

Tsouna's On Choices and Avoidances

Post by “Bryan” of February 1, 2021 at 5:59 PM

I would be very grateful for any information in regard to finding Giovanni Indelli and Voula Tsouna's treatment of Philodemus' *On Choices and Avoidances*, published by Bibliopolis in 1995. Dr. Tsouna let me know today that she is not aware of any place the book is available, and she only has two, one here with her in California and the other in Greece, so she was not able to provide me with a copy.

Post by “Bryan” of February 1, 2021 at 10:51 PM

Joshua was able to locate the book -- Thanks again!

Post by “Robert” of June 7, 2025 at 11:32 PM

Hello! Here I am, four years later, with the same question. Any leads?

Post by “Don” of June 7, 2025 at 11:37 PM

FWIW: 2 editions in 83 libraries

[On choices and avoidances | WorldCat.org](#)

On choices and avoidances | WorldCat.org
search.worldcat.org

Post by “Bryan” of June 8, 2025 at 12:32 AM

Hello Robert, the book can be purchased here:

[On Choices and Avoidances - Bibliopolis - Edizioni di Filosofia e Scienze](#)

Most of it is commentary and the translation only runs a few pages:

"It is fair that we speak against the rest of people who have a contrary opinion about what has been said, who state that we accomplish actions successfully without the help of philosophy. For we know that the very copies in which they are openly abusing us are easily available. But if we set side by side some ... And they claim that in truth no judgement takes precedence over any other, being persuaded that the great affection of the soul occurs as a result of pain and that thus we accomplish our choices and avoidances by observing both [bodily and mental pain]. For it is not possible that the joys arise in us in the same way and all together, in accordance with some expectation ... and some people denied that it is possible to know anything. And, further, they added that if nothing is present on account of which one should make an immediate choice, then one should not choose immediately. Some other people, having selected the affections of the soul as the moral ends and as not in need of additional judgement based on further criteria, granted to everybody unchallengeable authority to take pleasure in whatever they cared to name and to do whatever contributed to it. And yet others held the doctrine that what we call grief or joy are totally empty notions because of the manifest indeterminacy of things ...

(It is just as well that we know both that the good is not only limited in magnitude but also is easy to attain) and that the bad not only has limits in magnitude and time, but also is easy to bear; for otherwise it would be of no use that the good should be limited but impossible or difficult for us to attain, or that the bad should be limited but unbearable through its long duration. For what results from these points of knowledge is that one seeks after nothing which does not naturally remove pain—and such are most of the matters which people take a serious interest in—and that one does not avoid what does not prevent one from having pleasure—such as we should consider most matters of improvement to be. Again ... Having looked into those matters, one should also consider the differences among desires, both with regard to the pleasures and with regard to their causes. For it is also on account of the failure to distinguish between them that important errors occur through them with respect to choices and avoidances. For men suffer the worst evils for the sake of the most alien desires which they take to be the most necessary — I mean desires for sovereignty and brilliant reputation and great wealth and suchlike luxuries and other similar things. Again, they neglect the most necessary appetites as if they were the most alien to nature ... of natural pleasures some are necessary, others not necessary; and of the former ones themselves some are necessary for life, others for the health of the body, others for living happily, according to the different causes and not all taken together. And we called different causes those causes some of which, it seems, produce terrible storms while others do not, some occur prematurely due to certain

defects, others happen because of the perceptions of joy, some are produced by habits whereas others are produced independently from them, some occur having originated from ourselves while others arise because of external factors, or because things which became desirable by our lack of them inflicted a sort of wound by the very thought of them. And some...

...because the most blessed beings are far from having supreme power over them for ever. It is easy, then, to see that such beliefs are the causes of innumerable failures. For these men place themselves in such a situation so as not to take advice from anybody about anything at all, in the belief that nothing depends on man, but everything is controlled by the god.

Then, at any rate they inevitably fall into the evils which the lack of forethought tends to inflict upon men ... It must be indicated that ... they meet with irreparable misfortunes, and sometimes they cast their own cities into evils as well. And if they are not compelled by the plausibility of things, or indeed if the omens do not agree by sheer chance with what ought to happen, as they are held back and they procrastinate because of their apprehension to do nothing against the will of the gods, they fail to act. And because of the troubles which cannot be surpassed, they neglect...

...by Zeus, many and great evils concerning many matters occur as a result of the worthless assumptions of mindless men and are avoided as a result of the right concepts; and, as it is also suggested in those discussions, they consider some matters instead of others as the most important. Besides, men think that what occurs through the agency of the gods and of the other powers will perpetually cause to the dead evils by far greater than the goods which it will bring to the living in their lifetime. And for this reason...

...by them to the gods. Therefore, they lament if they are afflicted by things which resemble evils, both the evils deriving from ingratitude towards men and the fatherland, and also the evils resulting from superstition, i.e. because they take god to be the cause of both death and life —though, by Zeus, the other evils are very great. And because of the sorrow that weighs upon them on account of their death, they become irascible and hard to please and ill-tempered ...

