Diving Deep Into The History of The Tetrapharmakon / Tetrapharmakos

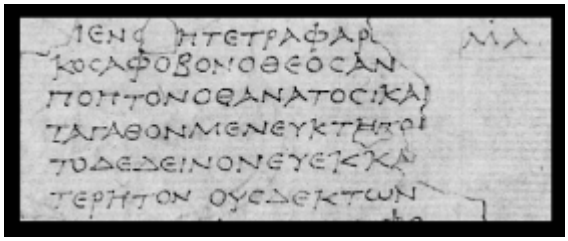
Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2019 at 10:27 AM

I frequently repeat my reservations and criticisms of the "Tetrapharmakos," for the reasons I stated in my 2015 post "Why I Think Epicurus Would Have Hated the Tetrapharmakon." Unfortunately from my point of view, this truncated passage is frequently pushed as a comprehensive summary of what is important to know about Epicurus. As a further effort to demonstrate that this text should not be treated as Epicurean gospel, I want to pull together in this thread everything I can find about where the passage comes from, who wrote it, the context in which it was found, etc.

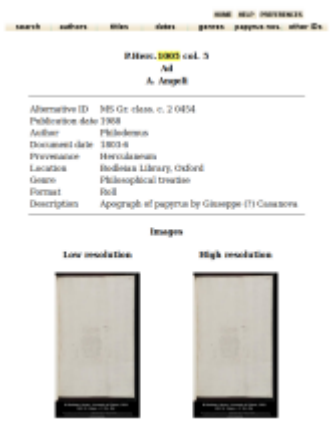
As of 5/14,25, the Wikipedia page has the tetrapharmakon as: As expressed by Philodemos, and preserved in a Herculaneum Papyrus (1005, 5.9–14), the *tetrapharmakos* reads:[7]

Don't fear god,	Ἄφοβον ὁ θεός,
Don't worry about death;	ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος
What is good is easy to get,	καὶ τἀγαθὸν μὲν εὔκτητον,
What is terrible is easy to endure	τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐεκκαρτέρητον

Wikipedia has the following graphic, which I presume to be in the handwriting of a researcher, rather than being a photo of the surviving scroll. As a start in this examination I would ask these questions: (1) Where is the original scroll? (2) Who transcribed these excerpts? (4) Is this text absolutely clear in the original, or as is frequently the case with the Herculaneum material, is some of the text "reconstructed?" (5) What if anything do we know about the text before and after this excerpt?



it appears that this text can be found labeled as follows at this link, which is page at the University of Oxford Faculty of Classics Papyrological Imaging Project :



ed hi-res image is here:

This link provides a full list of the plates available for this scroll.

So the place to start in analyzing the material before and after this text appears to be this page .

As of 2/2/19, Wikipedia offers this translation of the text:


The four-part cure [edit]

As expressed by Philodemus, and preserved in a Herculaneum Papyrus (1005, 4.9–14), the tetrapharmakos reads:[4]

Don't fear god,	Ἄφοβον ὁ θεός,
Don't worry about death;	ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος·
What is good is easy to get,	καὶ τἀγαθὸν μὲν εὔκτητον,
What is terrible is easy to endure	τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐεκπύρωτον

According to Wikipedia, citing Pamela Gordon: "The "tetrapharmakos" was originally a compound of four drugs (wax, tallow, pitch and resin); the word has been used metaphorically by Roman-era Epicureans. to refer to the four remedies for healing the soul."

The Wikipedia footnote for this statement is:

The name cannot be traced further back than Cicero and Philodemos. Pamela Gordon, *Epicurus in Lycia: The Second-century World of Diogenes of Oenoanda*, University of Michigan Press (1996), p. 61, fn 85, citing A. Angeli, "Compendi, eklogai, tetrapharmakos" (1986), p. 65.

Here is a post I made on NewEpicurean.com back in 2012:

> Quote
>
> The "tetrapharmakos" is a four-line condensation of the first four key doctrines based on the deciphering of a scroll found at Herculaneum (per Wikipedia). The standard English translation found on the internet is:
>
> Don't fear god,
>
> Don't worry about death;
>
> What is good is easy to get, and
>
> What is terrible is easy to endure.
>
> This version is sourced to the Epicurus Reader, page vi. In my copy of that work, the page shows the same text quoted above, with a cite to papyrus 1005, 4.9-14. An image of that papyrus can be found here, and is shown below.
>
> So far I have not found any discussion of the translation process in The Epicurus Reader, so it is not clear to me whether Inwood or Gerson (who are listed as translators) or Hutchinson (who did the intro) are responsible for the English summary. In my last post (on Key Doctrine 6) I noted that the Epicurus Reader has a translation of Key Doctrine 6 that diverges significantly from that of other authorities. Thus I am curious about the context of this translation of the Tetrapharmakos.
>
> We know that the editors state that the Greek original reads:
>
> Ἄφοβον ὁ θεός,

> ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος
>
> καὶ τἀγαθὸν μὲν εὔκτητον,
>
> τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐκαρτέρητον
>
> The page from which this text comes is fragmentary, and part of a longer passage, as can be seen in this image:
>
> tetrapharmakos-parchment-300x272.jpg
>
> Clearly much is missing, but since I do not know Greek I cannot determine to what extent these lines are complete and to what extent they are conjecture. Likewise, I cannot determine the context in which they appear on the page.
>
> The challenge that immediately arises is that we can quickly observe that while "Don't Fear God" is certainly ***one*** meaning that can be derived from the full text of the first Doctrine, it is certainly not the ***only*** meaning, and it is arguably ***not the most important***. I would argue that regardless of whether God is to be "feared," it is at least as important for us to know that God does not concern himself with men's affairs ***at all***. As a result, regardless of whether we fear god or love him, god does not control or doom us to a particular "***fate***."
>
> I am informed that by a number of readers who know Greek that the translation is probably accurate, and at least as to these four lines (but not the context) we have the full text. Thus the question to keep in mind in researching this is largely the context in which it was written. There is probably much we could learn from Philodemus' thought process if we knew the context in which he (or the writer from which he might be quoting) reduced the first four key doctrines to these brief lines.
>
> Display More

My NewEpicurean Post: Why I Think Epicurus Would Have Hated The Tetrapharmakon:

Wikipedia informs us that the tetrapharmakon comes down to us from a parchment found in the papyri of Herculaneum that it is attributed to Philodemus. Wikipedia also informs us of the following translation, which apparently comes from D.S. Hutchinson:

Don't fear god,

Don't worry about death;

What is good is easy to get, and

What is terrible is easy to endure.

What is missing from the record is any explanation or context in the papyri itself, so we cannot know what Philodemus intended to convey through or about these lines. What I will argue here,

in brief, is that taken as they are today as a summary of key Epicurean doctrine, they are *absysmally* bad.

(1) **“Don’t fear god”** is a woefully incomplete summary of PD1, which reads in full: “*1. A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.”* Far from simply not “fearing” the gods, PD1 tells us that we are equally not to look to them for reward (“partiality”) or any intervention from them whatsoever. To say simply that we should not “fear” gods is to omit the key foundation of Epicurean theology – that perfect beings bring no interference **of any kind** to lesser beings. Gods do not create universes; gods do not destroy universes; and gods *ask* nothing *of* us and *offer* nothing *to* us whatsoever – certainly not a heaven or any reward whatsoever for our actions. “Fear” is only a small component of this key insight.

(2) **“Don’t worry about death.”** Don’t *worry* about death? Epicurus stressed the importance of making the most of the present life, because he knew that there was no other. Quite the opposite of *not thinking about* the issue of death, Epicurus stressed the importance of spending time wisely, enjoying life to the fullest extent possible, and *thinking about death explicitly* as a way of savoring the present and preparing for the future. Seneca recorded “*Wait for me but a moment, and I will pay you from my own account. Meanwhile, Epicurus will oblige me with these words: “Think on death…*” And so what Epicurus emphasized was neither a “devil-may-care” attitude nor an attitude of benign neglect, but instead that we regularly remind ourselves that the shortness of life is in large point what makes life worth living: the fact that we only go around once and get no other chances encourages us to savor the time we do have. So thoughtful examination – the very *reverse* of the point superficially made in the tetrapharmakon, is what we are to derive from the facts clearly stated in PD2: “*Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us.”*

