# Epicurean Faction Handout

Delegation to King Menander's court • Sāgala, c. 150 BCE

*Pursue a secure, pleasurable life by limiting desires, overcoming fear, and cultivating friendship.*

## Your objectives

Primary — Win the court. Receive more allegiance votes than any rival faction for an outright victory; an absolute majority is not required. If two or more factions tie for the most votes, each tied faction earns a partial victory.

**Secondary — Royal patronage.** Persuade Menander to award the Epicurean delegation one year of royal patronage.

## Your responsibilities

- Explain and defend your school's central teachings. Decide together how to divide the presentation, questions, advice, and patronage case; everyone should contribute.
- Lead a short exercise: use or adapt a suggested practice, or invent one rooted in your school's philosophy. Explain its purpose.
- When the court receives its dilemmas, offer concrete advice grounded in your school's teachings and the primary sources. Respond to skeptical and rival objections.

## What your school believes

You represent Epicurus's Garden, established in Athens in the late fourth century BCE. Epicureans say that pleasure is the good, but this does not mean luxury or constant excitement. The most reliable pleasure is a life free from unnecessary bodily pain and mental disturbance, surrounded by trustworthy friends.

**Pleasure guided by prudence.** Pleasure is the end, but we should sometimes refuse an immediate pleasure and accept an unpleasant task when doing so makes life better overall. Prudence asks about the lasting effects of a choice, not merely how it feels in the moment. Friendship, mutual support, and modest comforts matter more than status.

**Three kinds of desire.** Natural and necessary desires—such as nourishment and shelter—have limits. Natural but unnecessary desires—such as elaborate meals—are optional. "Empty" desires—for endless acclaim, wealth, or domination—cannot be securely satisfied. The skill is learning when one has enough.

**Nature, gods, and death.** Epicureans explain nature through atoms and void. Gods do not meddle in human affairs or punish the dead; the soul perishes with the body. Epicurus argues that being dead cannot harm us as an experience, because when death is present there is no subject left to suffer. Critics ask whether death can harm by depriving us of future goods.

**Justice and political life.** Justice rests on mutually advantageous agreements that protect people from harm. Public ambition can create new dependencies and threats; the school usually prizes the security of private life. But your delegation must address difficult cases in which political withdrawal or a failure to help others might itself undermine security or justice.

**Your hardest question.** If pleasure is the ultimate good, why should someone make a painful sacrifice for a stranger, or repair an injustice that will never be discovered?

## Two suggested philosophical practices

These exercises are options, not requirements. Use one, adapt it, or develop another rooted in Epicurean philosophy, using the sources or additional research. Plan for about two minutes, invite silent or observational participation, and require no personal disclosure. Explain its philosophical point, without treating a useful experience as proof of the doctrine.

### Option 1 The contemplation of death

**Purpose.** Explore Epicurus's claim that being dead is "nothing to us" because there is no experience of it. Notice which fears this argument addresses and which it leaves open.

**1. Introduce the idea.** Say: "For this exercise, try out Epicurus's view that the mind ends when the body dies. You do not have to agree with it. We are considering the absence of experience, not imagining a painful death."

**2. Consider the time before your birth.** Invite everyone to sit quietly. Say: "Think of the world a century before you were born. People lived and died. Were you lonely or waiting in darkness? Or was there no experience for you at all?" Pause and let the distinction sink in.

**3. Consider the time after your death.** Say: "Now consider a century after your death. If Epicurus is right, would you experience loneliness, darkness, or disappointment? Darkness would still be an experience. His claim is that there would be no one left to experience anything." Pause. Invite participants to notice whether this differs from how they usually imagine being dead.

**4. Separate three worries.** Read each worry and its explanation. Ask participants to notice silently which one the exercise addresses:

- DYING MAY HURT. The process of dying can involve pain; Epicurus's argument does not deny this.
- BEING DEAD WILL FEEL TERRIBLE. On Epicurus's view, being dead cannot feel terrible because there is no experience at all.
- DEATH TAKES AWAY FUTURE PLEASURES. This is a further objection: perhaps losing a good future is harmful even if the loss is never experienced.

**5. Return to the present.** Ask everyone to notice the room around them. Then invite them to ask themselves: "Did the comparison change any part of my fear? What worry remains?" No particular emotional response is required.

**Discuss briefly.** Could death still harm someone by depriving them of future pleasures, even if they never experience that loss?

Sources: Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus 124–125; Principal Doctrine 2; the later Lucretius 3.832–842.

## Preparation for debate and negotiation

Defend pleasure as durable well-being. Show how Epicureanism motivates friendship and justice, not merely withdrawal. Challenge Stoic indifference to health and affection, and the Buddhist account of craving.

A useful exercise does not by itself establish that its underlying worldview is true.

## Option 2 The garden of gratitude

**Purpose.** Experience how attending to a simple pleasure or a happy memory can itself be pleasant. Explore the value of friendship and having enough.

**1. Choose an ordinary pleasure.** Say: “Recall a friendly conversation, a shared meal, laughter with friends, or another small enjoyment. Choose something simple rather than your happiest-ever experience.” Participants may imagine a fictional scene instead and keep its details private.

**2. Bring the scene to mind.** Say: “Recall where you were. Notice a sound, a taste, a friendly expression, or a feeling of ease. Stay with one or two details.” Leave a quiet pause after each suggestion; do not rush to the next question.

**3. Enjoy what is available in the memory.** Say: “Let yourself linger over one pleasant detail. Instead of listing what else you wish you had, attend to what was already satisfying. Is recalling it pleasant now?” If no pleasure arises, participants can simply notice that; the exercise is not a test.

**4. Notice what made it enough.** Ask participants to reflect silently: “Did this pleasure require wealth, prestige, or luxury? If other people were involved, what did trust or companionship contribute? Would having more necessarily have made the moment better?” Explain that Epicureans train themselves to appreciate accessible pleasures and dependable friendships.

**5. Bring the practice into court life.** Invite neighbors to name one simple pleasure the court could cultivate together and one pursuit of status or power that might crowd it out. For example, a shared meal could be displaced by endless competition for royal favor. Participants may offer a fictional example or continue reflecting silently.

**Explain the point.** Say: “Epicureans deliberately return to pleasant memories and nurture friendships. This exercise asks whether some of what makes life good is already available without endless striving.”

**Discuss briefly.** Can remembered pleasure and good friendship make a difficult life happy, or are there limits to their power?

Sources: Epicurus’s letter to Idomeneus, preserved in Diogenes Laertius 10.22; Principal Doctrine 27; Vatican Saying 17.

## After the final judgments

Give ONE collective rating (1–5) of the court’s Philosophical Deliberation. Judge understanding and reasons, not whether the court agreed with your faction. The Game Master will announce the court’s average rating.

## Sources and historical cautions

Epicurus’s Letter to Menoeceus, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings are primary sources. The later four-part remedy (tetrapharmakos) is a summary, not a court-era document.