

Tetrapharmakos in Philodemus's On Choices and Rejections

Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2022 at 4:44 AM

Thanks Don!

The way you say that makes me want to be clear that I have never had any issue whatsoever with the first four Doctrines in full. My issue has always been that their "abbreviated" form is deceptively brief and ends up being misleading, and that it is generally better to refer to them in their full original form. The abbreviated form ends up to me suggesting compromises and ambiguities that I doubt Epicurus himself would have wanted to create.

So long as those ambiguities are cleared up quickly no harm is done, but I bet in the ancient world there were some Epicureans who viewed them with a similar negative light.

Don has seen this before, but for those who haven't read [the discussion in the past](#), it boils down to:

- 1 it's not OK to Don't fear the gods because you think they like you;
- 2 It's not OK to Don't fear death because you think you are going to heaven;
- 3 It's not OK to think the good is easy to get if you think the good is salvation:
- 4 It's not OK to think the bad is easy to endure if you think the way to do so is stoicism.

None of those errors are possible with the full form of Doctrines 1 through 4, but they are not ruled out by the abbreviated version.

In abbreviated form they aren't just generic forms of the original medicines, they are more like a placebo when what you need is the full original strength dose. The original versions contain the observations that make them work; the abbreviated versions are simple assertions without any evidence or reasoning. Worse, their form ("Don't.....") implies that one should accept them "on authority," which is a terrible way to approach these issues. They sound more like something that has been influenced by the Abrahamic Ten Commandments than something Epicurus would say.

Or if i were being an alarmist, i might say that rather than being a full strength vaccine, they can tend to rewire ones thinking in a way (overbroad generalizing) that could actually produce more harm than good.

I don't think anyone here would have that problem, because we go to great lengths to avoid it. But I would wager a good number of casual readers who come across the abbreviated version

on the internet think that it is sufficient for their understanding of Epicurean teachings, when that is far from the case. Even here, when people are new, I worry that they encourage stopping too early in deciding what is important in Epicurus and what is not. It would be a big mistake to think that all you need to accept is these four abbreviations and then you're a "full Epicurean."

So it is good to bring out all the discussion we can find on this in Philodemus and elsewhere. Even the quote above indicates that the abbreviation was controversial in the ancient world. Personally, I strongly doubt Epicurus himself would have used the abbreviation as a summary of his views, and I can easily imagine that if a word like "rustic" was in play then the criticism was that they amount to an unwarranted "dumbing down" of the original forms.

Sorry for the tangent; I look forward to reading more of what you get from the book!