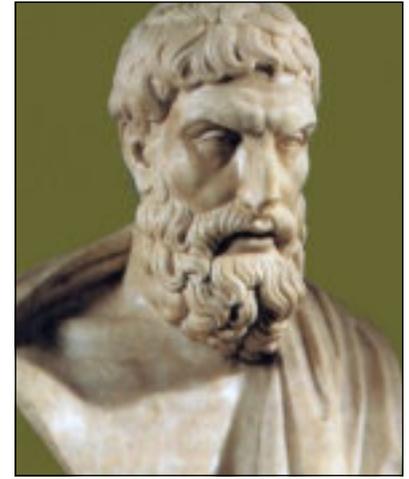




STOICS AS EPICUREAN FELLOW TRAVELLERS

John Sellars



Stoicism vs. Epicureanism

Many years ago, when I first studied philosophy as a student, there were two books that I came across on my own that really caught my attention: the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius. They seemed to share something in common, I thought at the time, especially when compared to the ancient philosophers I was studying, which was primarily Plato. Both Marcus and Lucretius offered naturalistic accounts of the physical world and saw human beings as tiny parts within an ever-changing Nature.

The standard view, I later came to learn, was that Marcus and Lucretius were on opposite sides of a polarised dispute between Stoics and Epicureans. You could be one or the other, but not both.

More similarities than differences

Even so, it seemed to me that they had at least as much in common as they did separating them. Both Stoics and Epicureans were empiricists and materialists. Both downplayed the importance of external possessions in a good life and both offered therapeutic arguments aimed at overcoming mental disturbances. I would later see that the Stoic Seneca often referred to Epicurus and quoted from Lucretius more than any other author. Marcus too alluded to Epicurean arguments about death in his *Meditations*.

So, Roman Stoics certainly read the

works of Epicurus and Lucretius.

What Stoics learn from Epicurus

Perhaps modern Stoics can learn from Epicureanism too. There are a few famous Epicurean ideas that seem especially relevant.

First, Epicurus drew a distinction between things we pursue that are natural and necessary (basic food, shelter), natural but unnecessary (fine food, fancy shelter), and unnatural and unnecessary (all the stuff we don't really need at all). This seems like a useful framework that a Stoic might use when thinking about 'preferred indifferents'. Like the Epicureans, the Stoics effectively argued that we ought only to pursue things that fulfil a natural need, contributing to our self-preservation.

Second, Epicurus argued that the key to a good life is not the accumulation of external possessions or worldly success but instead the cultivation of a calm and tranquil mind. Overcoming mental disturbances ought to be our first priority. For Lucretius, we can't do this without studying the natural world. We need to know how the world really works in order to avoid superstitious beliefs that might lead to unwarranted fears. In this sense, the Epicureans and Stoics share the idea that studying physics can contribute to our mental equanimity.

Third, Epicurus and Lucretius offered arguments why we ought not to be fearful of death. There is no need to worry about death because it is, by

definition, not something we shall ever experience. Death is the absence of sensation. Although we might be concerned about the fact that at some point in the future we won't exist, we seem quite relaxed about the fact that we didn't exist in the period before our birth. Both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius repeated these Epicurean thoughts with approval.

Stoics and Epicureans as fellow travellers

Stoics and Epicureans were fellow travellers headed in the same direction. They were both in search of a tranquil life, both offered remedies for psychological disturbances, and both thought that understanding our place within Nature was key to the whole enterprise. Given that, there may be various ways in which a Stoic might learn from Epicureanism, and vice versa, notwithstanding the many differences between their philosophical views.

I have discussed both philosophies side by side in my 2018 book *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press). I have also written a short introduction to Epicureanism called *The Fourfold Remedy; Epicurus and the Art of Happiness*, due out in January 2021 with Penguin (and, hopefully soon after, in the USA as *The Pocket Epicurean*, with University of Chicago Press).

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