

Lucian: Hermotimus, The Rival Philosophies

Post by “Joshua” of February 3, 2026 at 10:22 PM

I'm not sure I succeeded in using "far fewer words", but here it is 😊

I didn't listen to it, but I did finally read this dialogue yesterday for the first time, and I did find it interesting.

Dramatis Personae

Lycinus is generally regarded as an authorial self-insert for Lucian, and like the author he is satirical, skeptical, and sarcastic.

Hermotimus is a novice Stoic, full of admiration for the masters of that sect, but considering himself to be still toiling on the lower slopes of Mount Virtue while the leading lights he follows are enraptured with bliss at the summits.

The Argument

The dialogue takes its beginning from a problem suggested by Lycinus. This is the problem: suppose you want to get to Corinth, but have never been there yourself. There are many roads leading out of the city you are in now, but you do not know which of them, if any, lead on to Corinth. By each road there is a plausible-seeming, respectable-looking man who claims that *this* road, the one he stands by, is the one that will get you there.

However;

Quote

Lycinus: I find that each of them, as well as his guide, has tried one only [road], which he now recommends and will have to be the only one leading to the city. Whether he tells the truth I have no means of knowing; that he has attained some end, and seen some city, I may perhaps allow; but whether he saw the right one, or whether, Corinth being the real goal, he got to Babylon and thought he had seen Corinth—that is still undecided; for surely every one who has seen a city has not seen Corinth, unless Corinth is the only city there is. But my greatest difficulty of all is the absolute certainty that the true road is one; for Corinth is one, and the other roads lead anywhere but to Corinth, though there may be people deluded enough to suppose that the North road and the South road lead equally to Corinth.

Let Corinth be Wisdom; a thousand guides claim to show the way, and by a thousand different roads. Because you have not known Wisdom, and are not yet Wise, your search of it is vexed

an intransigent difficulty; **how can one who is not Wise find the right road that leads to Wisdom?**

By what standard will he judge each road on offer? He cannot take them all; in the course of a whole human life, there isn't the time to follow every road to its end. He cannot ask a guide, because even if he assumes that they are not wilfully deceiving him, they all say different things and cannot all be right. It's really important he gets this right, because some roads lead on to disaster. Some might lead him farther away from Wisdom than he is even now.

An obvious comparison can be made to Matthew 7: 13-14;

Quote

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

So what, do we just take this random guy at his word? Why? Because he said so? Or, rather, because he was *reported* to have said so by some other random guy, who only wrote this after his subject was dead?

Of course not. It's not a reasonable thing to ask. "I had rather be a dog, and bay the moon, / Than such a Roman" (Brutus, *Julius Caesar*)

Objections

Hermotimus does not immediately see the difficulty. He raises several objections:

You don't have to drink a whole jar of wine to know the quality; you only need a small taste. And so with Wisdom.

- But a jar of wine is all the same; but the schools of philosophy each make a variety of claims, and you cannot possibly judge them all until you have heard them all.

Well, suppose you were to judge the school not by sampling its doctrines, but by the character of the man who leads the school.

- Two problems; first, the same problem as before. How does one who lacks Wisdom judge the character of the man who claims to possess it? Second; How do you know that your master is not of one character in your company, or in public, and of quite a different character entirely in private? You cannot study him at all times; he may seem virtuous before you, but behave with pettiness, anger, drunkenness, and jealousy in other circumstances.

And there are other objections that Hermotimus does not raise, but which might be raised:

For instance, one ought to be able to quickly rule out one school or one thinker if they were clearly wrong on an important point, or were shown to be inaccurate with regard to some fact

or other, or were found to have employed a faulty syllogism. If someone tells me that in his system the Sun goes around the Earth, when I know it to be otherwise, I can disregard what he says without further explanation. He is unreliable.

- And yet, if you *do not* understand his system in general outline as well as in the particulars, it is possible that you have merely misunderstood him. Or that elsewhere he resolves the matter by another doctrine. For example, *I* do not believe that in the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist wine really does become blood. But if it is further explained to me that only the underlying and undetectable *substance* of the wine turns to blood, and that the surface appearance, scent, and taste of the wine remains unchanged, I may find it challenging to refute this metaphysic.

