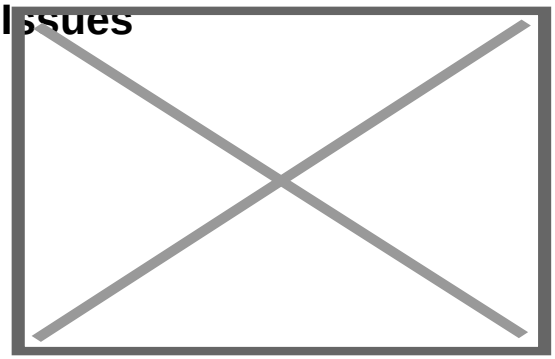
Controversies In Epicurean Scholarship - A Table Of Recurring Issues



Understanding Epicurus takes considerable effort, but not because the doctrines are always difficult. One problem is that Epicurean philosophy has been heavily criticized for more than two thousand years, and most of the articles and commentary that have been produced over that time are by people who are critical of it and have no desire to present the philosophy clearly and fully.

The following table of major issues within Epicurean philosophy are an attempt to help you navigate those confusing waters. A longer narrative blog post on the topic can be found here. The issues listed in the table are frequent topics of discussion on the internet, and this table lets you know that there are at least two sides to each of these questions. From at least as far back as the time of Cicero, opponents of Epicurus have employed the tactic of taking particular Epicurean passages out of context and torturing them into narrow conclusions that appear - and are - absurd. Opponents of Epicurus have no interest in providing the full context and showing how the pieces fit together, and as a result Epicurean philosophy is portrayed as confusing at best and incomprehensible at worst. It is therefore helpful for you to know as soon as possible in your reading of Epicurus that you are going to run into these issues so you can be ready for them. Posts and articles on the issues listed here are particularly welcome, and articles on these topics are prime candidates for the "Featured Articles" on the Home page of this website.

It would also be helpful to do another chart along the lines of "Where Epicurean Philosophy Disagrees with Other Philosophies" but that is not the focus of this chart. This one focuses on controversies within and among commentators on Epicurean philosophy about what Epicurus taught, not whether Epicurus was right or wrong.

Edits and contributions to this table by Level 3 or above participants at EpicureanFriends.com are welcome. If you attempt to edit and do not have access, please message a moderator.

Controversies In Epicurean SCHOLARSHIP

Topic	Modern Conventional Position	Alternative Position

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[1] What is the importance of distinguishing "katastematic" (static / continuing / restful) pleasure from "kinetic" (active) pleasure?	It is critically important because Epicurus defined "ataraxia," the goal of living, as a form of katastematic / static pleasure. Epicurus held static "absence of pain" to be the true goal of life, and he held kinetic / active pleasures to be significant only as a means of attaining katastematic pleasure. Thus we must understand that the goal of life is to pursue freedom from pain above all, which we do by minimizing our pursuit of active pleasures, which frequently cause pain, and living as pain-free and simply as possible, without regard to the active pleasures of joy and delight that ordinary people define as pleasurable.	This distinction addresses a specific philosophical criticism of pleasure as the goal of life, and taken outside that context it is used by opponents of Epicurus to mislead as to his true position. Epicurus held Pleasure to be unified and understandable, in ordinary terms, as the mental and physical feelings we feel when we experience pleasure of any kind. In Epicurean philosophy the goal of life is Pleasure as we ordinarily understand it. For Epicurus, distinguishing between katastematic and kinetic pleasure was significant mainly as a means of showing that there are many kinds of pleasure, some of which can always be experienced even during difficult circumstances. That is why Epicurus was able to dispute Plato and others who held that pleasure was often absent in life, and therefore could not be a reliable guide. In showing that pleasures are of many types and always present in life, Epicurus was able to say in reply to them that he calls us to "continuous" pleasure. - **Link To Discussion Forum**
Did Epicurus hold that "Gods" have a real existence independent of our conception of them, or are "gods" purely constructs of human thought?	There seems to be a split position on this question, with factors including one's view of "anticipations" and one's view of "images," with difficulties arising in reconciling the Velleius passages from Cicero's "On The Nature of the Gods" with Lucetius' discussions of the gods (especially in relation to images) and Epicurus' own letter to Menoeceus where he says that evidence of the gods is "manifest."	Link To Discussion Forum

