

# Are You Epicurean Or Hieronymian?

Post by "Cassius" of February 28, 2021 at 6:58 AM

Thanks for the detailed post Titus. Here are my thoughts:

## [Quote from Titus](#)

Many thinkers only refer to the ethics as presented in letter to Menoeceus (additionally [Principal Doctrines](#), Vatican Sayings) but do not apply Canonics and Physics, which they consider as a different point of interest. For a person who studies all three main branches of Epicurean philosophy and even tries to combine and interconnect, it's something different.

I very much agree with that. It seems to me that most of the people whose interpretations I find reason to criticize focus almost exclusively on one aspect (most frequently, the letter to Meoneceus) and act as if the epistemology and physics are irrelevant. In a nearby (in time) thread I think we see an example of that in an American philosopher (Pierce) who embraces one aspect of Epicurus to support his own views, but rejects the rest of Epicurus. I think it's necessary to incorporate them all to get a balanced picture.

## [Quote from Titus](#)

In my personal opinion, Epicurus is neither looking for painlessness nor for pleasure as pleasure on its own. He tries to find out what a human is in itself. This is why he focuses on senses, feelings and anticipations.

I agree that Epicurus is very concerned about looking to Nature to determine what a human is in itself, and that he does not just start with pleasure as the goal without any reason. But I would have to differ and say that the reliable texts when read as a whole (including the material cited in this thread) are clear that Epicurus held "pleasure" to be the goal and not painlessness. When you say he focuses on senses / feelings / anticipations I think that is where the answer is found, in that it seems to me that he is using "feelings" (or whatever word one prefers in translation) in general as the basis for choice, with pleasure being the positive thing to choose and pain being the negative to avoid, which is both a theoretical statement of the goal (pleasure) and a practical way of evaluating each decision (does it lead to greater pleasure or greater pain). I think the multiple perspective (incorporating both theory and practice) is how it is kept in mind that even when you are sometimes choosing pain in the short term, you are really always choosing pleasure (because you view the long term / total result),

## [Quote from Titus](#)

Consequently, satisfying all natural and necessary desires is the highest level of being.

This is a phrasing that I find very troublesome whenever I run into it, but it is definitely a conclusion a lot of people reach. For me, there is no way to carry such a formulation to its logical conclusion without accepting that living in a cave on bread and water is the course most to be desired for everyone. Epicurus himself certainly did not do that, and that observation alone is sufficient (to me) to show that such an interpretation would not be valid. I am sure that an elaborate and detailed rendering of such a phrase, by going through each word and applying very specific definitions, could be employed to save the formula from that result, but I just don't think Epicurus intended for his students to take that path.

#### [Quote from Titus](#)

This is why Epicurus advises only to fulfill natural but not necessary desires if they do not harm.

I would repeat the same observation as I just made. There are literally (to my knowledge) zero examples of actual Epicureans who pursued lives of asceticism and minimalism. Again, I realize that the formulation can probably be explained in a way that allowed the activism of a Cassius Longinus or the movement in the highest circles of Roman life of Atticus and other leading Romans who embraced Epicurus, but they had access to far more authoritative texts and teachers than we do, and they apparently found no contradiction in their lifestyles and fundamental Epicurean teaching. Maybe in fact there was a large body of ancient Epicureans who competed with the Stoics and the various ascetics in pursuing only that which was necessary to sustain their lives, but if there were such applications that seem to have escaped mention in the texts I have seen.

Much more likely to me is the deduction from such references as are made in the Ciceronian comments set out here that Epicurus would have been fully aware of the option of setting up painlessness as the real goal, as set forth by Hieronymus, and that Epicurus rejected that option in favor of identifying the goal as "pleasure" - which he then proceeded to broadly define as including all types of physical and mental pleasures.

As in the concluding sections of Diogenes of Laertius:

#### Quote

Epicurus differs from the Cyrenaics about pleasure. For they do not admit static pleasure, but only that which consists in motion. But Epicurus admits both kinds both in the soul and in the body, as he says in the work on Choice and Avoidance and in the book on The Ends of Life and in the first book On Lives and in the letter to his friends in Mytilene. Similarly, Diogenes in the 17th book of Miscellanies and Metrodorus in the

Timocrates speak thus: 'Pleasure can be thought of both as consisting in motion and as static.' And Epicurus in the work on Choice speaks as follows: 'Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures, but Joy and exultation are considered as active pleasures involving motion. '

A further difference from the Cyrenaics: they thought that bodily pains were worse than those of the soul, and pointed out that offenses are visited by bodily punishment. But Epicurus held that the pains of the soul are worse, for the flesh is only troubled for the moment, but the soul for past, present, and future. In the same way the pleasures of the soul are greater. As proof that pleasure is the end, he points out that all living creatures as soon as they are born take delight in pleasure, but resist pain by a natural impulse apart from reason. Therefore we avoid pain by instinct, just as Heracles, when he is being devoured by the shirt of Nessus, cries aloud,

Or maybe I could summarize my views on all of this subject as **"Like Epicurus, I refuse to give up joy and exultation!"**