Conclusion

Hermotimus is finally won over. Philosophy is a game for fools and liars and something worse.

Quote

Hermotimus. You are quite right. And now I will be off to metamorphose myself. When we next meet, there will be no long, shaggy beard, no artificial composure; I shall be natural, as a gentleman should. I may go as far as a fashionable coat, by way of publishing my renunciation of nonsense. I only wish there were an emetic that would purge out every doctrine they have instilled into me; I assure you, if I could reverse Chrysippus's plan with the hellebore, and drink forgetfulness, not of the world but of Stoicism, I would not think twice about it. Well, Lycinus, I owe you a debt indeed; I was being swept along in a rough turbid torrent, unresisting, drifting with the stream; when lo, you stood there and fished me out, a true *deus ex machina*. I have good enough reason, I think, to shave my head like the people who get clear off from a wreck; for I am to make votive offerings to-day for the dispersion of that thick cloud which was over my eyes. Henceforth, if I meet a philosopher on my walks (and it will not be with my will), I shall turn aside and avoid him as I would a mad dog.

My thoughts

I wanted you to have a normal life. That's something that you can't have when Rick shows up. Everything real turns fake, everything right is wrong, all you know is that you know nothing and he knows everything. And, well... well, he's not a villain, Summer, but he shouldn't be your hero. He's more like a demon, or a super fucked-up god.

-Morty Smith, *Rick and Morty; The Rickshank Rickdemption*

"Do they not Epicurise gloriously?" "Yes, if coming often to the powdering tub [for a syphilis remedy] be doing so."

-*The Epicurean*, Desiderius Erasmus

"ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and no man ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. it is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus. if it could be understood it would not answer their purpose. their security is in their faculty of shedding darkness, like the cuttlefish, thro' the element in which they move, and making it impenetrable to the eye of a pursuing enemy."

-Thomas Jefferson, letter to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 30 July 1816

Ok, now these are my thoughts;

Lucian achieved something remarkable. A Syrian boy, born in Mesopotamia, probably tutored in Greek as a second language, he went on to become one of the most successful and enduring writers in that tongue of his age. His influence, through devoted admirers like François Rabelais (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*), Desiderius Erasmus (*In Praise of Folly*), Thomas More (*Utopia*), and Jonathan Swift (*A Modest Proposal*), has set the standard for our conception of modern satire as a literary form.

He sparred with conmen, mountebanks, flatterers, and charlatans. His skepticism is not the tired, stale and rigidly syllogistic or geometric mental emptiness of the Xenos and Stilpos of centuries prior. It is a lively, vivacious, and penetrating spirit of genuine doubt and uncertainty that drives his work: he reminds me of Columbo raising two fingers and a cigarette as he is nearly out of the room, intoning almost as an afterthought;

"Just one more thing..."

Just one more thing; how can you be sure your philosopher isn't lying to your face? How can you be *certain* that the travelogue you just paid real money for in the marketplace isn't a pack of fables from beginning to end? How can you *know* that the oracle who appears to be flogging you for all the gold you can carry *isn't* prying open your seals, reading your secrets, inquiring after your confidants, and showering you with any line of bullshit he can think of just to keep you on the hook?

For me, the value of this dialogue is in the the following lesson; the very same arguments that I employ myself against claims of revealed religion can just as easily be turned against me. Indeed, they have been anticipated for use against me since long before I started using them myself.

Was Lucian an Epicurean? Well, probably not. I detect in him a sympathy for our school, and in this very dialogue he makes a very Epicurean point about the misuse of geometry by philosophers, a subject that I covered all too hastily in a [video](#) last January. In a letter to his friend Celsus on Alexander the false oracle, he speaks of Epicurus and Metrodorus with great admiration. This is probably because his correspondant was an Epicurean, but it may also have been genuine comraderie; the Epicureans at least saw right through many of the same scams he did. They were devoid of superstition, sought only causes *in nature* to explain phenomena in nature, and went for humble **pleasure** as their good rather than high-minded self-aggrandizing

virtue.

Whatever else he was, Lucian offers an indispensable view into the Epicureanism of Asia Minor in the second century.