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[2] What is the significance of "free will" in Epicurean philosophy?	It is very insignificant and totally unnecessary to the philosophy. To the extent Epicurus seems to be an advocate of any degree of personal responsibility for free-chosen human actions, he is simply wrong because that does not exist.	It is very significant as explained in the letter to Menoeceus, and Epicurus is right about it. Everyone knows that there are practical limits to free will, such as death preventing us from willing that we live forever. Epicurus understood this too, but he saw the importance of observing that we have some degree of control over our actions, so that we can in fact choose and avoid so as to pursue happiness and avoid pain.- Link To Discussion Forum
[3] What is the significance of "dogmatism" in Epicurean philosophy?	Epicurus was wrong to suggest that there is such a thing as a "true" and "false" position on anything. There is no such thing as "truth" or "knowledge," and Epicurus should have followed Pyrrho's radical skepticism.	Epicurus considered it very important to take firm positions on major issues, and he was correct about this. Without confidence in those things that are directly in front of us, it is impossible to have confidence in our reasoning about more complex and hidden things. Confidence in our conclusions, especially as to things such as interference by gods and punishment after death, is essential to our banishing the fears and doubts that keep us from living happily. - Link To Discussion Forum
[4] What is the meaning of "ataraxia" and "aponia," and what relation do they have to the goal of life?	"Ataraxia" and "aponia" are the terms Epicurus used to define the ultimate goal of living. Ataraxia is the state of freedom from disturbance to which all our actions should be directed, and aponia describes the state of being free from pain which is another aspect of ataraxia.	"Ataraxia" means nothing more than "without disturbance," just as "aponia" means "without pain," and the word "ataraxia alone is not even a pleasure at all, much less it is the highest goal of life. Living "without disturbance" and "without pain" are merely descriptions of the way which we should work to continue our full experience of pleasures after we have attained them; adverbs to describe how the pleasures of life are experienced, not a definition of the pleasures of life themselves. "Aponia" is the word used to describe freedom from pain. Since a particular human can only fill his experience with pleasures up to a certain limit (the vessel full of pleasure), the vessel full of ordinary pleasures can also be described as a vessel in which there is no pain. - Link To Discussion Forum (Ataraxia) (Aponia)

[5] To what extent should a person only and always pursue pleasures that are natural and necessary? (To what extent did Epicurus teach that we should always live as simply as possible?)	Epicurus taught that people should pursue ONLY natural and necessary pleasures, because the goal of life is to live without pain, and the only way to accomplish this is to choose only those pleasures that are most natural and most necessary.	Epicurus taught the framework of natural and necessary pleasures only as an example for how to evaluate all choices as to the relative pleasure and pain, without any inference that we should choose the most frugal and simple option in making any choice. Epicurus explicitly taught that all pleasure is desirable, and the only criteria for choosing and avoiding is whether the choice will lead to greater net pleasure in the end. Sometimes we choose luxury, when it can be obtained without undue pain, and sometimes we choose simplicity, but the overall of maximizing our pleasurable living never changes. VS63: "63. There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance." - Link To Discussion Forum
[6] Is Epicurus properly thought of as an "atheist?" Was the Epicurean view of divinity serious, or a trick to avoid prosecution for blasphemy?	Epicurus was essentially an atheist just as we use the term today, and his assertion that gods really exist was made primarily to avoid meeting the same prosecution and death that Socrates suffered.	There are several ways to interpret Epicurus' position on divinity as serious, all of which are based on the premises that everything that exists is natural, and that any "divine beings" which may exist are completely natural and did not create and do not control the universe. Within those parameters, which all interpretations include, the possibilities are: (1) That Epicurus meant exactly what he said, and that deathless and perfectly happy which do not interfere with humanity exist in the universe. They , do not exist in our world, but humans have the ability to know some things about them, either through images, anticipations, observation and implications of isonomy, observation and implications of the infinite and eternal existence of the universe, or some combination of these. (2) That Epicurus meant that divinity is an imaginary / ideal state which we can imagine and which we should use to serve as a goal, but which we should not consider as suggesting that "real" gods exist. - Link To Discussion Forum

