

Diving Deep Into The History of The Tetrpharmakon / Tetrpharmakos

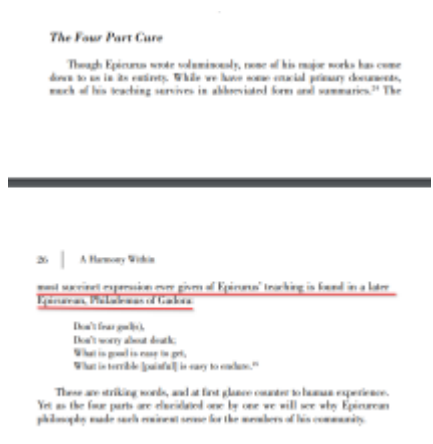
Post by "Cassius" of February 1, 2023 at 11:49 AM

I note that the material forwarded by [ResponsiblyFree](#) referenced [here](#) uses the **Tetrpharmakos as an organization model. I am adding this post to an earlier thread to expand discussion.**

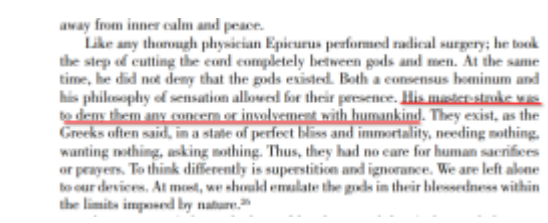
The article under review correctly cites the Tetrpharmakos as coming from Philodemus. It's not - as I need not repeat, but will - stated in this form by Epicurus himself, or by Metrodorus, or by Hermarchus, or by Diogenes of Oinoanda, or by Lucretius, or by any other recognized authority on Epicurus.

Further, to the extent the Tetrpharmakos appears to be included in a Herculaneum reconstruction of a work by Philodemus, it is (1) a fragment without clear context as to the point of its inclusion, and (2) contained in a work in which Philodemus is also campaigning against failure to pay proper attention to the original texts - in which I would suggest it would be natural to include *inadequate summaries of the original texts* (such as I would label the "Tetrpharmakos") as an example of what to avoid, not to follow.

Here is the way it is framed in the article we're discussing:



There are a couple of points I want to make about this presentation:



First, I don't consider the 'non-involvement' to be Epicurus' "masterstroke." The masterstroke was to develop Democritus' atomism into a full-blown conclusion that the universe is eternal, entirely natural, was never created by, and is not supervised by, any supernatural beings. That aspect is the foundation of the gods' non-involvement, because if we ever admitted the possibility that the gods created the universe originally, or supervise it now, then their lack of concern or involvement would be entirely reversible at any moment. And whether you want to skip over the issue that Epicurus "first" concern was to get at the truth, and not to justify a pre-ordained conclusion that relief from anxiety is desirable, then it's important not to leave the issue hanging: the reason that the gods won't decide to revoke their supernatural intervention in the future is that they have never in the past been capable of it, nor are they now or will they ever be.

The writer gets a lot of it right from my point of view, but his attitude continues to imply that Epicurus was fudging the truth by being "wise in not denying their existence" for reasons that are at the very least unattractive and not an appropriate assessment of the full impact of his work:

Thus, Epicurus eliminates one of the two chief causes for anxiety: Why fear the gods? It's a waste of time, they don't care. But he was wise in not denying their existence and in public respected people's religious observances, though in private he often pointed out their inconsistencies: "If God listened to the prayers of man," he said, "all men would have perished, for they are always praying for evil to fall on one another."²⁹ Epicurus had no desire to stir up the animosity of the multitudes which might shatter the quiet and peace of his community. But it was clear to him and his friends that it was less impious to

As for the section on death I see most of it as acceptable, but it always seems to me that going too far in comparing Epicurus to Buddhism is a bad idea, given the strikingly different assessment they make of the nature of life:

dissevered with it, thus eliminating the possibility of retribution after death."
Epicurus' teaching here can be compared to the Buddhist doctrine of "no soul" (Anatta) according to which the idea of an individual soul or self subsisting after death is a projection created out of the ego's need for self-preservation. In fact, Buddhist teaching comes very close in places to Epicurean philosophy of nature or sensation. Buddha said that it is better for one to take his or her physical body as a self rather than mind, thought or consciousness, because the former seems more solid than the latter which change constantly day and night faster than the body. Yet if this physical body dissolves at death how much more solid thought consciousness which is floating over one?³⁰

