

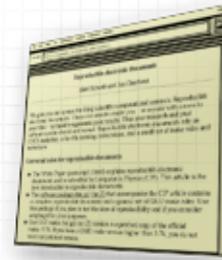
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Epicurean Philosophy Online

Introduction to The Epicurus Reader

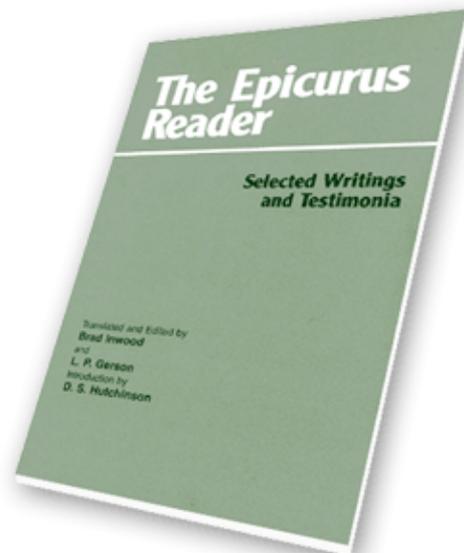
by D.S. Hutchinson

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Do you want to be happy? Of course you do! Then what's standing in your way? Your happiness is entirely up to you. This has been revealed to us by a man of divine serenity and wisdom who spent his life among us, and showed us, by his personal example and by his teaching, the path to redemption from unhappiness. His name was Epicurus.

This is the sort of thing you might have heard an Epicurean preaching in the market square of an ancient city. If it sounds like a religious message, that is no coincidence; Epicurus was revered by his followers as though divine, a sage who had answers to all the important questions of life. What attracted converts was the prospect of personal happiness, for which Epicurus offered clear philosophical advice.



The fundamental obstacle to happiness, says Epicurus, is anxiety. No matter how rich or famous you are, you won't be happy if you're anxious to be richer or more famous. No matter how good your health is, you won't be happy if you're anxious about getting sick. You can't be happy in this life if you're worried about the next life. You can't be happy as a human being if you're worried about being punished or victimized by powerful divine beings. But you *can* be happy if you believe in the four basic truths of Epicureanism: there are no divine beings which threaten us; there is no next life; what we actually need is easy to get; what makes us suffer is easy to put up with. This is the so-called 'four-part cure', the Epicurean remedy for the epidemic sickness of human anxiety; as a later Epicurean puts it, "Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure."¹

"What's good is easy to get." We need food, water, shelter from the elements, and safety from hostile animals and people. All these things lie ready to hand and can be acquired with little effort or money. We don't need caviar, champagne, palaces, or bodyguards, which are expensive and difficult to acquire and keep. People who want more than they need are making a fundamental mistake, a mistake that reduces their chances of being satisfied and causes needless anxiety. While our bodies need food, water, shelter, and safety, all that our souls need is to be confident that our bodies will get what they need. If my body is contented and my soul is confident, then I will be cheerful, and being cheerful is the key to being happy. As long as we are cheerful it takes very little to keep us happy, but without cheerfulness we cannot really enjoy even the so-called 'pleasures' of life. Being cheerful is a state which is full of pleasure—indeed Epicurus calls it 'the limit of pleasure'—and it is a normal state, but if we suffer from anxiety we need to train ourselves to attain and maintain it. The discipline of Epicurean philosophy enables its followers to recognize how little they actually need, to enjoy possessing it, and

to enjoy the confidence that they will continue to possess it. On the other hand, there is no reason not to enjoy occasional luxuries, if they happen to be easily available. There is nothing wrong with luxury in itself, but any dependence on luxuries is harmful to our happiness, as is every desire for unnecessary things.