And therefore, it is also obvious that, aside from those misadventures, they are totally worthless people. This is said because of what has been stated about the four cardinal principles, for the thesis that the understanding and the memorisation of the cardinal tenets contribute greatly to actual choices and avoidances is not equal to claiming that some choices and avoidances are traced back to the states of tranquillity concerning them [sc. the cardinal tenets] —as some have clumsily interpreted it—but to claiming that they [sc. the choices and avoidances] are accomplished successfully when we measure them by the ends laid down by nature...

...clearly, since they do not hold the assumptions which we value. The many are rather led to right conduct by the laws which threaten with death, and with punishments coming from the gods, and with pains which are considered intolerable, and with the privation of some things which are supposedly hard to procure. This is the case partly on account of what was said at the beginning, partly because these things threaten men who are foolish and who cannot be persuaded by the true precepts; and the only thing that is achieved through them [sc. the laws] is deterrence for a short period of time. Besides, it is evident that the assumptions...

...these things were shown to provide help in study. Above all, he establishes the principles of philosophy, by which alone it is possible to act rightly. And it is clear that he also establishes the congenital ends, which yield the most conspicuous evidence and by which the calculations concerning choices and avoidances are performed. Besides, one must unfailingly draw the moral arguments regarding both choices and avoidances from the study of nature in order that they should be complete — if nothing else, the principle that nothing is produced without a cause and that ... does not change...

...it is impossible for one to live pleurably without living prudently and honourably and justly, and also without living courageously and temperately and magnanimously, and without making friends and without being philanthropic, and in general without having all the other virtues. For the greatest errors in choices and avoidances occur when some men perform each action while holding the opposite views, and thereby while being constrained by evils. On the other hand, one should not quibble when talking about the teaching of the elements on account of the mutual entailment and necessary sequence of some things to some others. For sometimes ... the desires...

...we advise ... further in actions ... It is necessary to bear in mind also that a further factor which contributes to success is a thorough understanding of individual sources of external goods and how they stand in relation to us —for example, luxury and beauty and wealth, generally speaking, and marriage and the like—, but its contribution is small in comparison with the cardinal tenets which we mentioned. For which reason these have been placed also at the head of the [Principal Doctrines](#). Thus, it might even be said that...

...they say thoughtlessly: «It is impossible for anyone to learn beforehand on what day one might arrive (at the end of one's life), either in old age or dying before reaching old age; indeed, no one knows the exact truth. Whence, we do not reflect continuously on the fact that we will die in the same way as we do when death is clearly known to be coming soon. For there is some time left. And because the end of our life is hard to determine, sometimes we feel perhaps inclined to extend it as much as possible, while other times we tend to be able to quit life immediately afterwards [sc. immediately after we realise that death will be coming soon]». Thus, in an unseemly way, some people ...

... betray the only things which can provide pleasures and endure pains in vain. And they abandon philosophy entirely, each of them saying: «Shall I go now into endless toils and then pass away in the middle of them?» And they refuse to impart benefits of any kind on the grounds that this ought to be done by the immortals or by those who expect to receive gratitude in return. Again, they are ungrateful to everyone and they always exclaim with derision: «Don't give anything to the dead!» And indifferent towards all things...

...exclaiming: «Pray, do I not live decently and justly? Or do I not live in accordance with the laws applying to men? Then, when I shall die I shall be immortal». And they are cut off from everything by means of which they would have a better life, exactly like men who are sentenced to death. What is more, they neglect what contributes to health, adding: «How many evils shall I endure if I live luxuriously for three seasons?» And they are frightened to death by all diseases. And on account of projecting everlasting evils onto the time when they are dead, they are afflicted by immeasurable troubles ... Thus, carried away by this line of thought and struck against expectation by something sudden, they are entirely beside themselves. But before that, they deprive themselves of any enjoyment, so that the things necessary to life will last them. And they live putting everything off in the belief that it will be possible for them to partake of some goods later on. And thereafter, they are unbalanced throughout their lives. And they dedicate themselves to many labours...

...that they did contrive and will contrive new solutions, so as to ward off frightening things more speedily on every occasion which might turn out this way until they die. And for fear that, because of the length of time involved, they might ever lack the necessary things, they become reluctant to distribute any benefits and they withhold returning the benefits which they have received. And when they lose money, they suffer the pains of hell. Besides, they engage in wrath and hatred which do not befit humans, and they become arrogant in their announcements, commands or threats. Also, they lack pity and sympathy towards their kindred...

...nor does he desire to amass much money. And he does well in the present as is not illogical, but having closely examined the things which yield fruit in return for his labours, he works with more equanimity —*unless he works for the sake of friends*. And rather using all his time sparingly, he relies on his own capacities alone whenever there is need to do so. And from boyhood onwards, he never breaks off from the anchorages of philosophy. And feeling confidence during his own lifetime, even when this is very long, he also distributes all that remains [sc. his property], that only left remaining to him which is necessary for life itself...

