

Cosma Raimondi's Letter to Ambrogio Tignosi

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A Letter to Ambrogio Tignosi in Defence of Epicurus against the Stoics, Academics and Peripatetics

[translated by Martin Davies \(from Google Books\)](#)

Introduction

Very little is known about **Cosma Raimondi**. He calls himself a native of Cremona in Lombardy and a pupil of the well-known humanist teacher Gasparino Barzizza, probably at Milan in the 1420s. His life seems to have been dogged by ill fortune: he was forced to seek employment abroad, as a teacher of law at Avignon, where he appears to have emigrated about 1430. His efforts to return to a post in the Milanese dominion were rebuffed, and he hanged himself in 1436.

His only significant work, apart from decipherment of the newly discovered manuscript of Cicero's rhetorical works (1421), is the epistolary treatise in defence of Epicurus translated here. It is addressed to an unknown Ambrogio Tignosi, perhaps a student at the Milanese university at Pavia, and seems to date from before Raimondi's departure for France, probably about 1429. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the only thoroughgoing exposition of Epicurean ethical doctrine of the Quattrocento, preceding not only the widespread dissemination of the ancient sources on Epicureanism (Book X of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers* and *De sereno saturo* of Lucretius) but also the popular dialogue of Lorenzo Valla, *On Pleasure* (1431). **Raimondi** argues for a human good, one which takes account of the whole parcel of body and mind which we are; and he finds it in the pleasure (*voluptas*) of Epicurus, a pleasure not opposed to virtue but both guided and produced by it. Neither the barren end-in-itself virtue of the Stoics nor disembodied Peripatetic contemplation can bring the tranquility which **Raimondi** supposes, with Epicurus, to be the true end of human life. This refinement of the crude and widespread notion of Epicurus the voluptuary represents a long step towards recovery of the historical figure.

For the Latin text of Raimondi's letter see my critical edition in 'Cosma Raimondi's defence of Epicurus', *Rinascimento*, 27 (1987), 123–39.

I have very little leisure at the moment to argue my views on the subject which your letters raise, being taken up with more weighty and much more difficult matters. I do not mind saying that I am very much occupied with my studies in astronomy. But since I have always followed and wholly approved the authority and doctrine of Epicurus, the very wisest of men, and now see his standing bitterly attacked, harassed, and distorted by you, I have taken it upon myself to defend him. It is only right that tried and true pupils (as I have proved myself in all fields of learning) should defend their master's teaching when it is attacked. Otherwise, when teachers are criticized, the pupil's studies may themselves seem to be under attack. The great pains you have taken to gather material against Epicurus seem directed not so much at refuting him, but me, his follower and disciple. But I shall pay you back as you deserve.

It is not just a dispute between ourselves, for all the ancient philosophers, principally the three sects of Academics, Stoics and Aristotelians, declared war to the death against this one man who was the master of them all. Their onslaught sought to leave no place for him in philosophy and to declare all his opinions invalid — in my view, because they were envious at seeing so many more pupils taking themselves to the school of Epicurus than to their own. So I shall now set about doing within the limits of a letter what I had meant to do at greater length elsewhere, and defend him as fully as I can. And if the defense appears rather long-winded, it might well seem too short when you consider that debate on this topic could fill not just a longish letter but thick books. The subject—what is the supreme good—is important and difficult; and it requires lengthy exposition: it is an investigation that attracted a good deal of discussion among the ancients, and many books survive on either side of the question.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3296-cosma-raimondi-s-letter-to-ambrogio-tignosi/?postID=25725#post25725>

To show how unjustly you have attacked Epicurus and to make plain what he thinks is our ultimate goal, I shall therefore begin by treating the topic in some depth. Then I shall answer your letter and explain the whole matter in such a manner that you may actually be glad to return to the Epicurean camp you abandoned. Those who are not involved will say that it would be better first to refute the opponent's position and then state one's own. Yet the subject is so complex and obscure that I think it will perhaps be granted that we should first explain it as a whole, so that it becomes clearer what it is we are seeking.

