

# Where Is Epicurus In The "School of Athens"?

Post by "Don" of May 19, 2021 at 10:06 PM

Okay, as promised, here are the interesting items I found today. If I'm re-hashing anyone else's research, mea culpa! I'm not able to share the entire JSTOR doc due to copyright, but I'll share the citations and relevant parts. This definitely shows that the pudgy wreathed individual was NOT accepted as representing Epicurus by everyone (especially by these 2 authors from the 1800s and a more recent author). The ambiguity of the composition as well as the lack of notes by Raphael himself leads to conjecture, but, as I state again below, I like that Epicurus is possibly given a central placement by these authors with some sound reasoning. Still not entirely convinced, but this shows it's not a cut and dried Pudgy Guy = Epicurus equation.

1)

RAPHAEL'S "SCHOOL OF ATHENS"

Author(s): Gertrude Garrigues

Source: The Journal of Speculative Philosophy , October, 1879, Vol. 13, No. 4 (October 1879), pp. 406-420 (Excerpt, p. 417)

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*"Over his "Garden" in Athens might have been written the noble aphorism of Goethe, " Think of Living." Democritus had a glimpse of this high thought, Aristippus saw it "darkly," too, but to Epicurus is due its embodiment ? to his followers, alas, its prostitution.*

*Perhaps the finest episode of the picture, certainly the strongest antithesis, is the contrast of Cynicism and Epicureanism, as represented by their chief exponents. **Lying negligently upon the middle step (Raphael was no ascetic) is Diogenes of Sinope.** His eyes fixed upon a tablet which he holds in his hand, he is absorbed in thought. His drapery is scanty and poor, but he has not yet reached the lowest point of his voluntary destitution; his bowl stands on the step beside him. **Mounting the steps we see a young man, handsomely dressed. He has heard of the congress of philosophers, it seems, and has come hither to seek a master. Meeting a stranger (Epicurus, also richly dressed) descending, he inquires of him, "Who is the greatest teacher here? Surely this man, who exhibits so much contempt for all the luxuries and gauds of life; who, solitary, has no need of companionship." Epicurus points to the triumvirate above, telling him not to stop on the way, but seek always the highest good; and bids him not to trust too much to an appearance whose only characteristic may be its singularity.** We seem almost to hear the echo of words like unto*

*these of Emerson: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who, in the midst of the crowd, keeps, with perfect sweetness, the independence of solitude."*

So, Garrigues sees Epicurus as the figure descending the staircase and speaking to the person coming up the steps beside Diogenes. I do think having that reclining figure be Diogenes of Sinope makes the most sense. That cup beside him isn't hemlock (like the other recent author we found who says that's Socrates and his cup of hemlock). That's Diogenes last remaining possession before he was embarrassed by the child using his hands to scoop up water, then Diogenes throwing away his cup. **\*\*IF\*\*** there was no portrait bust for Raphael to go by, he could make Epicurus appear any way he wanted. I personally like the idea of the striding figure descending the steps rather than the pudgy wreathed librarian... even if he is a librarian.

2)

<https://archive.org/details/raphae...ge/128/mode/2up>

Raphael d'Urbin et son père, Giovanni Santi by Passavant, Johann David, 1787-1861

See p. 128

(I'm using Google Translate to get this translation)

*In the middle of the steps, **Diogenes of Sinope**, named the Cynic, lying negligently, holds a tablet in his hand, and seems to be meditating deeply, without taking care of the illustrious assembly which surrounds him.*

*This singular man (born 414 years BC), disciple of Antisthenes, founded the severe school of Virtue, which he interpreted as an absolute renunciation of the material things of life. He thus expressed the basis of his doctrine: "To need nothing is proper to the gods. To need only a little is to be like the gods. So we see near him his bowl, the only utensil he wanted to have - until he recognized its superfluity, seeing a child draw water from his hand to drink.*

*Contemporary with Cynicism and Stoicism, Epicureanism differed on several points. The founder of the Epicurean sect, Epicurus (born 34 ^ years BC, in Gargettus, near Athens) also tended towards personal contentment, but he sought happiness in the harmony of moral pleasures and sensual pleasures. The Epicurean practiced virtue and wisdom only in view of their consequences and as a means of pleasure; he lived soberly and fraternally, and mastered both joy and suffering.*

***The fresco shows Epicurus descending the steps of the estrade, he converses with Aristippus', named Metrodidactus, a young man with curly hair, in a rich costume, and he indicates to him with a gesture the proud Stoic, disdainful of sensual pleasures.***

***The Greek genius, in search of a solution to the universal enigma, had exhausted itself in these multiple attempts. When the great men disappeared, there remained***