...since he came to his death. And avoiding a careless death, he is industrious because of the consequent doctrine based on the concept of the preservation of one's goods. And since he does not cut short the long extent of his life, he always begins new activities and friendly attachments. And he attends to his own property as to how to administer it. Also, he reflects on former events in the belief that they may concern him in the future. And he treats with much care as many people as he can, and he is thankful to those who treated him kindly, in particular

because he hopes that he will share in some goods with them or that he will receive some benefit by these same people again in the future...

...during the long duration of his life. And when he encounters whatever can lead to an improvement, he spares no effort in the hope of surviving for a while. Indeed, he takes the greatest care of his health. And feeling confidence against illness and death, he endures with strength the therapies that can remove them."

Post by "Robert" of June 8, 2025 at 1:37 AM

[Bryan](#) thanks very much for this! I was interested primarily in the text, though I'm sure the commentary is valuable as well.

Thanks also to you, Don, for the WorldCat link. Possibly some options there.

Post by "DaveT" of June 12, 2025 at 3:23 PM

[Bryan](#) Thanks for sharing. However, I'm not clear about his reference to the four cardinal principals and what they specifically are. "it is also obvious that, aside from those misadventures, they are totally worthless people. This is said because of what has been stated about the four cardinal principles,..."

Post by "Don" of June 12, 2025 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

the four cardinal principles,

The Tetrpharmakos?

Post by "Kalosyni" of June 13, 2025 at 7:46 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from DaveT](#)

the four cardinal principles,

The Tetrpharmakos?

The first four [Principal Doctrines??](#)

[PD01](#). The blessed and incorruptible nature knows no trouble itself, nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favor. For all such things exist only in the weak. [\[1\]](#)

[PD02](#). [Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

[PD03](#). The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.

[PD04](#). Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh.

Post by “Bryan” of June 14, 2025 at 12:51 AM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

four cardinal principals

[Quote from Don](#)

Tetrpharmakos

Yes, here is Tsouna on that section:

"The expression τὰ τέτταρα refers to the *Fourfold Remedy*. We suggest that it should be distinguished from τὰ κυριώτατα (1. 8). τὰ τέτταρα are *precisely four* principles originally expressed by Epicurus and later constituting the *Fourfold Remedy*. On the other hand, the term κυριώτατα in its technical sense is intended to cover all the fundamental principles pertaining

to a certain subject and enabling the Epicurean student to confront particular problems and to solve them on his own."

Post by "DaveT" of June 14, 2025 at 10:48 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

[Quote from DaveT](#)

four cardinal principals

[Quote from Don](#)

Tetrapharmakos

Yes, here is Tsouna on that section:

"The expression τὰ τέτταρα refers to the *Fourfold Remedy*. We suggest that it should be distinguished from τὰ κυριώτατα (1. 8). τὰ τέτταρα are *precisely four* principles originally expressed by Epicurus and later constituting the *Fourfold Remedy*. On the other hand, the term κυριώτατα in its technical sense is intended to cover all the fundamental principles pertaining to a certain subject and enabling the Epicurean student to confront particular problems and to solve them on his own."



Thank you. That is helpful.

Post by "Don" of June 14, 2025 at 11:07 AM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

[Quote from DaveT](#)

four cardinal principals

[Quote from Don](#)

Tetrapharmakos

Yes, here is Tsouna on that section:

"The expression τὰ τέτταρα refers to the *Fourfold Remedy*. We suggest that it should be distinguished from τὰ κυριώτατα (1. 8). τὰ τέτταρα are *precisely four* principles originally expressed by Epicurus and later constituting the *Fourfold Remedy*. On the other hand, the term κυριώτατα in its technical sense is intended to cover all the fundamental principles pertaining to a certain subject and enabling the Epicurean student to confront particular problems and to solve them on his own."

This is very helpful, [Bryan](#) !

So, if I'm understanding the excerpt you cited:

τὰ τέτταρα literally means The Four Things (and *only* four things)

τὰ κυριώτατα literally means The Principal Things (as in a collection of things)

The word for "doctrines, principles" is implied in both in context.

From this here, τὰ τέτταρα is an alternative term for the Four Remedies that form the most basic, pared down, fundamental "things" on which Epicurus' ethics is built? I still think that the ethics is built on the physics, to be clear; but The Four is what one has to get right before "moving on" to details or to keep firmly in mind at all times?

Thoughts?

Post by "Eikadistes" of August 26, 2025 at 1:33 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

I would be very grateful for any information in regard to finding Giovanni Indelli and Voula Tsouna's treatment of Philodemus' *On Choices and Avoidances*, published by Bibliopolis in 1995.

I found a free, digital copy living [here](#) at the moment.

I've also organized the translation from that text on [twentiers.com](#).

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2025 at 2:56 PM

Thank you for all you do Eikadistes.