Epicurus is criticized, then, because he is thought to have taken too effeminate a view on what the supreme good is, by identifying it with pleasure and using that as the standard to measure everything else. But the more closely I consider the proposition, the more right it seems to be, as though it were something decreed not by a man but by Apollo or some sort of higher being. Epicurus scrutinized the force of nature in everything and grasped that nature has made and formed us in such a way that nothing suits us more than having and keeping our bodies sound and whole and remaining free from afflictions of mind or body. And so he laid down that the supreme good was located in pleasure. And how wise he was! What more can be said on the matter? What else can human happiness consist of? A man whose soul is in turmoil cannot be happy, no more than someone whose body is in pain can fail to be miserable. In case anyone thinks I am unaware of the temper of the times in which I discuss such things, I wish it to be understood that I am not now considering that absolute and true philosophy which we call theology. This entire enquiry concerns the human good of humankind and the various competing views of ancient philosophers on the matter.

Though this was Epicurus's judgment, the Stoics took a different view, arguing that happiness was to be found in virtue alone. For them the wise man would still be happy even if he were being tortured by the cruelest butchers. This is a position I most emphatically reject. What could be more absurd than to call a man 'happy' when he is in fact utterly miserable? What could be sillier than to say that the man being roasted in the bull of Phalaris,¹ and subject to the most extreme torment, was not wretched? How again could you be further from any sort of happiness than to lack all or most of the things that themselves make up happiness? The Stoics think that someone who is starving and lame and afflicted with all the other disadvantages of health or external circumstances is nonetheless in a state of perfect felicity as long as he can display his virtue. All their books praise and celebrate the famous Marcus Regulus for his courage under torture.² For my part I think that Regulus or anyone else, even someone utterly virtuous and constant, of the utmost innocence and integrity, who is being roasted in the bull of Phalaris or who is exiled from his country or afflicted quite undeservedly with misfortunes even more bitter, can be accounted not simply not happy but truly unhappy, and all the more so because the great and prominent virtue that should have led to a happier outcome has instead proved so disastrous for them.

If we were indeed composed solely of a mind, I should be inclined to call Regulus 'happy' and entertain the Stoic view that we should find happiness in virtue alone. But since we are composed of a mind *and* a body, why do they leave out of this account of human happiness something that is part of mankind and properly pertains to it? Why do they consider only the

mind and neglect the body, when the body houses the mind and is the other half of what man is? If you are seeking the totality of something made up of various parts, and yet some part is missing, I cannot think it perfect and complete. We use the term 'human', I take it, to refer to a being with both a mind and a body. And in the same way that the body is not to be thought healthy when some part of it is sick, so man himself cannot be thought happy if he is suffering in some part of himself. As for their assigning happiness to the mind alone on the grounds that it is in some sense the master and ruler of man's body, it is quite absurd to disregard the body when the mind itself often depends on the state and condition of the body and indeed can do nothing without it. Should we not deride someone we saw sitting on a throne and calling himself a king when he had no courtiers or servants? Should we think someone a fine prince whose servants were slovenly and misshapen? Yet those who would separate the mind from the body in defining human happiness and think that someone whose body is being savaged and tortured may still be happy are just as ludicrous.

I find it surprising that these clever Stoics did not remember when investigating the subject that they themselves were men. Their conclusions came not from what human nature demanded but from what they could contrive in argument. Some of them, in my view, placed so much reliance on their ingenuity and facility in debate that they did not concern themselves with what was actually relevant to the enquiry. They were carried away instead by their enthusiasm for intellectual display, and tended to write what was merely novel and surprising — things we might aspire to, but not ones we should spend any effort in attaining. Then there were some rather cantankerous individuals who thought that we should only aim for what they themselves could imitate or lay claim to. Nature had produced some boorish and inhuman philosophers whose senses had been dulled or cut off altogether, ones who took no pleasure in anything; and these people laid down that the rest of mankind should avoid what their own natural severity and austerity shrank from. Others subsequently entered the debate, men of great and various intellectual abilities, who all delivered a view on what constituted the supreme good according to their own individual disposition. But in the middle of all this error and confusion, Epicurus finally appeared to correct and amend the mistakes of the older philosophers and put forward his own true and certain teaching on happiness.

