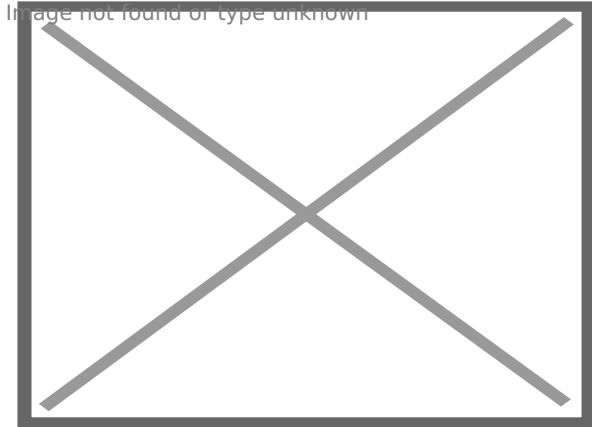


Stoics Aren't Ascetics... It's Those Epicureans!

Post by "Don" of November 29, 2024 at 7:41 AM



['Are Stoics Ascetics?' by Piotr Stankiewicz](#)

Are Stoics Ascetics? by Piotr Stankiewicz A few days ago I befriended an intelligent young woman on Facebook. We first met following the recent publication of...
modernstoicism.com

Well, this is an annoying little article. I didn't read the whole thing but stopped when I got here:

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.

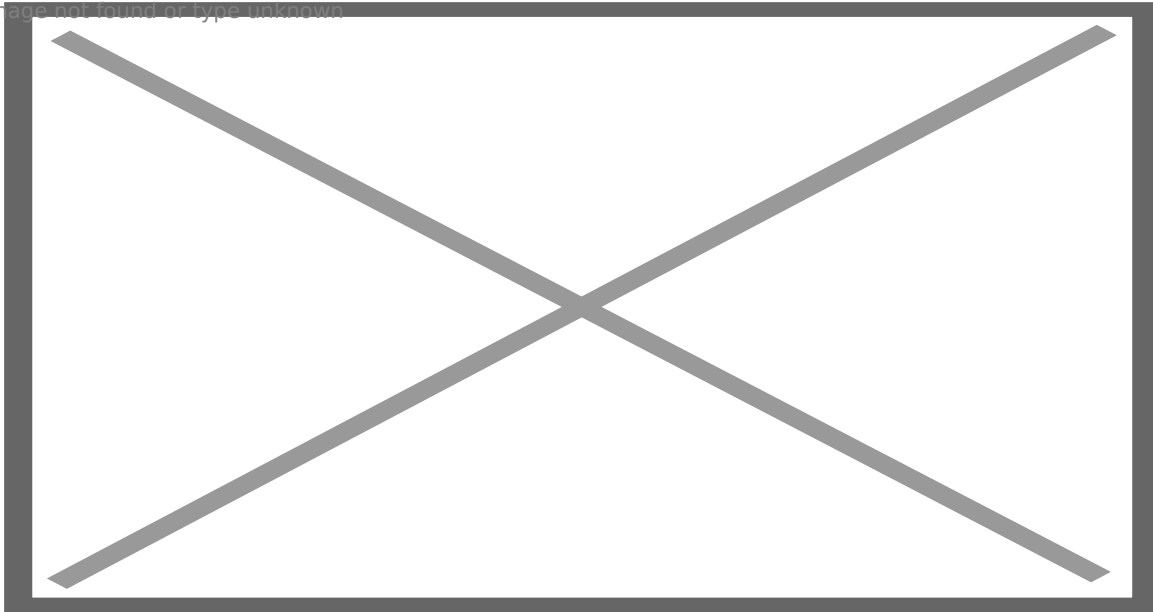
Where does he get "pale"? Did I miss a text? Maybe from Epictetus? I'll have to dig around unless someone knows and shares.

Maybe we can both agree that Diogenes the Cynic was really the ascetic. Throwing away your drinking bowl because you realize you can use your cupped hand... That's ascetic.

Post by "Don" of November 29, 2024 at 8:02 AM

I personally only found the original article to use this phrase " pale Epicureans." But I did find this:

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[The story of the pale Stoic in the storm](#)

Stoicism and fear, from the lost Fifth Book of Epictetus

thephilosophygarden.substack.com

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.

Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2024 at 8:11 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Where does he get "pale"? Did I miss a text? Maybe from Epictetus? I'll have to dig around unless someone knows and shares.

As to "pale" (unless someone knows a more explicit reference) I presume he's indulging in the common consensus that Epicureans are snowflake wallflowers. Many of Cicero's accusations against the Epicureans seem to follow a similar accusation.

And yet at the end of his life it was Cicero who was on the sidelines leaving it to the Epicurean Cassius (and other Epicureans Cassius cites in his letter to Cicero) to fight the war that Cicero was too retiring to fight himself.

