

Epicurus

Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about Epicurus

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! ... For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. ... You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. ... I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" —Titus Lucretius Carus

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher.

Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about Epicurus

EARLY LIFE—PEACE and flux. The cosmos was aligned just right when Epicurus was born. Or so Colotes, one of his original followers, declared. Plutarch quotes him as saying that Epicurus' "mother had just so many atoms within her that, when coming together, they must have produced a complete wise man."¹

However that may be, Epicurus was born on the island of Samos in the Aegean Sea just a mile off the coast of modern Turkey. The year was 341 BC. According to the ancient biographer Diogenes Laertius, he "was born in the third year of the 109th Olympiad, in the archonship of Sosigenes, on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion, in the seventh year after the death of Plato."²

The island itself—Samos—is spectacularly beautiful, surrounded by a clear blue sea, the sort one may imagine sitting next to in peace all day long. We may suppose that a similar peace—the tranquility of the physical setting or something like it—was something that remained with Epicurus throughout his life, a point we will return to. The circumstances of his parents' arrival in Samos, however, must have been anything but peaceful.

Epicurus' father and mother, Neocles and Chae-restrate, arrived on Samos as cleruchs, or colonists, just over a decade before their most famous son was born. This was all well and good except for there was already a sizeable population on the island. The

colonists' arrival, therefore, meant that the existing occupants had to be removed from their property and either tossed off the island or kept in subjugation. In short, it was no peaceful affair.³ Consequently, in contrast to the island's naturally tranquil setting, the political environment was anything but peaceful. The whole affair ended some three decades after the colonists' arrival, when they were forcibly evicted from the island. But more on that in a moment.

It is usual for scholars to emphasize the changing political times into which Epicurus was born.⁴ From a Greek world centered upon loyalty to what were, generally speaking, small city-states, Alexander the Great shifted focus to a much greater Macedonian Empire that was soon divided into multiple smaller kingdoms after his death. The upshot: people found themselves adrift in a great sea of political anonymity and hence, for many, political meaninglessness.

All this is true to some extent. But zooming out from those decades closing the fourth century and Alexander's sweeping moves to unify the Greeks as they had never been unified before, we see a constant flux in Greek political affairs from the early fifth century on, if not long before. It was this ongoing flux that Epicurus was born into. "Epicurus lived when very difficult times prevailed in his homeland."⁵ Such was Diogenes Laertius' brief judgment. There was the glory that was Greek politics, yes, but also the agony.

Samos' own recent turbulent history reflected the flux as one people streamed in to dominate while the other receded in submission—before the tide eventually turned again. Either way, the political environment of Samos was dissimilar to the tranquil blue sea with which Epicurus was likely familiar, the calm harbor he later pictured as the happy safe haven of the older wise man's life.

When Epicurus was eighteen years old, he left Samos behind for a few years. The year was 323 BC, the year Alexander the Great died. Left behind on the island were his father and mother, as well as his three brothers Neocles, Chaeredemus, and Aristobulus. Epicurus' destination was Athens. He was going there because he, along with his whole family, was an

Athenian citizen, and so he was obliged to give two years for military training and service. Benjamin Farrington tells us that those in training "were taught to fight in heavy armor, use the bow and javelin, and discharge a catapult."⁶

While Epicurus was hurling one projectile or another, his parents and brothers were being forcibly ejected from Samos by Alexander's former general Perdiccas. They landed in Colophon slightly inland along the coast of Asia Minor, about fifteen miles northwest of ancient Ephesus. Epicurus joined them there in 321 when he was twenty. His military service complete, he now turned to figuring out what to do with his life. His father was a schoolteacher; his mother seems to have worked as a fortune teller and a performer of "purificatory rites."⁷ But what would he do?

Education and turn to philosophy. Diogenes Laertius relates the account of Epicurus' early disappointment with Greek mythology's actual power to explain reality. Citing Apollodorus the Epicurean, he explains that Epicurus "turned to philosophy thanks to his contempt for teachers who were unable to explain the meaning of *chaos* found in Hesiod."⁸ For as Hesiod had sung in the *Theogony* nearly four hundred years before, "Truly Chaos was born the very first."⁹ It's not that the young lad lacked imagination. Instead, however poetic and possibly meaningful mythical explanations were in themselves, if they were mere signs pointing to nowhere, they were useless. And as we'll see, Epicurus was very much about what was useful.