Now that the Stoics have, I hope, been comprehensively refuted, I shall set about confirming his views as clearly as I can, which will at the same time rebut those of the Peripatetics and of the Academics too. On these last, though, I shall not need to dwell at length, as for them everything is uncertain. What sort of philosophy is it that denies that anything is certain? I do not think that even the Academics themselves understood what they were saying. If the Stoics are madmen, the Academics seem to me quite insane.³

There remain the Peripatetics, and they are more difficult to refute. Not only do they have a standard of certainty, but they argue in such a way that there seems to be some substance to what they are saying. But these philosophers too have in my judgment gone wholly astray. That will be more clearly grasped later on, once I have explained the main points of Epicurean doctrine. It will then be apparent to everyone that any others who lay claim to supremacy in philosophy and try to dislodge Epicurus from that position are utterly wrong, and that

Epicurus's teaching on happiness is entirely correct.

To show that this is so, there is no better place to begin than with nature herself, the sole mistress and teacher of everyone, whose judgment on each and every matter we must take to be absolutely true. When she was fashioning man, she polished her creation with so many little touches that he seems to have been made purely for enjoyment and to take advantage of every sort of pleasure. She endowed him with senses so distinct, varied and useful that though there were many different types of pleasure, there was none in which he could not share. First she gave him eyes, whose outstanding characteristic is that they shrink from looking on anything ugly or disgusting. We love to look at things of beauty, and not by any conscious or rational decision but because nature impels us to do so. Which of us, ever, if we are hurrying off elsewhere, does not stop to look if we catch a glimpse of some attractive sight? This effect is so marked that I think man would have been a poor thing indeed if nature had taken away from him the ability to gaze on all the many lovely and beautiful objects she had created. Is there anyone, again, who does not thoroughly enjoy hearing singing and the sweet sounds of music? The lyre and other such instruments seem to have been invented for the specific purpose of charming our souls. The same can be said of smell and the other senses, which the mind uses as its servants in sensing and grasping pleasure. I do not see what sort of pleasure can be found without the aid of the senses, unless perhaps it lies in study of the deep mysteries of the universe, which I do not deny can be a source of great mental delight. Of all the pleasures that there are, in fact, this is the greatest; and this is where the Peripatetics see true felicity, in examining and contemplating those hidden things which are most worth knowing. But our enquiry is into man as a whole, and not just a part of him: *the* Peripatetic thinker, no matter how profound, cannot be happy without external and bodily goods.

Epicurus was right, then, to call pleasure the supreme good, since we are so constituted as almost to seem designed for that purpose. We also have a certain inherent mental disposition to seek and attain pleasure: as far as we can, we try to be happy and not sad. No one who ponders how much nature has produced for the sake of man alone, the quantity and copiousness and variety of her bounty, can doubt that pleasure is the greatest of all goods and that it should direct all our aims. We see a vast array of fine things on land and sea. Many of them are necessary to support life, but most are simply pleasurable— they are of such a sort that nothing but pleasure is to be gained from them. Nature would certainly not have created such objects of pleasure had it not intended man to enjoy them and concern himself with them.

The passions and activities of mankind themselves make plain that everything is done for the sake of pleasure. Why on earth should we spend anxious nights and days involved in such great struggles to find and keep what we need for daily life unless we were sustained by the hope that some day we should be able to live a life of pleasure and enjoyment? If that hope were gone, our minds would be decidedly less inclined to take those pains and less keen and steadfast in enduring them. Why are scholarship and the disciplines of arts and letters thought so desirable unless there is some special natural enjoyment in acquiring them, besides the help they afford in gaining the wherewithal to pass our lives in pleasure? Nor should we be so keen on honours and glory, on kingdoms and empires, to acquire and defend which great battles and

disputes often arise, if these were not objects of the utmost delight. Decisions on war and peace alike are taken on the basis of keeping, protecting and increasing those things by which we live and in which we take pleasure.

Virtue, finally, is both the cause and guide of pleasure: it constrains us and warns us that we should pursue each thing within those same limits by which virtue itself is circumscribed. Why then should virtue be desired if not to allow us to lead an enjoyable life by avoiding those pleasures we should not seek and seeking those should? If virtue brings no pleasure or delight, why should we want it or make so much of it? But if it does, why not concede that the greatest of all goods — what should seek above all — is that for the sake of which virtue itself is desirable? We see that man's whole constitution is geared towards the perception of pleasure, that nature carries us towards it, that a great many important things exist for the sake of pleasure, that all our actions are measured against its standard so that in the end lives may be free of care, in short that everything is desired purely on account of pleasure it will give us. In these circumstances, now that Epicurus's case has conclusively proved by these rigorous and convincing arguments, who could still so hostile to him as not to assent to his doctrine and admit that the highest felicity will be found in pleasure?