[Quote from \[15.16\] Cicero to Cassius \[Rome, January, 45 B.C.\]](#)

...so even if it is now two or three years since, bewitched by the blandishments of Pleasure, you sent a notice of divorce to Virtue, I am free to act as I like. And yet to whom am I talking? To you, the most gallant gentleman in the world, who, ever since

you set foot in the forum, have done nothing but what bears every mark of the most impressive distinction. Why, in that very school you have selected I apprehend there is more vitality than I should have supposed, if only because it has your approval. "How did the whole subject occur to you ?" you will say. Because I had nothing else to write. About politics I can write nothing, for I do not care to write what I feel.

Post by “Don” of November 29, 2024 at 8:29 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

(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.

Good reminder for my own work! 👍

Post by “TauPhi” of November 29, 2024 at 5:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)


Where does he get "pale"? Did I miss a text? Maybe from Epictetus? I'll have to dig around unless someone knows and shares.

I wouldn't spend too much time trying to understand 'pale Epicureans'. The author seems to really love adjectives and probably just meant 'bleak', not 'pale'. The whole article is a perfect illustration why some people should have limited access to a thesaurus, or in the style of the author, the employment of a thesaurus should be categorically and unqualifiedly abstemious.

Post by “Don” of November 29, 2024 at 6:04 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

The whole article is a perfect illustration why some people should have limited access to a thesaurus, or in the style of the author, the employment of a thesaurus should be categorically and unqualifiedly abstemious.

 Well said!

Post by “Joshua” of November 29, 2024 at 6:46 PM

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: see footnote appended below;

Quote

CAESAR Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights:
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous. 195
ANTONY Fear him not, Caesar; he's not dangerous;
He is a noble Roman and well given.
CAESAR Would he were fatter! But I fear him not:
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid 200
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much;
He is a great observer and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men: he loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort 205
As if he mock'd himself and scorn'd his spirit
That could be moved to smile at any thing.
Such men as he be never at heart's ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
And therefore are they very dangerous. 210
I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.
Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,
And tell me truly what thou think'st of him.

Display More

193. Sleek-headed men. According to Plutarch, Caesar once said to friends who "complained unto him of Antonius and Dolabella, that they pretended some mischief towards him, 'As for those fat men and smooth-combed heads, I never reckon of them; but these pale-visaged and carrion lean people, I fear them most,' meaning Brutus and Cassius." ([citation](#))

Post by "Joshua" of November 29, 2024 at 7:08 PM

Quote

Under these circumstances the multitude turned their thoughts towards Marcus Brutus, who was thought to be a descendant of the elder Brutus on his father's side, on his mother's side belonged to the Servilii, another illustrious house, and was a son-in-law and nephew of Cato. 2 The desires which Brutus felt to attempt of his own accord the abolition of the monarchy were blunted by the favours and honours that he had received from Caesar. 3 For not only had his life been spared at Pharsalus after Pompey's flight, and the lives of many of his friends at his entreaty, but also he had great credit with Caesar. 4 He had received the most honourable of the praetorships for the current year, and was to be consul three years later, having been preferred to Cassius, who was a rival candidate. 5 For Caesar, as we are told, said that Cassius urged the juster claims to the office, but that for his own part he could not pass Brutus by.¹⁰⁵ 6 Once, too, when certain persons were actually accusing Brutus to him, the conspiracy being already on foot, Caesar would not heed them, but laying his hand upon his body said to the accusers: "Brutus will wait for this shrivelled skin,"¹⁰⁶ implying that Brutus was worthy to rule because of his virtue, but that for the sake of ruling he would not become a thankless villain. 7 Those, however, who p589 were eager for the change, and fixed their eyes on Brutus alone, or on him first, did not venture to talk with him directly, but by night they covered his praetorial tribune and chair with writings, most of which were of this sort: "Thou art asleep, Brutus," or, "Thou art not Brutus."¹⁰⁷ 8 When Cassius perceived that the ambition of Brutus was somewhat stirred by these things, he was more urgent with him than before, and pricked him on, having himself also some private grounds for hating Caesar; these I have mentioned in the Life of Brutus.¹⁰⁷ 9 Moreover, Caesar actually suspected him, so that he once said to his friends: "What, think ye, doth Cassius want? I like him not over much, for he is much too pale." 10 **And again, we are told that when Antony and Dolabella were accused to him of plotting revolution, Caesar said: "I am not much in fear of these fat, long-haired fellows, but rather of those pale, thin ones," meaning Brutus and Cassius.**

Plutarch, in [Parallel Lives](#)

Greek text at [Persius](#);

