

The Principal Doctrines of Epicurus

Below is a set of the editor's favorite translations for each of Epicurus' Principal Doctrines, also known as his "Sovran Maxims," which comes down to us from the [*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*](#) by [Diogenes Laërtius](#).

Some other collections are also available on the World Wide Web: [Yonge, 1853](#) . [Hicks, 1925](#) . [Bailey, 1926](#) . [Cook, 1997](#) . [Mylott, 1998](#)

I. That which is happy and imperishable, neither has trouble itself, nor does it cause trouble for anyone else; therefore, it is not subject to feelings of either anger or indebtedness; for these feelings only exist in what is weak.

II. Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dispersed into elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us.

III. The extent of pleasure reaches its maximum at 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.

IV. 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. Even diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain.

V. 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.

VI. Whatever you can provide yourself with to secure protection from men is a natural good.

VII. 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 do not possess that for which they originally aimed for by the instinct of nature.

VIII. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself: but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.

IX. If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another.

X. If those things which make the pleasures of debauched men, put an end to the fears of the mind, and to those concerns about the heavenly bodies, and death, and pain; and if they taught us what ought to be the limit of our desires, we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full with pleasures from every source and never have pain of body or mind, which is the chief evil of life.

XI. If we were not troubled by apprehensions about the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need to study nature.

XII. A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So without the study of nature there is no enjoyment of pure pleasure.

XIII. There is no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above and beneath the earth and throughout the boundless universe remain matters of suspicion.

XIV. Irresistible power and great wealth may, up to a certain point, give us security as far as men are concerned; but generally, the security of men depends upon the tranquillity of their souls, and their freedom from ambition.

XV. Natural wealth is both limited and easily obtained; but the riches demanded by vain ideals are insatiable.

XVI. Misfortune seldom intrudes upon the wise man; his greatest and highest interests are directed by reason throughout the course of life.

XVII. The just man is the freest of all men from disquietude; but the unjust man is a perpetual prey to it.

XVIII. Bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after that it only varies. The limit of mental pleasure, however, is reached when we reflect on these bodily pleasures and their related emotions, which used to cause the mind the greatest alarms.

XIX. Infinite and finite time both have equal pleasure, if anyone measures its limits by reason.

XX. The flesh considers the limits of pleasure to be boundless, and to provide it would require unlimited time. But the mind, intellectually grasping what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of eternity, furnishes a complete and perfect life, and we no longer have any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless, the mind does not shun pleasure; and when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, it does not approach its end as though it fell short in any way of the best life possible.

XXI. He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. Thus he has no longer any need of things which are troublesome to attain.

XXII. We must always refer our conclusions both to our goals and to the evidence of direct perception; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.

XXIII. If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard by which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those sensations which you claim are false.

XXIV. If you reject any single sensation and fail to distinguish between an opinion based on what awaits confirmation versus evidence already available based on the senses, feelings, and every intuitive faculty of mind, you will confound all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved a basis for doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.

XXV. If you do not on every occasion refer each of your actions to the ultimate end prescribed by nature, but instead turn to some other end in the process of choice or avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your theories.

XXVI. All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but such desires are easily discarded when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm.

XXVII. Of all the things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship.

XXVIII. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing terrible lasts forever, or even for long, also enables us to see that in the midst of the limited evils of this life, nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

XXIX. Among desires some are natural and necessary, some natural but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to groundless opinion.

XXX. Those natural desires which entail no pain when unsatisfied, though pursued with an intense effort, are also due to groundless opinion; and it is not because of their own nature they are not dispelled, but because of the vain fancies of humankind.

XXXI. The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and to keep oneself from being harmed.

XXXII. For all living things which have not been able to make compacts not to harm one another or be harmed, nothing is ever either just nor unjust; and likewise too for all tribes of men which have been unable or unwilling to make compacts not to harm or be harmed.

XXXIII. There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm.

XXXIV. Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the accompanying fear of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions.

XXXV. It is not possible for one who acts in secret violation of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed, to be confident that he will escape detection, even if at present he escapes a thousand times. For up until the time of death he will feel uncertain that he will indeed escape.

XXXVI. Overall, justice is the same for all people, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealing of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country or any other circumstances the same thing does not turn out to be universally just.

XXXVII. Among actions which are considered as just by law, that which is proven by examination to create advantageous conditions for men's dealings with one another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice. And if what is mutually advantageous varies, and for a period of time corresponds to our concept of justice, it is not less true that during that time, it really was just, at

least for those who do not preoccupy themselves about vain words, but who prefer in every case, to examine and judge for themselves.

XXXVIII. Where, without any change in circumstances, the things held to be just by law are seen not to correspond with the concept of justice in actual practice, such laws are not really just. But wherever the laws have ceased to be advantageous because of a change in circumstances, in that case and for that time the laws were just when they were advantageous for the mutual dealings of the citizens, and subsequently ceased to be just when they were no longer advantageous.

XXXIX. He who desires to live tranquilly without having anything to fear from other men, ought to make himself friends; those whom he cannot make friends of, he should, at least avoid rendering enemies; and if that is not in his power, he should, as far as possible, avoid all intercourse with them, and keep them aloof, as far as it is for his interest to do so.

XL. The happiest men are those who have arrived at the point of having nothing to fear from those who surround them. Such men live with one another most agreeably, having the firmest grounds of confidence in one another, enjoying the advantages of friendship in all their fullness, they do not mourn a friend who dies before they do, as if there was a need for pity.

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