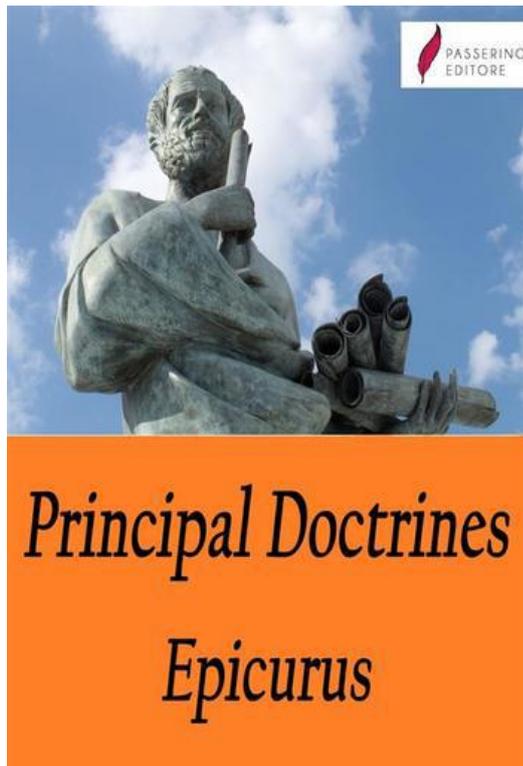


Irfan Ajvazi

# Principal Doctrines of Epicurus

Tesla Academy of Sciences

---



## Principal Doctrines of Epicurus

Epicurean philosophy, as Epicurus's teachings became known, was used as the basis for how the community lived and worked. At the time, founding a school and teaching a community of students was the main way philosophical ideas were developed and transmitted. Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), for instance, founded a school in Athens called the Lyceum.

Epicurus and his disciples believed either there were no gods or, if there were, the gods were so remote from humans that they were not worth worrying about. Similarly, humans would not have to worry about the afterlife. Instead, humans should live by maximizing their pleasure. The highest pleasure was to be found in the absence of pain. Epicurus taught that humans could maximize their pleasure by living simply and enjoying those impulses that are natural to humans. These impulses include the need to eat and the desire for good friends and company.

The Principal Doctrines are 40 statements outlining the basis for the beliefs of Epicurus and his followers about how to lead a good life. Epicurus's other philosophical beliefs (such as his belief that existence was composed of indivisible particles called atoms) are expressed in other writings. Almost none of Epicurus's original writings survive to the present day. His works, including the Principal Doctrines, are known to us because of the work of later writers. In the 3rd century CE, Diogenes Laërtius reproduced Epicurus's writings in *Lives, Teachings, and Sayings of Famous Philosophers*. Produced centuries after Epicurus's death, such collections may not be Epicurus's precise words or formulations. The Principal Doctrines should thus be regarded as the core principles not only of Epicurus but also of his followers, the Epicureans.

The first few statements establish what Epicurus believes to be fundamental truths about existence, pain, and happiness. His first statement implores readers not to worry about the existence or interference of gods. Truly happy and eternal beings do not experience any troubles themselves, nor do they trouble others. According to Epicurus, if gods experienced troubles, they would not be gods. This belief contrasts sharply with the dominant views of his society. Most ancient Greeks believed that the unpredictable and often vengeful gods played an active role in people's lives. Epicurus asserts that the gods could not possibly engage in such characteristically human behavior. Thus, it is best not to worry about the gods at all.

In his second statement, he suggests that death also should not be a source of worry. This is because the body, once dead, has no feeling. Death is not a thing that can be experienced, because only the living body can experience. It is foolish, Epicurus suggests, to fear something that cannot be experienced. Most Greeks of Epicurus's time believed in some form of afterlife. They believed that the spirit lived on after death so long as it was remembered by the living. Epicurus flatly denies this.

Epicurus's third statement provides the basis for his understanding of pleasure. The highest pleasure, he claims, is found in the total absence of pain. When pleasure is experienced without interruption, Epicurus points out, then pain does not exist in the body, the mind, or in the combination of body and mind. His fourth statement goes further, suggesting that pain does not last long in the body, not even extreme pain. Even in a case of persistent illness, pain does not outweigh the experience of pleasure. Because Epicurus teaches that seeking pleasure is the key to a happy life, his philosophy is classed as a type of hedonism. Hedonism is a philosophy that argues that humans are or should be motivated by pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Epicurus does not, however, advocate excessive pleasure-seeking. (He explains this point later in the text.) These basic principles established, the fifth statement argues that it is not possible to live a life of pleasure without also living well, wisely, and justly. All three elements (living well, wisely, and justly) must be present for life to be pleasurable. This argument provides the principle for a good life that will be discussed at length in the rest of the text.

