

Stoics Aren't Ascetics... It's Those Epicureans!

Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2024 at 8:05 AM

Quote

But it is not so. Stoicism is not asceticism and a Stoic is not a monk. In fact, it is the school of the pale Epicureans that is closer to the ideal of abstemiousness. The Stoic proposal is far broader and it extends far beyond the narrow passage of the ascetic way. The history of transmission of Stoic ideas, the piercing lack of many ancient sources and some intricacies of the doctrine account for the popularity of the ascetic misinterpretation. And yet, the time has come to disavow it.

He can claim and disavow asceticism all he wants, but protests don't change what is in the philosophy, and it's far from "intricacies of doctrine" that lead to the common understanding - from the past to the present - that Stoicism embraces asceticism and all other ways of escaping from the temptations of "pleasure."

As I read the article it is a series of assertions almost entirely devoid of citations to authoritative Stoics to support his position. This weak statement by Seneca that he'd rather wear a toga than walk around naked is about the best he offers.

Quote

These points don't exhaust all that I have to say against the ascetic misinterpretation. Yet, I hope they provide an outline of my anti-ascetic stance. For the record, I'm tempted to mention, as a closing argument, that the ancient Stoics themselves provided a wide array of explicit suggestions that they didn't have any harsh ascetism in mind. As Seneca put it "I prefer to display the state of my soul clad rather in the toga and shoes than showing naked shoulders and with cuts on my feet" (*On the Happy Life*, XXV.2).

One thing I would take away from reading this is something to consider when you're making an argument against an existing consensus (whether the consensus is that Stoicism is all about asceticism and virtue or that Epicureanism is all about retirement and tranquility). If you want to be taken seriously it's generally a good idea to (1) reinforce even a basic introduction with some clear citations that support your position, (2) deal quickly with the citations that appear to undercut your position.