Quote

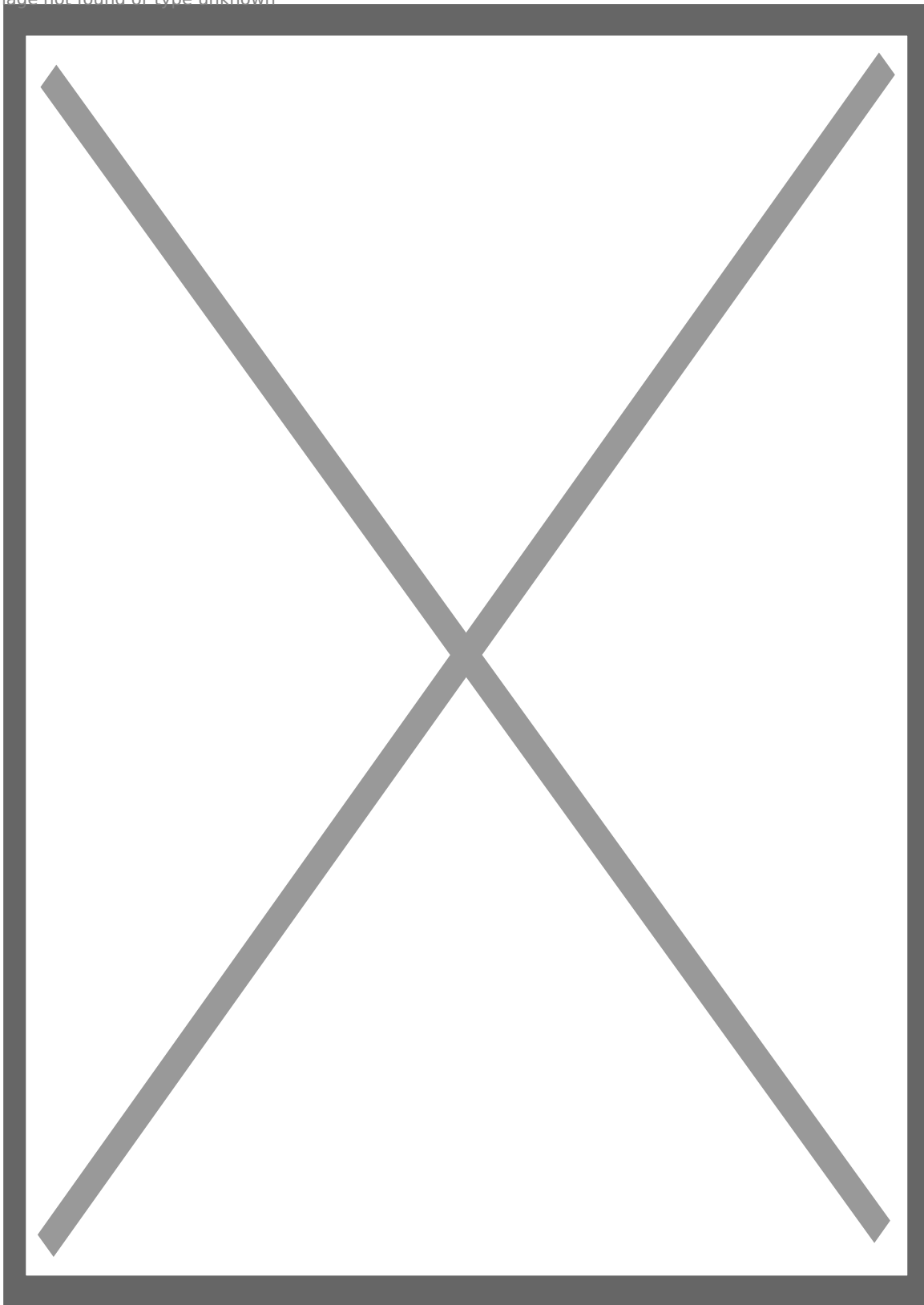
[5] εἶχε μέντοι καὶ δι' ὑποψίας ὁ Καῖσαρ αὐτὸν, ὥστε καὶ πρὸς τοὺς φίλους εἰπεῖν ποτε: 'τί φαίνεται βουλόμενος ὑμῖν Κάσσιος; ἐμοὶ μὲν γὰρ οὐ λίαν ἀρέσκει λίαν ὠχρὸς ὢν.' πάλιν δὲ λέγεται, περὶ Ἄντωνίου καὶ Δολοβέλλα διαβολῆς πρὸς αὐτὸν, ὡς νεωτερίζοιεν, ἐλθούσης, 'οὐ πάνυ,' φάναι, 'τούτους δέδοικα τοὺς παχεῖς καὶ κομήτας, μᾶλλον δὲ τοὺς ὠχρούς καὶ λεπτοὺς ἐκείνους' Κάσσιον λέγων καὶ Βροῦτον.

[ὠχρούς](#)

edit: you may recognize the Greek word as it has come into English; [ochre](#)

Post by "Joshua" of November 29, 2024 at 7:18 PM

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[File:Pech Merle main.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)
commons.wikimedia.org

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4164-stoics-aren-t-ascetics-it-s-those-epicureans/>

This image of a human hand was done in ochre ~27,000 years ago, which I think makes it more interesting than the article linked to above! 👍