Epicurus next considers the pursuit of pleasure. He addresses the idea that it is a "natural good" to use any means necessary to "obtain security from other people." He points out that some people have sought to make themselves secure from others by becoming famous, or well known. Epicurus suggests that some of these people did make themselves secure and achieved natural good. Those who did not achieve security, however, did not achieve natural good. Epicurus is referring to the great kings, conquerors, and heroes who defined the histories and events of his and—he assumes—all eras of human existence. During Epicurus's youth, the king of Macedonia, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), had embarked on a remarkable series of military campaigns. These made him one of the most powerful and famous men ever to have lived. Without naming him, or other numerous examples, Epicurus points out the futility of their activities. All their glory brought them neither happiness nor security, he argues.

Again, Epicurus emphasizes the superiority of simple mental pleasures over physical indulgence. The mind can easily obtain pleasure without unlimited time or resources, unlike the body.

Epicurus emphasizes that we can still find pleasure in the midst of pain. Even an appreciation of simply being alive can bring great pleasure, and one that you can recognize despite bodily pain. Doctrine 4 argues that all pain is temporary. Because of this, we should not fear future pain and be less anxious about current pain. And there is no pain after death, meaning that we should not fear it.

As part of his *Physics*, Epicurus's psychology held that the soul must be a body. It is made of very thin atoms of four different species—motile, quiescent, igneous, and ethereal—the last, thinnest and the most mobile of all, serving to explain sensitivity and thought. Thus constituted, the soul is, from another perspective, bipartite: in part distributed throughout the entire body and in part collected in the chest. The first part is the locus of sensations and of the physical affects of pain and pleasure; the second (entirely dissociated from the first) is the *psychē* par excellence—the seat of thought, emotions, and will. Thought is due not to the transmission of sense motion but to the perception of images constituted by films that continuously issue from all bodies and, retaining their form, arrive at the *psychē* through the pores.

The Principal Doctrines are forty short sayings by Epicurus. They are meant to serve as a pithy summary of the key elements of Epicurus' philosophical system. These sayings are but the tip of the iceberg, but they serve as a very useful summary and reminder of Epicurus' key points.

**/The “Principal Doctrines” (also sometimes translated under the title “Sovran Maxims”) are a collection of forty quotes from the writings of Epicurus that serve as a handy summary of his ethical theory: /**

1. A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.
2. Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us.
3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.
4. Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain.
5. It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.
6. In order to obtain protection from other men, any means for attaining this end is a natural good.
7. Some men want fame and status, thinking that they would thus make themselves secure against other men. If the life of such men really were secure, they have attained a natural good; if, however, it is insecure, they have not attained the end which by nature's own prompting they originally sought.
8. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.
9. If every pleasure had been capable of accumulation, not only over time but also over the entire body or at least over the principal parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ from one another.
10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad.

XI. If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us, and, moreover, if not knowing the limits of pains and desires did not trouble us, then we would have no need of natural science.

XII. It is impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters. So it is impossible to receive unmixed pleasures without knowing natural science.

XIII. It is useless to obtain security from men while the things above and below the earth and, generally, the things in the unbounded remained as objects of suspicion.

XIV. The purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many, although a certain degree of security from other men does come by means of the power to repel [attacks] and by means of prosperity.

XV. Natural wealth is both limited and easy to acquire. But wealth [as defined by] groundless opinions extends without limit.

XVI. Chance has a small impact on the wise man, while reasoning has arranged for, is arranging for, and will arrange for the greatest and most important matters throughout the whole of his life.

XVII. The just life is most free from disturbance, but the unjust life is full of the greatest disturbance.

XVIII. As soon as the feeling of pain produced by want is removed, pleasure in the flesh will not increase but is only varied. But the limit of mental pleasures is produced by a reasoning out of these very pleasures [of the flesh] and of the things related to these, which used to cause the greatest fears in the intellect.

XIX. Unlimited time and limited time contain equal [amounts of] pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning.