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/165-where-is-epicurus-in-the-school-of-athens/?postID=12192#post12192>

**only sects which crossed and clashed.**

*This confused transition is indicated by the young man leaning against the base of one of the columns of the vestibule. Equilibrium on one leg, the other leg crossed in the air, he writes on his knee, not what his own research has taught him, but what he has heard from here and there. 11 represents Eclecticism which begins.*

*But while Eclecticism grasps all that seems to it to be true in the different systems, Skepticism, emerging at the same time, goes so far as to maintain that one can prove the falsehood of all established truth - a tendency which would have as a result the annihilation of all science, of all philosophy.*

**Pyrrho d'Elis** (born 3M years BC) is the representative of this skeptical philosophy, which has even been given its name (Pyrrhonism). ^ E will not be accused of levity, if we designate , as **Pyrrho, the standing and inactive philosopher, who leans against the base of a column and looks sarcastically into the book written by the young eclectic.**

*Standing next to him, the philosopher who, by a movement of hesitation, turns his head to one side and the body to the other side, must be Archilaus of Pitane (born 318 years BC), the founder of the new Academy, whose theory leaned towards Skepticism, the practice towards Stoicism. In general he only concluded with problematic knowledge, and, as all reason is subject to contradiction, he believed he should refrain from any decided adhesion.*

I like the idea of Epicurus taking center stage, so to speak. And it would make sense that Pyrrho is nearby Epicurus since Epicurus had some degree of respect for him. They could be placed together.

3)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30...ol\\_of\\_Athens%27](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30...ol_of_Athens%27)

Codes and Messages in Raphael's 'School of Athens'

August 2016

State: In Progress

Authors: John Douglas Holgate, St George Hospital

See the entire article. The author does a lot of work identifying Renaissance scholars and matching up possible representations of Greek philosophers. His identification of Plato's successor Speusippus is interesting. The figure does look like the 1655 woodcut in the Wikiedia article <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speusippus>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/165-where-is-epicurus-in-the-school-of-athens/?postID=12192#post12192>

Plato's Group



1. Archelaus 2. Socrates 3. Crates 4. Polemo 5. Xenocrates 6. Speusippus 7. Aristotle of Pélion 8. Plato

As for the pudgy, wreathed figure most often identified as Epicurus by modern "scholars", this author identifies him with Democritus:

*"Democritus of Abdera (ca 460-370 B.C.) was a student of Leucippus and was the founder of atomism. His major work was The Great Diacosmos (World Order). Raphael has cheekily placed Pope Julius the Second's emblematic wreath of oak leaves on the head of the atheist Democritus while doubling his likeness with that of his close friend the poet and actor Tommaso 'Fedra' Inghrami, the Vatican Librarian and Papal Secretary who was probably the main source for the philosophical content of the painting itself."*

This author identifies the person with the long flowing hair ascending the stairs with Epicurus (p. 30):

*"**Epicurus**, whose philosophical message was ataraxia (freedom from fear) aponia (absence of pain) and the importance of friends, **here gestures towards Diogenes the Cynic asking Crates how this life of askesis (shamelessness) and social alienation can be justified.** Crates, a student of Diogenes, points in the direction of the Stoics Chrysippus and Crates' former pupil Zeno of Citium blaming them for the mist of confusion Stoicism had caused. As the sixth scholarch of the First Academy Crates founded the tradition of radical scepticism and the rejection of Platonic idealism continued with the Second and Third Academies under Arcesilaus of Pitane and Carneades respectively."*

*"Pico della Mirandola (known for his long curly locks) is here masked behind the figure of Epicurus. The Renaissance scholar Christiane Joost-Gaugier argues in her book 'Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura' (p.95) that Pico can be seen 'as the young man seen from the back who actively enters the painting and implores with his hands on Aristotle's side.' Mirandola was in fact a strong critic of Aristotle and an apologist for Epicurus, re-evaluating his notion of pleasure. Here Pico is appealing to his nephew Gianfrancesco to explain the tragic situation of Pico's mentor Savonarola just as Epicurus is asking Crates to vindicate the life of his teacher Diogenes of Sinope."*

So, it appears that there is no consensus, or at least wasn't, as to where Epicurus was in the fresco. The authors from the 1800s certainly associated him with the figure descending the stairs. I personally like the look on his face as he points back towards Plato and Aristotle as if to say, "Look at them! All high and mighty. They haven't got a clue!" and he hurries down the

steps away from them.

Personally, I found this a LOT to chew on.

PS. The two men ascending and descending the steps were seen as on composition as evidenced by this sketch for the larger work:

