

Epicurus' Favorite Insults

Post by “Cassius” of April 29, 2021 at 1:15 PM

The list of insults used by Epicurus against his opponents, as listed by Diogenes Laertius, is colorful, but there is also a lot to learn from taking them apart and dissecting them. That's a task that probably can't be handled in one thread, but this is a place to start. If you've seen commentators give explanations for these, please add them to the thread . In each case we ought to explore who the opponent is, why he was an opponent, and the basis in truth for why Epicurus' insult is biting.

Here's the list:

1. **Nausiphanes:** 'The mollusk,' 'The illiterate,' 'The cheat,' 'The harlot.'
2. The **followers of Plato:** 'Flatterers of Dionysus,'
3. **Plato:** 'The golden man,'
4. **Aristotle:** 'The debauchee,' saying that he devoured his inheritance and then enlisted and sold drugs.
5. **Protagoras:** 'Porter' or 'Copier of Democritus,' saying that he taught in the village schools.
6. **Heraclitus:** 'The Muddler,'
7. **Democritus:** Lerocritus ('judge of nonsense'),
8. **Antidorus:** Sannidorus ('Maniac'),
9. **the Cynics:** 'Enemies of Hellas,'
10. **the Logicians:** 'The destroyers,'
11. **Pyrrho:** 'The uneducated fool.'

Anyone who can help, please add a post below and we can compile the result either here in this first post of the thread, or in the lexicon, or some other logical place, over time.

Post by “Cassius” of April 29, 2021 at 1:17 PM

As to **Nausiphanes** 'The mollusk,' 'The illiterate,' 'The cheat,' 'The harlot,' we have the following from DeWitt's EHP chapter three:

How long Epicurus sojourned with Nausiphanes it is impossible to say, but the duration of the discipleship was certainly long enough to engender exceptional bitterness of feeling. Cicero

records in a malicious moment that being "on the spot," as it were, and unable to deny obligation, Epicurus assailed his teacher with all sorts of insulting epithets. This statement can be documented, thanks to the researches of later Platonistic adversaries, who rummaged the records for damaging items of evidence. From a single list we learn that among the opprobrious epithets were "lung-fish," "dumb animal," "imposter," and "prostitute." These insults call for comment. Of the four words the first two and the second two constitute pairs.

The word here rendered "lung-fish" has been erroneously translated "mollusc" and "jelly-fish." The Greek is *pleumon*, "lung," and Pliny describes the creature as having no more sensation than a block of wood, while Sextus Empiricus explains the word as equivalent to "insensate."³⁰ The word rendered "dumb animal" above is usually translated "illiterate." To so describe Nausiphanes would be absurd. The Greek is *agrammatos* and when used of animals it signifies "dumb," just as the psalmist speaks of the horse and the mule "which have no understanding." Just what justification Epicurus may have had for so characterizing his teacher can only be surmised. In their opposition to skepticism and acceptance of dogmatism they were agreed. It is conceivable therefore that the bitterness of Epicurus arose from his inability to bring his teacher around to his own views on the topics of free will and determinism and the function of philosophy, which were the chief grounds of his rupture with the teachings of Democritus. At this stage of his career he was litigious and shunned no controversy.

This is not the whole story, however. The imperturbability of Pyrrho was indifference and a sort of resignation to belief in the impossibility of knowledge. With this sort of resignation it is clear that neither Nausiphanes nor Epicurus had any patience. The distinction of becoming the first dogmatists may perhaps be claimed for them. Nausiphanes admired only the disposition of Pyrrho and rejected his skepticism. He erected a canon of knowledge, which means that he asserted the possibility of knowledge. He called his canon the Tripod, though information is lacking us concerning the three legs of this triad. The astute Epicurus did not take over this name, but he did set up three criteria of knowledge, the Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings. These he chose to call his Canon. That it was in reality filched from Nausiphanes is expressly stated by a reliable writer.³¹ If there be truth in this report — and such charges were often made with little justification — the achievement of Epicurus was to bring the idea to universal knowledge; his gifts as a publicist were of a high order.

There remain the epithets "imposter" and "prostitute." For these it is the most plausible explanation that Epicurus discovered his teacher to be living a double life, preaching virtue, as all philosophers did, and at the same time practicing vice. Cicero informs us that most philosophers condoned the practice of homosexuality, and for once he agreed emphatically with Epicurus in condemning it as against Plato.³² The latter, as is well known, had essayed in his *Symposium* to sublimate this passion into a passion for knowledge. Epicurus also wrote a *Symposium*, in which he retorted: "Intercourse never was the cause of any good and it is fortunate if it does no harm."⁸³ In the case of Nausiphanes there is another item of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (Platonists)

will think me really a pupil of the 'lung-fish' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom." ³⁴ The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics,³⁵ but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shadier side of student life among the Greeks.

As for Epicurus himself, even if strict in his views about chastity, there is no doubt that he was an irritating pupil. It will be recalled how he put his early instructor in a corner over the topic of chaos. The following extract reveals no more the irritable teacher than the irritating pupil; the reference is to Nausiphanes: "Well, good riddance to the braggart, for that rotter, when in a temper, would have a torrent of the sophistic bluster at the tip of his tongue, like many another of the servile creatures." ^{3e} It may be mentioned that Epicurus classified all men as slaves who, like the physicists, believed in Necessity, or, like the poets, in Fate, or, like Theophrastus, in Fortune, or, like the people, in divine interference, or like the Platonists, in astral deities, or those who, by pursuing the conventional education, surrendered their freedom for the pursuit of power, fame, or wealth.

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2021 at 1:20 PM

As to the **followers of Plato** being 'Flatterers of Dionysus,' we have this from DeWitt's EHP chapter fourteen:

Outside of the popular assembly *parresia* signified the expression of the speaker's opinion without regard for the feelings of others, and it might mean defiance. Epicurus was exemplifying it when he publicly assailed the Platonists, who in his youth were enjoying a monopoly of favor. He called them "flatterers of Dionysus," and the "deep-voiced." ²⁰ The latter was a term of derision similar to "would-be Hamlets"; it was applied to second-rate actors who pitched their voices absurdly low in the performance of kingly roles. Insofar as they hung around hoping for such parts, they were "flatterers of Dionysus," the god of the theater, comparable to the flatterers of Alexander and his successors. The reference is rendered specific by the derisive language of Metrodorus, who dubbed the young Platonists would-be Lycurguses and Solons.²¹ There was a temporary revival of law-giving because of Plato's dream of a philosopher-king, which opened court posts for graduates of the Academy.

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2021 at 1:21 PM

As to Plato being "the Golden man" we have this from EHP chapter five:

"The Platonists, however, could not boast of innocence themselves, because their own Arcesilaus was on record as hailing the founders of the school as "almost gods or relics of the race of gold." ⁴⁶ Thus Epicurus, when dubbing Plato "the Golden," was possibly mocking his followers and not merely deriding his division of mankind on the basis of iron, silver, and gold."

Post by "Don" of April 29, 2021 at 2:04 PM

You know I'm going to post the original Greek for all these at some point, right? 😊

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2021 at 2:33 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

You know I'm going to post the original Greek for all these at some point, right?

I would expect nothing less, and I am looking forward to it! When we are insulting people we want to do it as precisely as possible! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2021 at 2:36 PM

More seriously, I really would like to see what we can develop as to the details on each of these, as I think it's a really helpful way to triangulate on exactly where Epicurus was coming from and what flaws he saw in opposing philosophies. I know for example that by now we're pretty used to seeing Epicurus worked up to oppose Plato, but I think a lot of us are surprised to see the same kind of opposition (or even worse?) to Aristotle. Same goes with Pyrrho, because many people consider Epicurus to be similar to Pyrrho in many respects (and in some respects he probably was). So I think this topic has lots to be gained from pursuing it in addition to helping us make our language more colorful!