XX. The flesh took the limits of pleasure to be unlimited, and [only] an unlimited time would have provided it. But the intellect, reasoning out the goal and limit of the flesh and dissolving the fears of eternity, provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited time. But it [the intellect] did not flee pleasure, and even when circumstances caused an exit from life it did not die as though it were lacking any aspect of the best life.

XXI. He who has learned the limits of life knows that it is easy to provide that which removes the feeling of pain owing to want and make one's whole life perfect. So there's no need for things which involve struggle.

XXII. One must reason about the real goal and every clear fact, to which we refer mere opinions. If not, everything will be full of indecision and disturbance.

XXIII. If you quarrel with all your sense-perceptions you will have nothing to refer to in judging even those sense-perceptions which you claim are false.

XXIV. If you reject unqualifiedly any sense-perception and do not distinguish the opinion about what awaits confirmation, and what is already present in the sense-perception, and the feelings, and every application of the intellect to presentations, you will also disturb the rest of your sense-perceptions with your pointless opinion; as a result you will reject every criterion. If, on the other hand, in your conceptions formed by opinion, you affirm everything that awaits confirmation as well as what does not, you will not avoid falsehood, so that you will be in the position of maintaining every disputable point in every decision about what is and is not correct.

XXV. If you do not, on every occasion, refer each of your actions to the goal of nature, but instead turn prematurely to some other [criterion] in avoiding or pursuing [things], your actions will not be consistent with your reasoning.

XXVI. The desires which do not bring a feeling of pain when not fulfilled are not necessary; but the desire for them is easy to dispel when they seem to be hard to achieve or to produce harm.

XXVII. Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one's whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship.

XXVIII. The same understanding produces confidence about there being nothing terrible which is eternal or [even] long-lasting and has also realized that security amid even these limited [bad things] is most easily achieved through friendship.

XXIX. Of desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary, and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as a result of a groundless opinion. [Footnote 2]

XXX. Among natural desires, those which do not lead to a feeling of pain if not fulfilled and about which there is an intense effort, these are produced by a groundless opinion and they fail to be dissolved not because of their own nature but because of the groundless opinions of mankind.

XXXI. The justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor be harmed.

XXXII. There was no justice or injustice with respect to all those animals which were unable to make pacts about neither harming one another nor being harmed. Similarly, [there was no justice or injustice] for all those nations which were unable or unwilling to make pacts about neither harming one another nor being harmed.

XXXIII. Justice was not a thing in its own right, but [exists] in mutual dealings in whatever places there [is] a pact about neither harming one another nor being harmed.

XXXIV. Injustice is not a bad thing in its own right, but [only] because of the fear produced by the suspicion that one will not escape the notice of those assigned to punish such actions.

XXXV. It is impossible for someone who secretly does something which men agreed [not to do] in order to avoid harming one another or being harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if in current circumstances he escapes detection ten thousand times. For until his death it will be uncertain whether he will continue to escape detection.

XXXVI. In general outline justice is the same for everyone; for it was something useful in mutual associations. But with respect to the peculiarities of a region or of other [relevant] causes, it does not follow that the same thing is just for everyone.

XXXVII. Of actions believed to be just, that whose usefulness in circumstances of mutual associations is supported by the testimony [of experience] has the attribute of serving as just whether it is the same for everyone or not. And if someone passes a law and it does not turn out to be in accord with what is useful in mutual associations, this no longer possesses the nature of justice. And if what is useful in the sense of being just changes, but for a while fits our basic grasp [of justice], nevertheless it was just for that length of time, [at least] for those who do not disturb themselves with empty words but simply look to the facts.

XXXVIII. If objective circumstances have not changed and things believed to be just have been shown in actual practice not to be in accord with our basic grasp [of justice], then those things were not just. And if objective circumstances do change and the same things which had been just turn out to be no longer useful, then those things were just as long as they were useful for mutual associations of fellow citizens; but later, when they were not useful, they were no longer just.

XXXIX. The man who has made the best arrangements for the confidence about external threats is he who has made the manageable things akin to himself, and has at least made the unmanageable things not alien to himself. But he avoided all contact with things for which not even this could be managed and he drove out of his life everything which it profited him to drive out.

XL. All those who had the power to acquire the greatest confidence from [the threats posed by] their neighbours also thereby lived together most pleasantly with the surest guarantee; and since they enjoyed the fullest sense of belonging they did not grieve the early death of the departed, as though it called for pity.