Aside from his own youthful ruminations on the nature of life and reality, Epicurus' first substantial contact with philosophy came sometime in his early teens if not slightly before.¹⁰ The ancient author Diocles reports that Epicurus was an admirer of the fifth century BC philosophers Anaxagoras and Archelaus (the latter was Socrates' teacher).¹¹ If true, we have no further information. Otherwise, it is possible that Epicurus studied with the Platonist philosopher Pamphilus from when he was fourteen or so until he departed for Athens and his military service. This is what Ariston, who wrote a biography of Epicurus, reports—but again, without details.¹²

J.M. Rist tells us that when Epicurus was in Athens, he “had some opportunity to hear the major philosophers of the day.”¹³ According to one ancient report, Epicurus “listened to the lectures of Xenocrates,” the third head of the Academy, Plato’s school.¹⁴ He may have also heard Theophrastus, Aristotle’s successor. (Given the political flux of the times, Aristotle had recently departed from Athens, not wanting to appear “pro-Macedonian” in what was by then a very anti-Macedonian city.¹⁵) The bottom line is that we really don’t know what Epicurus would have learned in Athens in terms of philosophy. It is possible that he was so busy with his military duties that he had no time for philosophical pursuits.¹⁶

What we do know with a fair amount of confidence is that Epicurus’ life shifted significantly once he moved to Colophon. At that point, or at some point thereabouts, he encountered the philosopher Nausiphanes of Teos and his major work the *Tripod*.¹⁷

Epicurus learned much from Nausiphanes—much that would over time form the backbone of his own philosophical system. Diogenes Laertius gives us Ariston’s report “that Epicurus’ treatise called *The Canon* originated from the *Tripod* of Nausiphanes.”¹⁸ If true, then this means that Epicurus’ epistemology, his system delineating what can be known and how we can learn and know about things, came from Nausiphanes. More importantly, perhaps, Epicurus learned the basics of atomism from him—the philosophy of nature positing atoms and the void that originated with Leucippus and Democritus in the fifth century BC. According to Diogenes Laertius, the ideas found in “the works of Democritus” instigated Epicurus’ real turn toward philosophy.¹⁹ Then again, he was also attracted to the goal that Nausiphanes posited for human life—that of imperterbability (*akataplēxia*). Scholars suspect that Epicurus’ own stated goal of *ataraxia*—literally “lacking disturbance” or, to state it in positive terms, “calmness” or “tranquility” (as it is often given)—was inspired by Nausiphanes’ *akataplēxia*. We can imagine that *ataraxia* resembled for Epicurus the clear, blue, and peaceful waters surrounding parts of Samos. Both Epicurus’ and Nausiphanes’ goals were likely the thought-descendants

of the fearlessness or “absence of dread” (*athambiē*) of Democritus.²⁰

In the end, Epicurus unearthed the building stones of his philosophy from various philosophical quarries: from the atomists, through Nausiphanes and Democritus’ writings; from Pyrrho’s skepticism—again, through Nausiphanes; from Aristotle’s philosophy, through Aristotle’s own work and that of Theophrastus and others at the Lyceum; and from the Platonists of the Academy, even if their ideas only gave Epicurus something to react against. According to Farrington, Epicurus “labored to take account in his system of the best ethical and the best natural philosophy of his day.”²¹

Epicurus’ school and teaching career. It was with and within this philosophical structure, which he constructed during the decade or so following his military service in Athens, that Epicurus began to gather and instruct students. He did so over the following half decade or so, teaching for a year in Mytilene, the chief city on the island of Lesbos, followed by a four-year stint in Lampsacus along the coast of the Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles), and finally in Athens, where he moved in 306 BC.

The move to Athens was, as Rist assures us, “an obvious move for two reasons.” One, Epicurus “himself was an Athenian” citizen. Two, “Athens was the center of the philosophical world.”²² There is one other reason that is, perhaps, less obvious. This reason has to do with the turmoil that Epicurus had experienced in attempting to set up his school in Mytilene. In short, Mytilene was the sanctioned turf of the Aristotelians. And even though Epicurus had received the necessary signatures—as it were—to teach in the public spaces there, the Aristotelians seemed to have pushed for his removal. Consequently, he moved to Athens where he could acquire his own private property to set up his own school.