"What's terrible is easy to endure." There is no denying that illness and pain are disagreeable, but nature has so constituted us that we need not suffer very much from them. Sickness is either brief or chronic, and either mild or intense, but discomfort that is both chronic and intense is very unusual; so there is no need to be concerned about the prospect of suffering. This is admittedly a difficult teaching to accept, especially for young people, but as people get older and more experienced in putting up with suffering, they tend to recognize its truth more and more, as did the Roman philosopher Seneca, whose health was anything but strong.² Epicurus himself died in excruciating pain, from kidney failure after two weeks of pain caused by kidney stones; but he died cheerfully, he claimed, because he kept in mind the memory of his friends and the agreeable experiences and conversations they had had together. Mental suffering, unlike physical suffering, is agony to endure, but once you grasp the Epicurean philosophy you won't need to face it again. Know the limits of what you need, recognize the limits of what your body is likely to suffer, and enjoy the confidence that your life will be overwhelmingly pleasant, unless you poison it with anxiety.

"Don't worry about death." While you are alive, you don't have to deal with being dead, but when you are dead you don't have to deal with it either, because you aren't there to deal with it. "Death is nothing to us," as Epicurus puts it, for "when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist."³ Death is always irrelevant to us, even though it causes considerable anxiety to many people for much of their lives. Worrying about death casts a general pall over the experience of living, either because people expect to exist after their deaths and are humbled and terrified into ingratiating themselves with the gods, who might well punish them for their misdeeds, or else because they are saddened and terrified by the prospect of *not* existing after their deaths. But there are no gods which threaten us, and, even if there were, we would not be there to be punished. Our souls are flimsy things which are dissipated when we die, and even if the stuff of which they were made were to survive intact, that would be nothing to us, because what matters to us is the continuity of our experience, which is severed by the parting of body and soul. It is not sensible to be afraid of ceasing to exist, since you already know what it is like not to exist; consider any time before your birth—was it disagreeable not to exist? And if there is nothing bad about not existing, then there is nothing bad for your friend when he ceases to exist, nor is there anything bad for you about being fated to cease to exist. It is a confusion to be worried by your mortality, and it is an ingratitude to resent the limitations of life, like some greedy dinner guest who expects an indefinite number of courses and refuses to leave the table.

"Don't fear god." The gods are happy and immortal, as the very concept of 'god' indicates. But in Epicurus' view, most people were in a state of confusion about the gods, believing them to be intensely concerned about what human beings were up to and exerting tremendous effort to favour their worshippers and punish their mortal enemies. No; it is incompatible with the concept of divinity to suppose that the gods exert themselves or that they have any concerns at all. The most accurate, as well as the most agreeable, conception of the gods is to think of them, as the Greeks often did, in a state of bliss, unconcerned about anything, without needs, invulnerable to any harm, and generally living an enviable life. So conceived, they are role models for Epicureans, who emulate the happiness of the gods, within the limits imposed by human nature. "Epicurus said that he was prepared to compete with Zeus in happiness, as long as he had a barley cake and some water."⁴

If, however, the gods are as independent as this conception indicates, then they will not observe the sacrifices we make to them, and Epicurus was indeed widely regarded as undermining the foundations of traditional religion. Furthermore, how can Epicurus explain the visions that we receive of the gods, if the gods don't deliberately send them to us? These visions, replies Epicurus, are material images travelling through the world, like everything else that we see or imagine, and are therefore something real; they travel through the world because of the general laws of atomic motion, not because god sends them. But then what sort of bodies must the gods have, if these images are always streaming off them, and yet they remain strong and invulnerable? Their bodies, replies Epicurus, are continually replenished by images streaming towards them; indeed the 'body' of a god may be nothing more than a focus to which the images travel, the images that later travel to us and make up our conception of its nature.⁵

If the gods do not exert themselves for our benefit, how is it that the world around us is suitable for our habitation? It happened by accident, said Epicurus, an answer that gave ancient critics ample opportunity for ridicule, and yet it makes him a thinker of a very modern sort, well ahead of his time. Epicurus believed that the universe is a material system governed by the laws of matter. The fundamental elements of matter are atoms,⁶ which move, collide, and form larger structures according to physical laws. These larger structures can sometimes develop into yet larger structures by the addition of more matter, and sometimes whole worlds will develop. These worlds are extremely numerous and variable; some will be unstable, but others will be stable. The stable ones will persist and give the appearance of being designed to be stable, like our world, and living structures will sometimes develop out of the elements of these worlds. This theory is no longer as unbelievable as it was to the non-Epicurean scientists and philosophers of the ancient world, and its broad outlines may well be true.

