

# Julie Giovacchini - "The Tetrpharmakos, Authentic Formula Or Simplistic Summary Of Epicurean Ethics?"

**Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2023 at 2:23 PM**

OK I finished reading the google translate of the French article posted above, and it contains a lot of useful information and discussion. If I had to summarize the conclusion, the writer seems to be taking the position that it was an ongoing issue in the ancient world (especially among Epicureans) to debate the relationship and usefulness of summaries vs longer texts. I gather the point is parallel to the question of whether the benefits of philosophy can be gained from what might disparagingly be called the repetition of oversimplified "magic words," or whether the benefits must come through an ongoing enterprise of study over time.

The writer also makes the point that there is a major perspective difference between the kind of material that dedicated thinkers can pursue vs what ordinary people who have no time for philosophy can benefit from. The latter don't have time for long study, but they also deserve to get as much benefit as possible from short presentations of the approximate truth.

I will see if I can quote some important sections but the bottom line view of the article seems to be that the best perspective is to appreciate BOTH approaches, just as Epicurus said that you don't always need the details but that you do need the big picture most of the time. The trouble that is inherent in using only a few words to describe the big picture is something that we have to deal with by keeping in mind that as a practical matter it is the result that matters. Those who have the time and inclination and ability to dig into the details need to do so, and thereby they will get a deeper understanding of the issues. But those who don't have the time and inclination or ability to do so will still benefit from the summary, even if they end up missing the subtleties. Probably another appropriate time to remember the "perfect is not the enemy of the good" maxim.

Here's good quote which I think summarizes the point of the writer about the tension that is involved, but which is sustainable because we can explain the different perspectives and make use of both:

## Quote

It must therefore be admitted that, at least in their intention, the successors of Epicurus held a difficult line. Claiming, in line with the introduction of the Letter to Herodotus and the continuity it establishes between the complete doctrine and its summary<sup>44</sup>, a

perfect coherence and a complementarity between discursive ethics and the dogmatic and simplified ethics of summaries, they underlined in the same movement the risks linked to the abbreviated form; in this context the tetrapharmacos, taken out of its context, loses its rationality despite its completeness and is emptied of its meaning, since it is in reality not a magic formula but an invitation to reflection

and calculation