

# Alex's Heresies - embracing a physical reality

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## Person: Epicurus – an early Greek humanist

July 18th, 2008 Alex McCullie

Epicurus was a humanist and freethinker in the Hellenic period of Greece after the Alexander's death. Many of his messages for the ancient Greeks are also relevant today – seeing the world as a physical occurrence; developing close friendships; dismissing beliefs in and fears of gods as irrational; and reducing unnecessary consumerism.

Born in Samos, an Athenian colony, in 341BCE, Epicurus formed one of the major philosophical movements of the Hellenic period of ancient Greece. In 307BCE Epicurus moved to Athens and bought a property close to Plato's academy – Garden of Epicurus – 'the Garden'. Unlike most Athenians he welcomed all comers including women and slaves equally. Something we also didn't see with Christians many years later.

His name is still with us today as *epicurean* typically defined as "Devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure, especially to the enjoyment of good food and comfort." (<http://answers.com>) Similarly, *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne offers an *Epicure* supplement (<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/epicure/>) promoting fine dining and eating. Seeking 21st Century-style pleasure wrongly characterises Epicurus. He promoted the pursuit of pleasure through *static* pleasure – reduction of physical and psychological pain, freedom from disturbance – rather than *kinetic* pleasure, short-term physical pursuits. Epicurus went as far as avoiding civic participation as he saw it as a cause of distress.

Metaphysically Epicurus saw gods as tranquil and remote beings from human affairs. More importantly he believed they had no involvement in the natural world and in fact neither created the universe nor involved with it. So for all practical purposes Epicurus saw reality like today's atheists. The gods played role models for humans only. Epicurus was an atomist – belief started by Democritus some 80 years previously – and as such believed the universe has always existed and matter is formed randomly by the combining and dissolving of indivisibly small particles, *atoms*.

Epicurus taught four principles to reduce mental distress, *tetrapharmakon*:

- Do not fear gods – as gods have no involvement in human affairs so there is no benefit to supplication or fear
- Do not fear death – there is no possibility of everlasting pleasure or pain after death based on the whims of gods. As existence ends with death, there is no distress after death similar to there is none before birth.
- Good is easy to obtain.
- Learning to enduring unavoidable pain – something that cannot be avoided any way.

Epicurus also promoted improving health by developing and maintaining close friendships. Epicureanism is often referred to as the 'cult of friendship'.

Epicurus died in 270BCE a painful death that he appears to have faced gracefully.

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