Post by “Cassius” of April 29, 2021 at 3:30 PM

One source of analysis of this list is [David Sedley's "Epicurus and His Professional Rivals"](#) in which Sedley argues that these statements are in the most part not disparaging at all, but indeed can be seen in some cases as praise!

This appears to be in contradiction of the position of Bignone, who unfortunately I don't think we have in English.

My view is that Diogenes Laertius can hardly fail to have realized that the way he was recounting the story implied that he expected the reader to take his statements at face value and correct, and that the "but these are all mad" distinguished Epicurus' treatment to his living acquaintances and not necessarily his "professional rivals."

One again we have a dispute with not much to go on to decide who is right, so the best and only way to proceed is to look into all sides and judge for ourselves. Whichever side you come down on I think the exercise is useful for highlighting at least the potential areas of dispute.

[ADMIN EDIT: I have censored Cassius and removed several posts which were simply clipped Sedley sections. I reminded Cassius that the major point of this thread should not be to show how good we are at quoting commentators, but to be sure we understand what possible differences Epicurus had with these people philosophically. Sedley's article contains much good material but the overall impression it leaves is probably "don't worry too much about this because these comments either aren't to be trusted or probably weren't as mean as they sound to us today." That may be true to some extent, but our purpose out to be first to understand what philosophical issues Epicurus took with these people, so let's focus on that aspect.]

Post by “Joshua” of May 26, 2022 at 2:05 AM

I'm fresh off a review of the [Philebus](#) material, and wanted to have another look at Plato the "Golden".

Quote

Plato's school he called "the toadies of Dionysius," their master himself the "golden" Plato, [...]

Quote

τούς τε περὶ Πλάτωνα Διονυσκόλακας καὶ αὐτὸν Πλάτωνα χρυσοῦν,

It seems that the word we're dealing with is χρυσοῦν. If that word is an adjective, and derives from χρύσεος, then it certainly does mean "golden". But if χρυσοῦν is a participle deriving from χρυσόω, then it may instead mean "gilded"--papered over with gold-leaf.

If my fanciful and doubtlessly flawed analysis has any weight, Epicurus may have been going for a pun here. Because "Plato" (Πλάτων) comes from the word platys (πλατύς), meaning variously broad, flat, level, etc.

If this *was* the intent of Epicurus' words, then Plato's goldenness was, as his own name suggests, just a false veneer, like the Platte River in Nebraska--a mile wide and an inch deep. All surface, and no substance.

Perhaps [Don](#) can come in here and bring me back to reality!

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2022 at 6:37 AM



Look at [Joshua](#) parsing the Greek! That makes me so happy!! (It's kind of fun, isn't it?)

At first read, I don't see anything wrong with your parsing of χρυσοῦν. Here's the Wiktionary entry for the Attic form of χρῦσεος

<https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=χρυσσοῦς&oldid=55002924>

But if it's from χρυσόω, the present active neuter participle would be χρυσοῦν with the same circumflex over the upsilon. So you're spot on there from my meager knowledge.

[Joshua](#) 's analogy of "flat" Plato to "gold-leaf, gilded" Plato is intriguing! Gold leaf is really flatter than flat. It's barely there.

Another possible source *could* be, since we're blue-skying it - or even a complement to Joshua's idea - is that Plato just gilded himself with his teacher Socrates' ideas or used Socrates to gild his own ideas.

Since it would be a present active neuter participle, it would probably be translated as "Gilding" I think, so "Gilding Plato"? The one who is gilding? "... And Plato himself gilding." Even so, no matter how that sentence is parsed, the χρυσοῦν < χρυσόω option raises some intriguing possibilities!

Thanks for the food for thought!! Great job!

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2022 at 11:27 AM

Forgot to add

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, χρυσόω](#)

[Kata Biblon Wiki Lexicon - χρυσόω - to gild \(v.\)](#)

Post by “Don” of May 26, 2022 at 8:28 PM

Sorry, I can't let this go now. 😊

I do see that all three words could be parsed as being in the accusative case: αὐτὸν Πλάτωνα χρυσοῦν but I'm still not convinced that χρυσουν has to be parsed that way but that could just be due to my ignorance. Regardless, I think [Joshua](#) has brought up some interesting connotations of "golden" whether or not we're looking at an accusative case noun or a participle.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, χρύσεος](#)

Socrates is still a jerk btw.