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[7] What is the role of "virtue" in Epicurean philosophy?	No serious scholar suggests that Epicurus held "virtue" to be the goal of life, but it is frequently stated that due to PD5, there is no essential difference here between the Stoics and Epicurus: The Stoics held virtue to be the goal of life, and Epicurus held virtue to be indispensable to the good life - thus there is no real difference in their positions.	Epicurus said what he meant and meant what he said: No action or state is virtuous unless it leads to pleasant living. It is not possible to define courage, justice, wisdom, temperance or any other "virtue" in the abstract - whether an action is courageous, just, wise, temperant, or in any other way "virtuous" is totally determined by whether that action in fact leads to pleasurable living. The difference between the Stoics and the Epicureans on this point could not be more dramatic and stark, and the ancient Epicureans and Stoics recognized this point and fought about it constantly. - Link To Discussion Forum
[8] Is Epicurean philosophy properly thought of as "hedonism"?	Yes - "hedonism" refers to any philosophy that advocates pursuit of pleasure as the goal of life, and Epicurean philosophy is therefore a form of hedonism.	Not really - the answer depends entirely on one's definition of "hedonism," which is not a term that Epicurus used or to which the Epicureans referred. When the word "hedonism" is used today, it generally connotes or implies the pursuit of pleasures of the moment, without regard to net long-run pleasure. Hedonism implies that one will never choose pain. That is explicitly NOT what Epicurus taught. Epicurean philosophy is a complete system of physics, ethics, and epistemology in which pleasure is the goal of life, but in which actions which bring immediate pleasure are often not chosen. - Link To Discussion Forum

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[9] Is the emphasis on "Atomism" in Epicurean philosophy significant to us today?	Not really - our physics today has shown that Epicurean physics is generally false, so it is not important to study Epicurean physics.	Yes, in the extreme. The major issues resolved by Epicurean physics are as true today as ever. The universe operates on natural, and not supernatural principles. Any perfect beings that exist are not supernatural and do not interfere with me. The universe as a whole was never created by a god nor is it controlled by one or more gods. The regularity which we observe in the universe arises from eternal natural particles, and the properties of those particles coming together through space to form bodies must be studied to understand that there are no universal abstract principles which govern the universe or human behavior. The universe is not divine fire or "one" in the respect that there are laws that are universal for all people at all places and all times. - Link to Discussion Forum
[10] Was Epicurus an "Empiricist"?	Yes, Epicurus held the senses to be always correct, and he is properly thought of as an Empiricist in this modern usage of the word.	No, not in the way "empiricist' is generally used today. Epicurus certainly held that all reasoning relies on the senses, but he also held the "anticipations" and the "feelings" (of pain and pleasure) to be tools for gathering evidence. Epicurus also based a great deal of his philosophy on deductive reasoning from principles of nature which were validated by the senses (such as the twelve principles of physics) but which were also proved, and then applied, using deduction. - Link To Discussion Forum