Epicurus called his property—a portion of it, anyway—the Garden (*Kēpos*). And so the name of his school. The Garden was a hierarchically run philosophical association where people—men and women, free and slave, Greek and non-Greek, as we have noted—could come to learn Epicurus’ philosophy.

More importantly, however, they could live the simple Epicurean lifestyle in friendship with others, a life that ideally bore the fruit of happiness.

Epicurus' remaining life and death. The truth is we do not know much about the details of Epicurus' life down to his death. We know he "sailed across the [Aegean] Sea to Ionia to visit his friends" in Lamp-sacus, and that he kept a fairly regular life in the Garden teaching and practicing the Epicurean way of life. "His friends came to him from all parts and lived with him in his Garden."²³ Otherwise, the sources remain mostly silent.

As for his death, his successor Hermarchus reports that Epicurus expired due "to stones that blocked the flow of his urine." He perished in a bath of warm water, comfortably numb, accompanied by a pitcher full of strong wine. Diogenes Laertius concludes that "Epicurus died in Athens in the second year of the 127th Olympiad, in the archonship of Pytharatus. He was seventy-two."²⁴ Depending on how you count, and on which scholar you consult, the year was 271 or 270 BC.²⁵

Epicurus' writings. Diogenes Laertius reports that Epicurus "was a most prolific writer" who wrote "about three hundred rolls" that were full of his own words and ideas rather than "citation[s] from other authors."²⁶ These writings touched on all the major areas of ancient philosophy—on how we come to know reality (epistemology), on the nature of that reality (physics or natural philosophy), and on how we might live well within that reality (ethics). Of the three hundred rolls, Diogenes Laertius lists forty-one of what he terms "the best" of his writings. We still possess fragments of Epicurus' major work *On Nature*. Aside from bits and pieces, however, we have little of his larger works. Nothing remains, for example, of his *Teachings on the Feelings*, or of his *On Atoms and Void*, or of the four books of his *On Human Life*.

That said and properly lamented, Diogenes Laertius fortunately preserved four important summaries of Epicurus' teachings. Three of the four are in the form of letters—doubtlessly part of the "Letters of Epicurus" that he includes in his top forty-one best list. Two have to do with Epicurus' philosophy of nature and what we may call his general scientific or

epistemic method. They are the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Letter to Pythocles*. The other one, the *Letter to Menoeceus*, states Epicurus' basic ethical teachings, with an emphasis on how to live well and be happy. Otherwise, we possess Epicurus' *Principal Teachings* (*Kuriai Doxai*), a work that also made the top forty-one best list. Intended for memorization, the *Principal Teachings* are forty brief remarks about how to flourish. Similar to these is another collection of sayings known as the *Vatican Sayings*.

Ancient sources for Epicurus and Epicureanism. Aside from Epicurus' own writings and sporadic fragments found in ancient historians and essayists, early Church fathers, and a few others, there are only a handful of significant sources that help us understand what Epicurus was up to.

One of the most important is the first century BC Roman poet Lucretius. In his epic poem *On the Nature of Things* (*De Rerum Natura*), he sympathetically presents Epicurus' system and Epicurus himself as the liberator of humankind. Another is the slightly older Philodemus of Gadara, who was the "house philosopher of Julius Caesar's father-in-law, Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus."²⁷ Although much of Philodemus' work is in poor shape (it was discovered just two hundred fifty years ago beneath layers of volcanic ash in Herculaneum in Italy), books such as *On Anger*, *On Frank Speech*, and *On Death* nevertheless offer an invaluable picture of what it was like to practice Epicurus' philosophy. A third source is Philodemus' near-contemporary, the Roman statesman Cicero, who wrote about Epicurus' philosophy in several of his works. The most significant work for us, though, is his *On the Ends of Good Things and Bad Things*, in which he offers a dialogue between his Epicurean friend, Torquatus, and Cicero himself that explores the positive and negative aspects of Epicureanism.²⁸

Moving into the present era and the time of the Roman Empire, other important sources include Seneca's letters to Lucilius and other writings (first century AD), several of Plutarch's essays (first and early second century AD), and, it almost goes without saying, the tenth and final book of Diogenes Laertius' third century AD *Lives and Sayings of Eminent*

Philosophers, our most valuable source for Epicurus and Epicureanism.