Post by “Don” of May 27, 2022 at 11:53 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

You know I'm going to post the original Greek for all these at some point, right? 😊

As promised too long ago:

Diogenes Laertius, Book X.8:

[8] καὶ αὐτὸν Ἐπίκουρον ἐν ταῖς ἐπιστολαῖς περὶ Ναυσιφάνους λέγειν: "Ταῦτα ἤγαγεν αὐτὸν εἰς ἔκστασιν τοιαύτην, ὥστε μοι λαιδορεῖσθαι καὶ ἀποκαλεῖν διδάσκαλον." πλεύμονά τε αὐτὸν

ἐκάλει καὶ ἀγράμματον καὶ ἀπατεῶνα καὶ πόρνην: τούς τε περὶ Πλάτωνα Διονυσοκόλακας καὶ αὐτὸν Πλάτωνα χρυσοῦν, καὶ Ἀριστοτέλη ἄσωτον, <ὄν> καταφαγόντα τὴν πατρῶαν οὐσίαν στρατεύεσθαι καὶ φαρμακοπωλεῖν: φορμοφόρον τε Πρωταγόραν καὶ γραφέα Δημοκρίτου καὶ ἐν κώμαις γράμματα διδάσκειν: Ἡράκλειτόν τε κυκητὴν καὶ Δημόκριτον Ληρόκριτον καὶ Ἀντίδωρον Σαννίδωρον: τούς τε Κυνικοὺς ἐχθροὺς τῆς Ἑλλάδος: καὶ τοὺς διαλεκτικοὺς πολυφθόρους, Πύρρωνα δ' ἀμαθῆ καὶ ἀπαίδευτον.

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, I, ΕΠΙΚΟΥΡΟΣ](#)

Step one, Check.

The parsing will have to wait 😊

Post by “Don” of May 28, 2022 at 7:55 AM

Okay, done! That was fun! I didn't do Plato since [Joshua](#) did a good job above.

Enjoy!

Nausiphanes:

'The mollusk,' πλεύμονά (pleumona "lung-fish, jellyfish"> related etymologically to English "pleurisy")

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, πλεύμων](#)

Hicks note: Cf. Sext. Emp. Adv. math. i. 3 νῦν πλεύμον α καλῶν τὸν Ναυσιφ ἀνην ὡς ἀνάισθητον; Plato, Phil. 21 c ζῆν δὲ οὐκ ἀνθρώπο υ βίον ἀλλὰ τινος πλεύμον ος; Hesychius, s.v. ; whence it appears that obtuseness and insensibility, not weakness or pliability, were the qualities imputed by this term.

'The illiterate,' ἀγράμματον (agrammaton)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀγράμματος](#)

Don note: It's an even better insult than simply "illiterate" because one connotation is "of animals, unable to utter articulate sounds."

'The cheat,' ἀπατεῶνα (apateōna "a cheat, rogue, quack.")

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀπατεῶν](#)

Don note: Follow that LSJ link for some other uses of the term in Hippocrates, Plato, and Xenophon

‘The harlot.’ πόρνην (pornēn, related to English "pornography.")

Don note: The pornai were at the bottom of the ancient Greek social structure, always slaves living at the whim of pimps. There is a solid article on "[Prostitution in ancient Greece](#)" on Wikipedia that is heartbreaking (and graphic, NSFW). The recent fiction book "The Wolf Den" by Elodie Harper does an excellent job in portraying the lives of the women enslaved in the (excavated) brothel in Pompeii.

