

# Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers, "Gods"

Post by "Don" of November 28, 2020 at 11:10 AM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

A superficial hearing of "pleasure" as the guide of life leaves open the possibility that a human could find pleasure living in a cave on bread and water and never do anything else.

[Cassius](#) , I've seen you make the "bread & water + living in a cave" remark before and had some thoughts and questions.

"bread & water": I realize many people see Epicurus's remark about bread and water and that infamous "pot of cheese" as endorsing \*only\* living on bread and water and the occasional cheese. They posit an ascetic Epicureanism. I agree with you, that's just silly. It seems to be putting a Christian mortification of the flesh back onto Epicureanism. Here's my take:

I do remember some texts talking about Epicurus's occasional fasts as experiments to see how much he could live on and be satisfied. He seems to have wanted to learn what was the minimal level that could provide pleasure. I don't get the impression that that's what he did all the time; otherwise, the occasional nature of those fasts wouldn't have been noteworthy. But it seems to me he did experiment with minimalism. Not as a rule, but I'll call him minimal-curious.

In my interpretation, he does call his students to moderate their pleasures or at least to choose wisely, prudently. Not every pleasure is to be chosen, not every pain is to be avoided.

So, those who posit the "bread and water" diet take one instance as indicative of the whole experience. But it seems to me that you sometimes posit that Epicurus never ate just "bread and water" and that the idea is farcical. I come down somewhere in the middle. The division of desires appears to me to be a roadmap of what desires to pursue. And those you pursue should lead to an overall pleasurable well-being.

"Living in a cave": I don't remember the texts talking about a cave. Am I correct in assuming you use this as hyperbolic shorthand for your opposition to literal interpretations of the biosas "live unknown" and "Epicurus forbade being active in politics"? I completely agree that Epicureans shouldn't live in a cave. *By Apollo!* We have the Garden itself and the importance of friendship ready at hand to dismiss that idea! But... In my interpretation of the texts, there is, as a general rule in Epicurus's teaching, a recommendation to the biosas as in "keep your head down." Individuals can have different inclinations and Epicurus and Philodemus (among others) make allowances for those who do find pleasure in politics and an active political life. On the other hand, one is encouraged to write texts and to provide public instruction when

invited to. And to start a school but don't attract a crowd, literally not to ὀχλαγωγῆσαι "to court the mob" or "to attract a crowd." So, by no means should Epicureans live in a cave. Leave that to Christian and Tibetan Buddhist monks. But I do see a general recommendation to not rock the boat, and I think this comes from Epicurus's own life experience. That's why, for example, he didn't teach publicly in the agora or a stoa or a gymnasium but taught in his own private property. Now, I also don't think those who see the Gardens as hippy communes have it quite right either. It seems there was a core that lived full time in the Garden including Epicurus (although I'm still not clear if there Garden was attached to his house or separate), senior members like Hermarchus, some slaves, some students, but I get the impression that it also allowed for "commuter students" too. Since they didn't combine their funds, the hippy commune or cult analogy also seems to break down fairly quickly.

To come back to the cave, you appear to advocate a strong, assertive Epicureanism and I think the philosophy makes allowances for those with that disposition. But, generally, I see a philosophy with a more nuanced approach to confronting society. Epicurus was a revolutionary radical thinker and believed he found the best route to achieving eudaimonia. But I think he knew if he tried to boldly proselytize in the agora he'd be risking a lot (see the fate of Socrates, for example) and the philosophy could be lost.