As to the "good is easy to get" we have a good treatment of the sweeping nature of the term pleasure, but coupled with the typical narrowing to exclude sensual pleasures - which Epicurus did not do when his philosophy is read in full:

The Epicurean notion of pleasure is not what we understand when we use the term one-dimensionally. For it is both subtle and refined, beginning with the physical and reaching to the highest mental states. Thus, it is all-inclusive. Hedonism (hedone) does not mean the wild pleasures of orgiastic experience which Epicurus eschews:

When we say that pleasure is the end of life, we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate, or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul.³¹

And this comes very close to reversing the proper perspective of wisdom as a tool for pleasure, rather than wisdom being a goal in and of itself as the Stoics allege:

So much for traditional views of Epicureanism. At this point it becomes apparent that the term "Hedonistic ethics" is not a contradiction. Pleasure will be rationally sought in line with what brings tranquility of soul (*ataraxia*). For the good life is one of balance. Thus, a kind of prudence or foresight, even wisdom, accrues in the choosing of pleasure. Sedgwick has put it well:

And we also get "the simple life of frugality is the best" stated as an absolute, rather than contextually:

The implications of Epicurean teaching here are twofold: First, one can find the most pleasure and tranquility if he or she fulfills those desires which are natural and moderate. Thus, a simple life of frugality is the best since basic desires are most easily satisfied and deal with the most available things—food, drink, adequate shelter, safety from hostile invasion, and so on. Epicurus praised

As to the "terrible is easy to endure" we go through the familiar apologies for the wording:

The alert reader will probably find two problems with this reasoning. The first is in regard to the words "easily endured." We are not accustomed to viewing pain, especially persistent chronic pain, in this manner. Chronic pain which is more than just a nuisance lowers the quality of life for most of us. Simply put, there is a definite difference between living with pain and a life relatively free of pain. It is hard to see how one could equate them, especially in espousing a philosophy based on pleasure. However, one must remember that the overriding good Epicurus sought to procure for himself and his disciples was "ataraxia"—freedom from disturbance. And this ultimately involved a mental adjustment, the kind of coming to terms with things that creates psychic equilibrium. A life of healthy frugality spent among caring friends would most likely reduce the physical factor, especially when one considers the many ways life can still be enjoyed. Perhaps, one has to have spent some time coping with

Still, one has to seriously wonder whether such an argument adequately addresses the issue of chronic pain which can infiltrate one's being to such an extent that we find ourselves in a state which seems endless. Emily Dickinson's striking verse puts the matter well:

Pain—has an Element of Blank—
It cannot recollect
When it began—or if there were
A time when it was not.⁷³

Those who suffer from chronic pain—whether it be that of severe arthritis or from an injury too deep and destructive to have allowed adequate healing—know all too well how it can come to dominate one's existence. Surely, Epicurus himself was familiar with this kind of chronic pain. Whether his solution to the problem is adequate enough to create the equilibrium necessary for *ataraxia* is open to question, at least in our time.

So in summary:

There is some documentation that the ancient Epicureans discussed this formulation, but there is slender if any good reason to expect that the ancient Epicureans held this up as the climactic expression of their philosophy. There is equal if not more reason to think that Philodemus was critical, rather than supportive, of the formulation, given his criticism of failure to read the original texts, of which the "four part cure" is but a serious amputation of the first four [principal doctrines](#).

The tetrpharmakos does provide an a shorter version of the first four doctrines, but at the cost of adding ambiguity, obscurity, and the possibility for ridicule (especially as to the latter two). It is not clear, it is not unambiguous, and it is not an accurate summary of the philosophy.

Yes it has its uses, but it has at least as much use for explaining what Epicurean philosophy does not claim as what it does claim.

And thus my point in this post is this not to endlessly criticize but to ask: Do we really need to endlessly hold up the tetrpharmakos as the supreme statement of Epicurean philosophy? Neither Lucretius nor Diogenes of Oinoanda nor Epicurus himself expressed the philosophy in

this truncated this way. ***Why should we?***

Note: I see from the earlier posts in the thread that this was started back before we had some of our best current researchers. I hope that we can add this topic into our sights and target it for much deeper investigation. ***What is the true and accurate context of this formulation? Did anyone else beside Philodemus cite it? Do we even know that Philodemus approved of it?***