

# Cyreniacism Gone Wrong - "Hegesias the Death Persuader"

**Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2023 at 7:48 AM**

I don't have time for a full post but I want to get this out there before I forget about it. Credit to Emily Austin for bring this to our attention, which we touched on briefly in a short zoom discussion on 5/17/23.:

"Some contemporaries and predecessors of Epicurus did run around telling people that life is bleak, and that death is a welcome reprieve from human suffering, but Epicurus thinks that's nonsense. The Cyrenaics were a competing hedonistic philosophical school and numbered among them was a man dubbed "Hegesias the Death Persuader" for the power of his argument that life is more painful than pleasant. Hegesias was reportedly run out of town for his effects on the young. That life is unpleasant is an odd view for a hedonist, and Epicurus felt at pains to deny it."

Seems to me that there is a lot to be learned from looking into this to see if we can figure out what weaknesses in Cyreniac philosophy held the door open for this kind of craziness and how Epicurean philosophy deals with it and prevents it. It's not clear to me how the dates relate and whether Epicurus was aware of Hegesias, and whether the reference in the letter to Menoeceus about those who wish never to have been born applies to him, but I think we could gain some good points of comparison by following the trail. -- especially as to the danger of inarticulately holding "freedom from pain" to be the goal of life without a lot of background explanation of how that perspective can make sense if you understand that freedom from pain is just a measurement of living completely engaged in pleasures without any component of pain of body or mind.

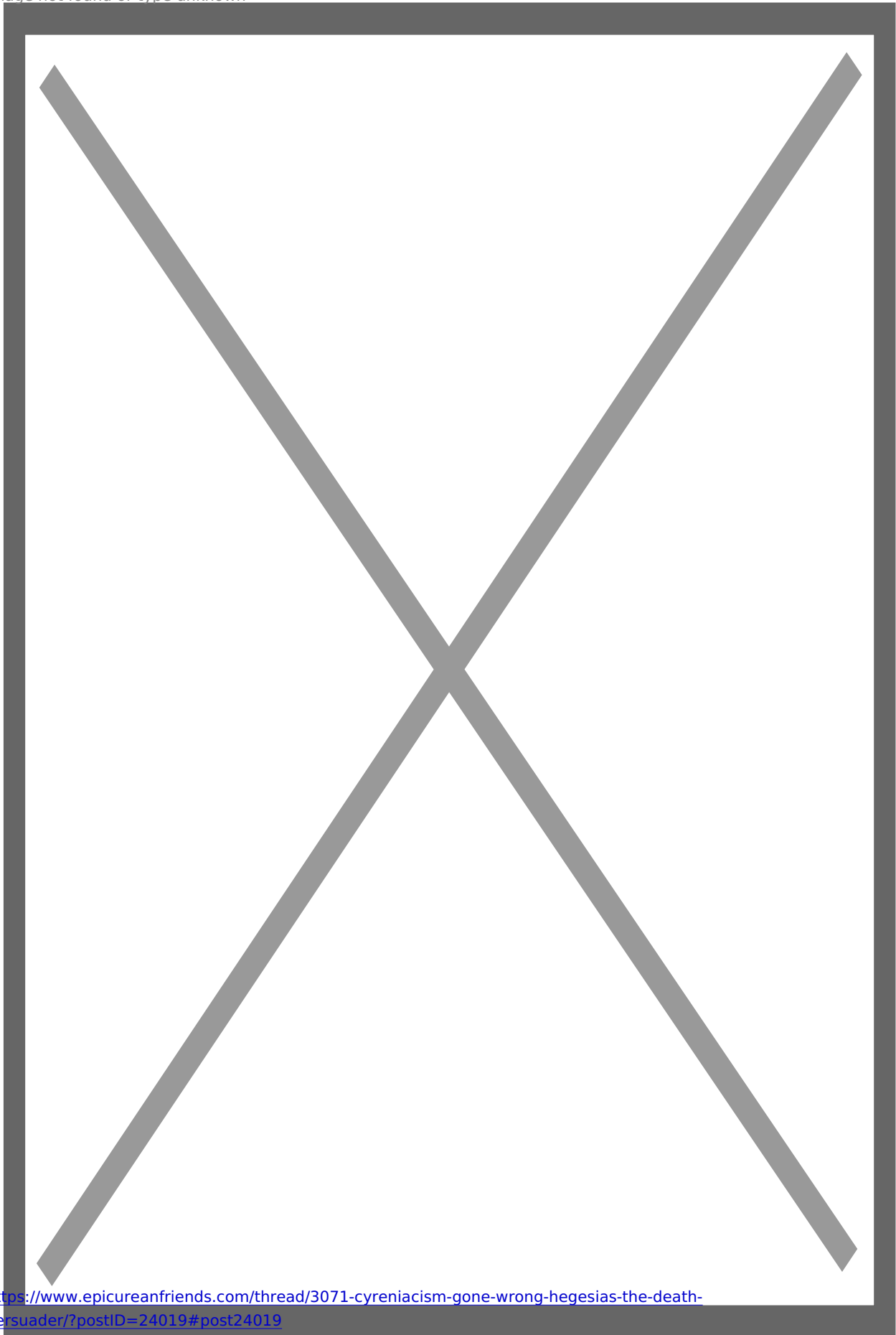
Seems to me also that there is a discussion here about the danger of letting "the perfect be the enemy of the good" if these clips are correct. What kind of logic is it that would say that because "perfect" happiness cannot be achieved we should consider the pleasure we can experience in life to be of indifference to us?