We happen to have a great deal of evidence about the Epicurean philosophy of nature, which served as a philosophical foundation for the rest of the system. But many Epicureans would have had little interest in this subject, nor did they need to, if their curiosity or scepticism did not drive them to ask fundamental questions. What was most important in Epicurus' philosophy of nature was the overall conviction that our life on this earth comes with no strings attached; that there is no Maker whose puppets we are; that there is no script for us to follow and be constrained by; that it is up to us to discover the real constraints which our own nature imposes on us. When we do this, we find something very delightful: life is free, life is good, happiness is possible, and we can enjoy the bliss of the gods, rather than abasing ourselves to our misconceptions of them.

To say that life is free is not to say that we don't need to observe any moral constraints. It is a very bad plan to cheat on your friends or assault people in the street or do anything else that would cause you to worry about their reactions. Why is this a bad plan? Not because god has decreed that such things are 'immoral', but because it is stupid to do anything that would cause you to worry about anything. In the view of some moral philosophers (both ancient and modern) this view makes Epicureanism an immoral philosophy, because it denies that there is anything intrinsically wrong with immoral conduct. If we could be sure that nobody would find out, then we would have no reason to worry about the consequences, and therefore no reason not to be immoral. True, admits Epicurus, but we can never be sure that nobody will find out, and so the most tranquil course is to obey the rules of social morality quite strictly. These have been developed over the centuries for quite understandable reasons, mostly to give ourselves mutual protection against hostile animals and people. The legal and moral rules of society serve a good purpose, although it is not worthwhile to exert yourself to become prominent in public affairs and have the anxiety of public office. Much more satisfying and valuable is to develop individual relationships of mutual confidence, for a friend will come to your assistance when an ordinary member of the public will not. In fact, friends are our most important defence against insecurity and are our greatest sources of strength, after the truths of Epicurean philosophy itself.

Friends and philosophy are the two greatest resources available to help us live our lives in confidence and without anxiety. Perhaps the best thing of all would be to have friends who shared our Epicurean philosophy with us; many Epicureans lived in small Epicurean communities, as did the followers of Pythagoras in earlier times. These Epicurean communities were probably modelled on the community that Epicurus established on the outskirts of Athens, called "The Garden." We know very little about the organization of these communities, except that they did not require their members to give up their private property to the commune (unlike the Pythagoreans and some modern religious cults) and that they probably involved regular lessons or discussions of Epicurean philosophy. They also included household servants and women on equal terms with the men, which was completely out of line with the social norms of the time, but Epicurus believed that humble people and women could understand and benefit from his philosophy as well as educated men, another respect in which Epicurean philosophy was well ahead of its time.

The membership of women caused scandalous rumours, spread by hostile sources, that "The Garden" was a place for continuous orgies and parties, rumours apparently supported by Epicurus' thesis that bodily pleasure is the original and basic form of pleasure. But Epicurus believed in marriage and the family, for those who are ready for the responsibility, and he disapproved of sexual love, because it ensnares the lover in tangles of unnecessary needs and vulnerabilities. Here's the typical pattern: first lust, then infatuation, then consummation, then jealousy or boredom. There's only anxiety and distress in this endlessly repeated story, except for the sex itself, and Epicurus regarded sex as an unnecessary pleasure, which never did anybody any real good—count yourself lucky if it does you no harm!⁷

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with casual sex, but much more important than either love or sex is friendship, which "dances around the world, announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness."⁸