(3) **“What is good is easy to get”** is a superficial cliche that has turned more people off to Epicurean philosophy than any other (except for the next cliche in the tetrapharmakon, which follows immediately). Everyone knows how much effort is required to live happily, and how the slightest slip can lead to disaster. And when “everyone” knows something, that means Epicurus knew it too. And so when we check the text we find this clumsy cliche bears no resemblance whatsoever to the full text of PD3: “3. *The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.”* Legions of stoics jump to the opportunity to argue that Epicurus held that “removal of all pain,” and nothing more, is the complete definition of the good life. The trouble is that this interpretation ignores the philosophical background of why “limits” were held to be important. As Seneca recorded in discussing Epicurus, “*Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping point. The false has no limits.*” Epicurus knew this was a carryover from Plato (*see* Philebus), and that those who argued against pleasure held that pleasure could not be the guide of life because it had no limits, and thus could never be satisfied. With this context in mind the meaning of PD3

is clear – Pleasure DOES have a limit, and it is reached when we succeed in filling our lives so full of pleasure that no room is left for pain of any kind. Cicero expressed this Epicurean doctrine concisely, "*nothing [is] preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.*" PD3 has nothing to do with "good" being "easy to get." Stripped of its Stoic misinterpretations, PD3 can be seen to be of the same level of profundity as the discussion of gods and death: it is a statement that PLEASURE is the guide of life, and that this guide of life can be achieved by those who follow pleasure intelligently.

(4) **"What's terrible is easy to endure"** is even more outrageously false than the third line of the tetrapharmakon, and no amount of dancing around the point is enough to convince an honest student that a man to whom such a doctrine was attributed could be wise. Epicurean texts are full of appreciation for the difficulties and pains of life, and for the tragedy of those "hearts in darkness" who live in fear and doubt. Yet some would have us believe that the same Lucretius, who was compassionate enough toward *animals* to describe at length described the pain felt by a cow on loss of her calf, would advocate a philosophy where the pains of *human* life are held to be "easy" to endure. Once again the fault is in the summary, and in its interpretation, and not in the doctrine of Epicurus. Doctrine four reads: "PD4. *Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain."* This statement has little or nothing to do with "what's terrible is easy to endure," and for good reason. The numbering of the Principle Doctrines was not introduced by the ancient Epicureans, and there has never been any reason to separate the intent of PD3 from PD4. Taken together, these two doctrines fit hand in glove to establish not only that Pleasure DOES have a limit (the essential structure necessary to defeat the Platonic anti-Pleasure argument), but also that Pain is not to be considered as something to be avoided at all costs. How many times today do we see fans of Epicurus act as if "avoidance of pain" is far more important than pursuing pleasure? If Epicurus had in fact taught such a doctrine, he would have emphasized the severity of pain and the overriding necessity of avoiding it. But Epicurus knew what tricks the ascetic other-worlders were up to – he had the texts of Plato himself from which to learn. Thus Epicurus elevated to nearly the top in importance the observation that pain is NOT to be dreaded, and NOT to be allowed to cause us to shrink back from pursuing pleasure. The meaning of PD4 is not that pain is easy to endure, but that *pain is WORTH enduring compared to the reward of Pleasure.*

Perhaps one day more context will be readable from the papyri and we will know what Philodemus was thinking when he included these lines in his text. In the meantime, we know far too much about Philodemus to think that intended the Tetrapharmakon to be interpreted as it is today. The current text and interpretation does more harm than good, and creates more confusion than light, and as such would have been an abomination to Epicurus, the man who wrote "*In the first place, Herodotus, you must understand what it is that words denote, in order that by reference to this we may be in a position to test opinions, inquiries, or problems, so that our proofs may not run on untested ad infinitum, nor the terms we use be empty of meaning. For the primary signification of every term employed must be clearly seen, and ought to need*

no proving; this being necessary, if we are to have something to which the point at issue or the problem or the opinion before us can be referred.“

Other posts I have made on this subject are:

Research Projects: 2 – The Meaning of the “Tetrapharmakos” – NewEpicurean
On The Subject of the Tetrapharmakon

Comparing Translations of the Tetrapharmakon

Post I made on Facebook:

It's my view that using the "tetrapharmakos" as a summary of Epicurean philosophy is a terrible idea. The phrasing is so truncated that it fails to convey Epicurus' original meaning and distorts the conclusions that many people will draw as to his intent. Further, the text does not come from Epicurus himself, nor does it come to us in an intact and reliable narrative by a recognized Epicurean authority. The flood of words devoted to the "tetrapharmakos"on the internet is all traceable to one source: a reconstructed fragmentary passage found in Herculaneum, written 200+ years after Epicurus, and attributed to Philodemus. It is my understanding that this four-fold summary is found in this form nowhere else in the ancient records left to us. Probably the best source from which to study the origin and condition of the text is at the Oxford University page linked in my post. On that page, images of **transcriptions** of the surviving pages from this scroll may be viewed. I would like to study this further so that I can revise my opinion, if warranted. If anyone who knows Greek has the time to look at these and comment, or anyone knows articles which have done this, please comment below.