I wonder also if the title of this thread might better be: "Hedonism Gone Wrong....." which gets me back to why I personally do not in general conversation describe Epicureanism as "hedonism" or "pleasurism" (which would be the English term for hedonism if we were willing to be straightforward in English). Warning against the disasters that come from pursuing a feeling - even pleasure - without prudence is maybe the main subject of Epicurean ethics.

Here are references:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3071-cyreniacism-gone-wrong-hegesias-the-death-persuader/?postID=24019#post24019>

Image not found or type unknown



<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3071-cyreniacism-gone-wrong-hegesias-the-death-persuader/?postID=24019#post24019>

## [Hegesias of Cyrene - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Hegesias followed [Aristippus](#) in considering pleasure as the goal of life; but, the view which he took of human life was more pessimistic. Because [eudaimonia](#) was unattainable, the [sage's](#) goal should be to become free from pain and sorrow. Since, too, every person is self-sufficient, all external goods were rejected as not being true sources of pleasure:

### Quote

Complete happiness cannot possibly exist; for that the body is full of many sensations, and that the mind sympathizes with the body, and is troubled when that is troubled, and also that fortune prevents many things which we cherished in anticipation; so that for all these reasons, perfect happiness eludes our grasp. Moreover, that both life and death are desirable. They also say that there is nothing naturally pleasant or unpleasant, but that owing to want, or rarity, or satiety, some people are pleased and some vexed; and that wealth and poverty have no influence at all on pleasure, for that rich people are not affected by pleasure in a different manner from poor people. In the same way they say that slavery and freedom are things indifferent, if measured by the standard of pleasure, and nobility and baseness of birth, and glory and infamy. They add that, for the foolish person it is expedient to live, but to the wise person it is a matter of indifference; and that the wise person will do everything for his own sake; for that he will not consider any one else of equal importance with himself; and he will see that if he were to obtain ever such great advantages from any one else, they would not be equal to what he could himself bestow.[3]

Hence the sage ought to regard nothing but himself; action is quite indifferent; and if action, so also is life, which, therefore, is in no way more desirable than death:

### Quote

The wise person would not be so much absorbed in the pursuit of what is good, as in the attempt to avoid what is bad, considering the chief good to be living free from all trouble and pain: and that this end was attained best by those who looked upon the efficient causes of pleasure as indifferent.[3]

None of this, however, is as strong as the testimony of [Cicero](#),[4] who claims that Hegesias wrote a book called *Death by Starvation* ([Greek](#): ἀποκατερῶν), in which a man who has resolved to starve himself is introduced as representing to his friends that death is actually more to be desired than life, and that the gloomy descriptions of human misery which this work contained were so overpowering that they inspired many people to kill themselves, in consequence of which the author received the surname of *Death-persuader* (Peisithanatos). The book was said to have been published at [Alexandria](#), where he was, in consequence, forbidden to teach by king [Ptolemy II Philadelphus](#) (285–246 BC).

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3751954>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3071-cyreniacism-gone-wrong-hegesias-the-death-persuader/?postID=24019#post24019>