One of the remarkable features of Epicurus' philosophy is that it can be understood at several levels of subtlety. You don't need to be a philosophical genius to grasp the main points, which is why Epicurus coined slogans and maxims for ordinary people to memorize, to help them relieve their anxiety whenever it might arise. There were signet rings and hand mirrors, for example, engraved with the words 'death is nothing', so the faithful could be reminded while going about their daily business. Suppose, though, that you're not convinced that 'death is nothing', for example, and you want proof before you organize your life around that idea. For people like you, Epicurus wrote letters outlining his basic arguments, which circulated freely among those interested in the topic. Suppose, again, that you already have a philosophical education, and you want to assess Epicurus arguments against the competing arguments, from other philosophers, for example. For this purpose he wrote elaborately careful and thorough memoranda of his arguments; his main treatise on natural philosophy ran to a staggering thirty-seven volumes. This extremely long book was given an intermediate (but still quite detailed) summary by Epicurus, and there may have been other levels of length and subtlety. If on a certain topic all our evidence seems superficial, that is probably because the more extensive discussions of that topic have not survived.

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Modern students of Epicureanism should know the status of the available evidence. None of Epicurus' major works survives in its entirety, but of his many abbreviations and summaries, three survive because they are quoted in *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius, an otherwise unknown third-century-A.D. compiler. The most important of these is the *Letter to Menoecus* (text 4), which gives the basic outline of the Epicurean approach to personal happiness. The *Letter to Herodotus* (text 2) gives the basic outline of the Epicurean materialist philosophy of nature, and the *Letter to Pythocles* (text 3) concerns the natural phenomena of the sky (which many felt were the work of the gods). These letters can be trusted to reflect Epicurus own views and way of arguing, as can the so-called "Principal Doctrines" (text 5), a group of forty short and pithy remarks, which were collected so that the basic principles of the Epicurean system could be easily memorized. A similar collection, the so-called "Vatican Sayings" (text 6), is a mixture of sayings from Epicurus and other Epicureans, and we print the sayings that seem likely to have come from Epicurus himself.

The picture that emerges from this evidence can be somewhat enlarged with fragments from Epicurus' works. In some cases, these are literally fragments, charred and brittle pieces of papyrus (the ancient equivalent of writing paper) excavated from a villa in Herculaneum which was engulfed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Their damaged state explains the numerous gaps ('lacunae') in our text of part of Book 25 of Epicurus' *On Nature* (text 34). Other fragments are small portions of Epicurus works quoted by other Epicurean writers, such as Philodemus of Gadara, whose charred books were also found in Herculaneum. Still other fragments are small portions of Epicurus' works quoted by other ancient authors whose works survived in the ordinary way, by being copied from handwritten book to handwritten book. Sometimes the source tells us which treatise or letter he is quoting from (texts 30 to 64). In other cases we cannot know what work the quotation comes from (texts 65 to 159).

Not all quotations can be taken to be accurate, word-for-word citations from Epicurus. We have indicated, by using quotation marks, where we thought the source was purporting to quote Epicurus, but ancient standards of accuracy were not as rigorous as modern ones, especially when ancient writers were attacking their intellectual enemies. Other sources don't even purport to quote Epicurus exact words, and we need to be yet more careful with these reports, which are referred to as 'testimonia'. Readers should regard purported quotations as generally more reliable than testimonia, but should always prefer Epicurus' own texts to both these other kinds of evidence. Fortunately, most of the evidence coheres, and it is usually possible to reach a reasonable assessment of Epicurus' views, at least on the topics where evidence is available.

