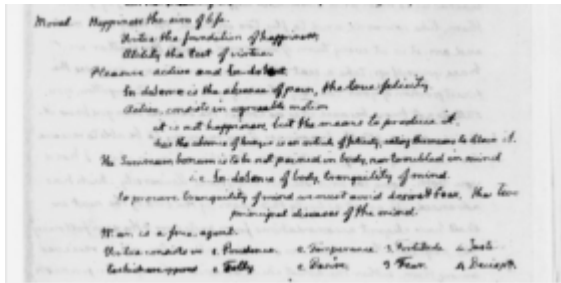


Thomas Jefferson's Epicurean Outline

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2021 at 7:19 AM

I was looking over the [William Short 1818 letter](#) this morning and a couple of questions came to mind (focusing here only on the ethics part):



(1) I wonder what Jefferson was following in composing this outline? Was he working from the letter the Menoeceus, or from Diogenes Laertius' entire biography, or perhaps even from Cicero's 'On Ends' -- or all of the above plus Lucretius?

(2) I didn't clip this part, but it's interested that he included a section on physics and ethics, but nothing on canonics. For someone as interested in "Reason" as Jefferson appears to have been, that's curious.

(3) "Virtue the foundation of happiness" and "utility the test of virtue" sounds almost like "On Ends." That precise point is not a focus of the letters, and I am not sure it stands out in Diogenes Laertius, does it? Does that then point to Cicero? I seem to remember a commentator pointing out that the list of virtues mirrors the listing in Torquatus.

(4) "Pleasure active and indolent" and the "agreeable motion" -- That's not in the letters, is it, but might be drawn from Diogenes Laertius but also from Cicero, correct?

(5) It's interesting that he would choose to use the word in-dolent, which I've never seen anyone else use for the resting / static / katastematic category referenced in DL and Cicero. I wonder why he chose that word, and chose to write it with the dash, almost as if he were emphasizing the "in-" part?

(6) The "it is not happiness, but the means to produce it." Is "it" referring to pleasure in general, or to his observation about active / agreeable motion?

(7) Does the "summum bonum" sound like a direct reference to Cicero's formulations in "on ends"?

(8) It is interesting that he chooses to say "utility" is the test of virtue rather than "produces pleasure" if he was following "On Ends." Maybe that is a reflection of the Utilitarianism

movement (?)

These are just some of the questions that arise but I think it's interesting to consider what this outline indicates about which Epicurean sources Jefferson was reading. I note that he says in this 1819 letter that he wrote the outline some twenty years beforehand, which I gather would have been a very busy period for Jefferson.