

Why I am an Epicurean

When I call myself an *Epicurean*, I don't mean someone who merely enjoys fine food and wine (though I do love these things!). That popular definition, like the mischaracterization of Luddites as loutish technophobes, simplifies and distorts the true depth of the Epicurean worldview.

That said, perhaps "depth" isn't the right word. What draws me to Epicureanism is precisely its skepticism toward metaphysical claims of deeper meaning beyond what we perceive through our senses. Such claims often lead to a kind of existential heaviness—the "spirit of gravity" that Nietzsche, at his best, opposed with a *yea-saying* love of life, the body, and the earth.

So what is the Epicurean worldview? In my understanding, it rests on these principles:

1. Pleasure is the highest good and the aim of human life.
2. The gods likely don't exist, and if they do, they are irrelevant.
3. We should focus on the one life we have, seizing its moments.
4. Much suffering arises from fear and illusion.
5. True happiness is cultivated through well-being, nature, and deep connections with others.

I may be accused of filtering Epicureanism through a Buddhist lens, yet these traditions share key insights—despite Buddhism's surface resemblance to Stoicism, Epicureanism's rival. What remains radical about Epicureanism is its first principle: *pleasure as the highest good*. This remains provocative because it contradicts major religious traditions, especially Christianity—and even, in many interpretations, Buddhism.

Since its inception, Epicureanism has been misunderstood as mere hedonism, condemned as a philosophy of indulgence and moral decay. But Epicurus himself taught that true pleasure comes not from excess, but from *balance*—a life that avoids both asceticism and unbridled indulgence. This only makes sense when we reject the mind-body dualism so entrenched in Western (and some Asian) traditions. Consider the pleasures of eating: they are enhanced by cultural knowledge, setting, and companionship. Pleasure is not a raw sensory experience but a dynamic interplay of sensation, emotion, and intellect. And like any art, it requires discipline—whether through education, physical exercise, or meditation.

Epicurus did not advocate limiting desires so much as *refining* them. With proper training, we can align our desires with what is attainable, minimizing sacrifice and regret. This reminds me less of Buddhism than of the *Daodejing*, which suggests that by attuning to our desires rather than repressing them, we come to understand their natural limits. This is not the ascetic's fear of desire but the pianist's recognition that mastery—and joy—requires practice, not just frantic movement across the keys. As James Baldwin wrote: "To be sensual... is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread."

Thus, Epicureans distinguish between necessary and unnecessary desires. The former include what we might refer to as universal basic needs: food, shelter, security and, though it is sometimes underappreciated as a need, *love*. The latter—wealth, power, fame—are distractions, illusions. Christianity and Buddhism reject them as well, but where those traditions often moralize about worldly attachments, Epicureanism sees them as *unnatural*—socially constructed rather than inherent. This makes them easier to discard.

Classical Epicureans don't have a lot to say about economics, but I think there is something to be gained from extending Epicurean logic into the realm of work, in particular. First, and most obviously, Epicureans reject the cultural narrative that makes “work”—understood as wage labor—as fundamental to one's life, identity, and happiness. Of course, some “work” must be carried out in order for humans to be able to survive, but the question that we must raise is: *what is it that we want to spend most of our time doing?* It is impossible to imagine that most current forms of employment in, for instance, the U.S., bring pleasure to those employed in them. Are these jobs necessary? Some, perhaps—most, probably not. Epicureans cannot accept a world in which many or most people sacrifice a great deal of time and energy engaged in activities that bring little to no happiness.

This brings us to politics. Classical Epicureans valued friendship as a foundation of happiness but were skeptical of political life, rejecting Aristotle's (and arguably Marx's) idea of humans as inherently political animals. They saw how rulers operated and turned away, cynical about politics. This attitude remains common today, particularly in places like the U.S.

Yet if we take friendship and community seriously, we must acknowledge that human flourishing depends on relationships beyond the family. I imagine an Epicurean political order as an anarcho-syndicalist collective or a worker's cooperative. We must first of all meet basic material needs—without which tranquility is impossible. We have both an individual and collective responsibility to create systems that provide for these needs while minimizing hierarchy and coercion.

The Epicurean worldview aligns almost perfectly with my own. This is no accident; my perspective has been shaped, in part, by the work of Epicurean thinkers since my undergraduate days studying philosophy and literature. One of the first books I read at McGill was *On the Nature of the Universe (De Rerum Natura)* by Lucretius, the great Roman poet. My love for the Romantic poets was, at its core, an appreciation for their Epicurean sensibilities. More recently, I have been captivated by Matthew Stewart's argument that not only Thomas Jefferson—who declared, “I, too, am an Epicurean”—but many of the founders of the United States were Epicureans at heart. Nowhere is this American Epicurean spirit more evident than in the poetry of Walt Whitman (“*always the procreant urge of the world*”). That legacy gives me hope for this country, even in its darkest moments.

Epicureanism is not an escape, nor is it a license for excess. It is a call to live well—grounded in reality, free from illusion, and in harmony with oneself and others. It is a philosophy of pragmatic joy, deeply skeptical of power, ideology, and all forms of dualism, yet unwavering in its reverence for nature, friendship, and the simple pleasures of life. At the end of the day, we can enjoy our glass of wine—not as an indulgence, but as an affirmation of a life well lived. That is why I am an Epicurean.