[11] To what extent did Epicurus teach that we should always "live unknown" and withdraw totally from public affairs?	Epicurus taught that wise people should always live unknown and withdraw totally from public affairs.	Epicurus did not teach that people should always live unknown and withdraw from public affairs. Epicurus himself certainly did not live unknown, and many Epicureans, including Epicurus himself, where closely involved in influencing public matters. The "live unknown" phrase does not appear in any letter of Epicurus, nor the poem of Lucretius, and comes to us without any context whatsoever. Epicurus and his faithful poet Lucretius devoted large parts of their lives to outreach to others. Atticus, Cassius Longinus, and other Epicureans known to us through history were directly involved in political affairs. - Link To Discussion Forum
[12] To what extent did Epicurus advise against getting married and/or having children?	Epicurus taught that wise men should never get married and that they should avoid having children.	The key passage on this has been the subject of great controversy, and translated in opposite ways. What we know for sure is that Epicurus took great care for the welfare of Metrodorus' daughter and instructed that she be given in marriage to a member of the Epicurean school. We also know that Epicurus held friendship to be of critical importance in living happily, and friendship with a spouse and child can be among the closest of friendships. As with every other choice and avoidance in life, Epicurus advised that we should look to the result as to how it would effect us in terms of pleasure and pain. The better view that is more consistent with the trust of Epicurean philosophy is that marriage and children are subject to the same advice: each of us must evaluate and choose in these areas according to our personal circumstances and context. - Link To Discussion Forum

[13] Are Stoic and Epicurean Philosophies Ultimately Similar and Reconcilable?	Yes, Stoic and Epicurean philosophies are very similar and very reconcilable. Both seek human happiness, even though Stoics call virtue the goal of life, and Epicureans call virtue a tool toward the goal of life.	No, Stoic and Epicurean philosophies are very dissimilar and very much irreconcilable at root. Stoics and Epicureans aim at very different conceptions of the goal of life, and the differences are not just terminology. The ancient Stoics firmly denounced Epicurean philosophy, and the ancients who knew both sides of the argument considered them to be mortal enemies and totally irreconcilable. Stoics seek to suppress emotion and are hostile to all emotion, especially pleasure, which they see as especially damaging to virtuous living. Epicureans seek to employ emotion and to live as pleasurably as possible, which they see as the goal of living, not abstract "virtue." A chart on these differences, with quotes from the ancient authorities**, is here. - Link To Discussion Forum**
[14] What are (1) the "greatest good" and (2) the "goal," or "end of life," in Epicurean philosophy?	The greatest good, and the goal of life, in Epicurean philosophy is "pleasure." Epicurus defined pleasure as the absence of pain, and thus the goal of human life is to achieve tranquility by - above all else - avoiding pain.	In answering this question we must first define the terms. The "greatest good" does not mean the guide that we follow - the "greatest good" is our most important possession, which is life itself. "Good" has no meaning except to the living. On the other hand, possessing life, we must decide how to employ it, and the "guide" of life is pleasure. The term "Pleasure" is meant to include all forms of pleasure as we ordinarily feel it, both pleasures that are "active" and "continuing," and pleasures of both body and mind. **- Link To Discussion Forum**

[15] What is the nature and operation of "anticipations" / "preconceptions"	The word "preconceptions" is a reference to the result of conceptual reasoning, which is stored in the mind as a mental presentation, and then compared to new mental presentations as they arise from the five senses. For example, we repeatedly see various animals and assemble a mental picture which we label "ox." When we see a new animal, we evaluate whether the new animal fits our picture of an ox, and thereby decide whether it is truly an ox.	"Preconceptions" is a term which references a faculty used to produce conceptions, but is not to be confused with the concepts themselves. Epicurus refers to preconceptions in discussing divinity, justice, and time, and these examples (especially gods) do not indicate that he was referring to concepts stored in the mind after reasoning, but innate predispositions to organize information in particular ways. Viewed in this way the faculty of preconceptions is a facility of contract with external reality which produces data which is not subject to error, but which is used to form opinions (concepts) which, when when used by the mind, are highly subject to error. The major proponent of this view is Norman DeWitt as presented in Chapter 8 of "Epicurus and His Philosophy - Link to Discussion Forum.

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