We also have long discussions of Epicureanism from the pen of the well-known philosopher Cicero, who discussed Epicureanism in several of his books (texts 15 to 26). Cicero was not himself an Epicurean, and he was content to rely on Epicurean handbooks of a period close to his time. Sometimes Cicero does not really understand what he is transmitting (though that doesn't stop him

from arguing against it), and in these cases especially we can be confident that he is faithfully paraphrasing his Epicurean source. But what he transmits is only what he selects from his Epicurean source, and his source is not Epicurus himself but a later (more or less orthodox) follower. Plutarch, another well-known philosopher, was a more scholarly-and a more hostile-critic, who argued against the Epicurean philosophy with all the devices of argument (legitimate and illegitimate) at his command. There are more quotations from Epicurus in Plutarch than in Cicero, but the Epicurean way of thinking is more distorted, because Plutarch's purpose is to ridicule it, by belittling it element by element. The most useful evidence from Plutarch comes in his attack on the book written by Colotes, an early follower of Epicurus (text 29), but there is evidence also in his critique of the self-effacing Epicurean life-style, *Is 'Live inconspicuously' a wise precept?*, and in his polemical essay called *It is quite impossible to enjoy life on Epicurean principles*.

By far the most useful body of evidence that is not transmitted in our *Reader* is a poem by Lucretius, a Roman Epicurean of the first half of the first century B.C. This is a long didactic poem in six books, called *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*, which sets out in Latin verse the Epicurean philosophy of nature, drawing an occasional liberating and anti-superstitious lesson. It is a classic of world literature, which impresses as much by its rich poetic qualities as by the rigour of its thought. But it is not possible to know exactly how reliable it is as a source for the views of Epicurus, since the so-called *Major Summary* (a detailed summary of Epicurus' thirty-seven-volume *On Nature*), on which it seems to have been based, has entirely perished. We print two particularly important passages which do seem to have been drawn quite directly from Epicurus own works (texts 27 and 28), but probably most of Lucretius' poem reflects Epicurus' views equally well. A good example is Book III, lines 83-1094, which offers the arguments for believing that 'death is nothing to us'; although we cannot be certain that Lucretius is not introducing new ideas, there is nothing here that is incompatible with Epicurus' known views. A comprehensive study of Epicureanism would include the poem of Lucretius among its main body of evidence, and we recommend that our readers read it in the excellent recent translation, with introduction and notes, by M. F. Smith: [Lucretius, On the Nature of Things](#) (Hackett, 2001).

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Epicurus developed a system of philosophy and a way of living that deserve our respect and understanding, perhaps even our allegiance. This way of living claimed many thousands of committed followers, all over the ancient Mediterranean world, in cooperative communities that lasted for hundreds of years. But from the very beginning of his teaching mission, his message was opposed and distorted, first by academic philosophers and political authorities, and later by Christians. Epicureans apparently almost never switched their allegiance to other philosophical systems, whereas other schools regularly lost students to the Epicureans. Why? Perhaps because the Epicureans found that their system made excellent sense. But the explanation offered by Arcesilaus, Epicurus' rival, is typically dismissive: "You can turn a man into a eunuch, but you can't turn a eunuch into a man."² Even in modern times, the critics of Epicureanism continue to misrepresent it as a lazy-minded, shallow, pleasure-loving, immoral, or godless travesty of real philosophy. In our day the word 'epicureanism' has come to mean its opposite-a pretentious enthusiasm for rare and expensive food and drink. Please have the courage to ignore two thousand years of negative prejudice, and assess this philosophy on its own considerable merits. This book gives you the evidence you need.

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Notes:

1. Philodemus of Gadara, from a work whose title is uncertain, preserved in Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, column W, lines 10-14.

2. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* lxxviii.7-10.

3. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (text 4), section 125.

4. Aelian, *Miscellaneous Histories*, 4.13 (text 159).

5. This is only a suggestion; it is not easy to understand the Epicurean conception of the nature of the gods, and readers

should be aware that modern scholars do not agree about the correct interpretation of the evidence.

6. He borrowed this hypothesis from Democritus, an earlier atomist, and it was borrowed in turn from Epicurus by Pierre Gassendi, who introduced the atomic theory into modern science in the seventeenth century.

7. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers* x.i 18 (text 8).

8. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* (text 6) #52; cf. *Principal Doctrines* (text 5) #27.

9. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers* iv.43. Arcesilaus was the Head of the Platonic Academy in Epicurus' day.