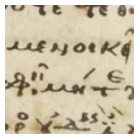
Aristotle:

‘The debauchee,’ ἄσωτον (asōton)

Don note: It's very important to realize that this is the *exact* same word Epicurus used in describing the pleasure of the *profligate/prodigal* in the letter to Menoikeus: "Therefore, whenever we say repeatedly that "pleasure is the τέλος," we do not say the pleasure of those who are prodigal..." I highly recommend people taking a look at verse 131 in my Letter to Menoikeus translation at

File

[Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus - A New Translation with Commentary](#)



An in-depth translation and commentary of Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus.



Don

July 19, 2023 at 11:25 PM

he devoured his inheritance and then enlisted and sold drugs.

καταφαγόντα τὴν πατρῶαν οὐσίαν (kataphagonta "eat up, devour" the last part is the English suffix "-phage")

στρατεύεσθαι (strateuesthai "serve/enlist/enlist in the army")

φαρμακοπωλεῖν (pharmakopōlein LSJ "to be druggist"; a dealer in drugs)

Protagoras:

‘Porter’ φορμοφόρον (phormorphoron "porter", also name of a play by Hermippus)

[Hermippus - Wikipedia](#)

Related <https://kaikki.org/dictionary/Anc...F%8C%CF%82.html>

'Copier of Democritus,' γραφέα (graphea, "private secretary, copyist, scribe") Δημοκρίτου (Demokritou)

he taught in the village schools. ἐν κώμαις γράμματα διδάσκειν

Heraclitus:

'The Muddler,' κυκητήν (kykētēn, LSJ "stirrer, agitator") from κύκᾱω "to stir up, mix; to stir up, throw into confusion, confound"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, κυ^κ-άω](#)

Democritus:

Lerocritus ('judge of nonsense')

Ληρόκριτον (Lērokriton, kriton "judge, see English "critic")

λῆρος "silly talk, nonsense, trumpery, Ar.:—of persons, nonsense, a trifler, Plat.; λῆροι λεπτότατοι, of sophists, Ar.; as an exclamation, λῆρος, nonsense! humbug! id=Ar."

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, λῆρος](#)

Don note: I'm curious of the context of this one. Is Democritus "judging nonsense" or is he a "silly-talking judge". I could see Lerocritus being positive under one context and an insult under another. Context is everything here. Hicks translates it "the nonsense-monger". I don't see the sense of monger or dealer or trader in nonsense in the -kriton part

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, κρι^τ-ής](#)

So I wish we knew from where Diogenes got that reference.

Antidorus: Ἀντίδωρον

Sannidorus ('Maniac') Σαννίδωρον (Sannidorōn .. Sannidorus)

Don note: My bet is that the name is a play on Antidorus' name itself: Ἀντίδωρον so Σαννίδωρον. His name itself literally means return-gift "anti-gift" so the job would be what does Σαννί- refer to. What kind of "gift" is Epicurus word-playing here? σᾶννᾶς is "zany, fool, buffoon" but also σάννιον "membrum virile, Eup.440" which reminds me in this context of a now-classic Saturday Night Live skit with Justin Timberlake. Enough said on that.

This Antidorus must be:

[Antidorus of Cyme - Wikipedia](#)

the Cynics:

'Enemies of Hellas,' ἐχθροὺς τῆς Ἑλλάδος (ekhthrouς tēs Hellados ("Greece/Hellas"))

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐχθρός](#)

Don note: I found this connotation interesting in that definition: "ἐχθρός is one who has been φίλος ("friend"), but is alienated." It's still "enemies" but provides a shade of meaning.

the Logicians: διαλεκτικούς (dialektikous, specifically those skilled in dialectic)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, διαλεκτικός](#)

'The destroyers,' πολυφθόρους (polyphthorous, "destroying many (poly-), fraught with death"

Pyrrho:

'The uneducated fool.'

Don note: It's actually two words: ἀμαθῆ καὶ (&) ἀπαίδευτον. Hicks: "ignorant boor"

ἀμαθῆ (amathē, "ignorant, stupid") but see LSJ for some intriguing alternative connotations

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀμαθής](#)

ἀπαίδευτον apaideuton, literally means uneducated (paidaea)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀπαίδευτος](#)