The last significant ancient source comes from Diogenes Oenoanda (alternatively given as Oinoanda), an individual we know next to nothing about, aside from the fact that he must have been a wealthy man, who lived in the Roman province of Lycia, in what is now south-western Turkey.²⁹ On a wall that would

have stretched as long as a soccer or football field, he left an inscription setting out the Epicurean path to understanding and happiness. Unfortunately, we only possess 223 fragments of the inscription. Nevertheless, they shed much light on Epicureanism that we would not otherwise have, meriting Diogenes Oenoanda our gratitude.

So ends Item 2. See you in **another reading or item**.

NOTES

¹ Plutarch, *That It Is Not Possible to Live Pleasurably According to the Doctrine of Epicurus* 18.

² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.14.

³ See Benjamin Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 5 ff. for a good discussion, as well as Andre-Jean Festugiere, *Epicurus and His Gods*, 19-20.

⁴ See, for instance, J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 3. The emphasis and thesis goes back at least to Eduard Zeller (1883).

⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.10.

⁶ B. Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus*, 5.

⁷ For “schoolteacher” (*grammatodidaskalos*, sometimes given as schoolmaster), see Diskin Clay, “The Athenian Garden,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, 12. See also Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 10.3. For his mother’s occupation, see J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 1.

⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 10.2. Relative to this story, Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Physicists* 2.18-19) reports that when Epicurus’ teachers told him that it was the business of philosophers to discuss such questions (i.e., the origin of chaos), Epicurus replied, “Well then, I must go to them, if they are the ones who know the truth of things that are.”

⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony* 116 from *The Best of Hesiod’s Theogony & Works and Days* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius offers both twelve (10.14) and fourteen (10.2) as the age of the initial contact and study.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.12.

¹² Ibid., *Lives* 10.14. See also J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 1, and B. Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus*, 5.

¹³ J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 2.

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.13.

¹⁵ See J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 2. Aristotle appeared pro-Macedonian as the former tutor of Alexander the Great, the king of Macedon.

¹⁶ Such is Festugiere’s conclusion. See Andre-Jean Festugiere, *Epicurus and His Gods*, 20.

¹⁷ Though the significant point is *that* he did do so, there seems to be some controversy over when, exactly, Epicurus encountered Nausiphane and studied with him. Rist suggests it was at some point during the ten years following 321 (see J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 3-4). Festugiere, however, declares that Epicurus studied with Nausiphane when he was fourteen (see Andre-Jean Festugiere, *Epicurus and His Gods*, 19). For what Diogenes Laertius has to say regarding the matter, see *Lives* 10.2 (for Epicurus’ move to Colophon and his study with other philosophers) and 10.13-14 (for the possibility of Epicurus’ being Nausiphane’s student, and what he possibly derived from him).

¹⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 10.14.

¹⁹ “. . . When [Epicurus] happened to encounter the works of Democritus, he took up philosophy.” Ibid., 10.2.

²⁰ See Andre-Jean Festugiere, *Epicurus and His Gods*, 19, for a discussion of these terms and 23 (footnote 3) for a presentation of the Greek found in Diels-Kranz.

²¹ B. Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus*, 9.

²² J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 9. For a similar conclusion, see B. Farrington *The Faith of Epicurus*, 11.

²³ For visiting his friends and for others visiting him, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.10.

²⁴ Ibid., 10.15.

²⁵ Various authors give different dates. For example, A.A. Long (*Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*), J.M. Rist

(*Epicurus: An Introduction*), and the editors of *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*) give 271; Andre-Jean Festugiere (*Epicurus and His Gods*), Diskin Clay and Catherine Wilson (in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*), and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* give 270.

²⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.26.

²⁷ David Armstrong, “Philodemus, the Herculaneum Papyri, and the Therapy of Fear,” in *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance*, 20.

²⁸ We have included parts of this work in this volume. See Part 5, “Epicureanism as Presented by Cicero.”

²⁹ See Michael Erler, “Epicureanism in the Roman Empire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, 54 ff.

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