But the Peripatetics do deny his doctrine and cannot bear the thought that pleasure is the supreme good, placing it rather in virtue. I should like to ask them: if virtue itself is going to bring in its train sadness, grief, pain and fear, is it still to be desired? That, I think, they will not agree to. Since, then, virtue is sought for the tranquility it brings to life (in which, under the name of pleasure, Epicurus identified the supreme good), again I ask the Peripatetics why they are unwilling to place the greatest good in pleasure. If perhaps some think that by this Epicurus meant that we should spend our days wallowing in feasting and drinking, in gambling, games and the pleasures of sex, such a wastrel Epicurus would hardly deserve our praise. His teaching would indeed be lamentable if he wanted us to be gluttonous, drunken, debauched, boastful and promiscuous. But that is not what Epicurus in his wisdom said or recommended. In fact, so far was he from wanting us to live without virtue that virtue is actually essential for living up to his teaching, since it constrains and directs, as it were, all the bodily senses (as we argued already) and does not permit us to make use of them except when needed. Epicurus does not slide into pleasure in the manner of animals, without the exercise of judgment and when necessity does not require it, but rather enjoys it with restraint when it is right to do so. His theories, therefore, should not be neglected, nor should they be treated as condemned; and it is clear that the Peripatetics have not sufficiently understood what it is they are saying.

I have run through these matters briefly and cursorily even though I do not suppose they necessarily respond to your letter directly. The discussion here will have answered it in full measure, or very largely. Yet I should still like to complete this refutation by touching on each single point you raise. You think that we should not let pleasure direct all our aims. That, I think, has been demolished at length, and with some elegance, by what I have said: it has been shown that pleasure is the standard to which everything must be referred. As for your adding that Epicurus likened us to animals,⁵ in that you seem to be not merely not attacking him but actually supporting his case. Since pleasure is endowed with such power that it is sought even

by animals — brutes bereft of reason whose impulses are entirely guided by nature —Epicurus could draw from that fact the very firm conclusion that what all beings seek is the greatest of all goods. When I wrote that the severe Catos of old would on occasion take ample refreshment of wine, and you thought that a matter for criticism, it is in fact wholly admirable if a sage (as the Catos were taken to be)⁶ sometimes engages in conviviality of a rather exuberant sort. Your following remarks, whose drift is that if we embrace Epicurus we should be obliged to live like beasts, have, I think, been dealt with by what I said before: since Epicurus does not suppose that life should be lived without virtue, I do not think he leads the life of animals. So he is not to be shunned like some traitor who would overthrow or pervert human society. He does not corrupt public morals; his whole doctrine is instead directed at making us as happy as we can be.

You must at length give up your attacks on Epicurus, then: reform yourself and return to the camp in which you once fought with distinction. You have now turned against him, under the spell of Stoic subtlety of argument and seduced by the majesty and splendor of the Academics and Peripatetics. But you may be forgiven for that, since you are a younger man not yet of an age to form a proper judgment on these very difficult matters, with the indulgence granted to youth. But now that you have been fully instructed in the arguments of Epicurus, if you persevere in your hostility towards him, you will be thought intolerably arrogant, and not a little stupid.

Turn then to embrace Epicurus, whose teaching I shall perhaps expound at more length if ever I have greater leisure (this letter took me just two days to write, though I fear it may still be rather prolix). Shortage of time did not allow me to pursue all those aspects of the controversy which I feel could still benefit from clear exposition and discussion. I have had to leave many important points untouched, which someone who wanted to take an opposing view could seize upon to rebut my arguments, either-from disinterested love of truth or as an intellectual exercise. And that is not some thing which I should find unwelcome: I encourage any one who wants to contribute to the debate to enter the fray.

You have had a pretty long letter which sets out the whole truth about Epicurus; You must either find it convincing or refute it by contrary arguments, so that if you come up with something better, I in turn may be persuaded by that.

Farewell.