

# Seneca's "On The Happy Life" - A Deceptive View of Epicurus

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Although this book is written from a Stoic perspective, it is so representative of the dominant Stoic-infused modern view of Epicurus that we may want to review it at least briefly next on the podcast, after we complete "On The Nature of the Gods." It contains a lot of commentary on Epicurean philosophy in the form of referencing "pleasure," which we can productively use to unravel where Seneca might be accurate from the larger sections where is is probably inaccurate in his characterization of Epicurus.

I plan to make some notes as I review this and wanted to start with two explicit mentions of Epicurus. I am underlining the parts I would challenge. The quote below from from the [Gutenberg edition](#), translated by Sir Roger L'Estrange.

In this first excerpt from Chapter XV, I submit we see illustrated a strong example of Seneca turning Epicurus into a Stoic. There are no known examples of actual Epicureans construing pleasure in real life following this ascetic model (eating only for hunger, drinking only when thirsty, seeking the end of eating and drinking as "satiety," or categorizing all non-ascetic pleasures as "an evil cause" or lumping them into terms like "sloth, gluttony, and lust." Nor would I submit that the ancient Epicureans would ever have admitted that a proper interpretation of Epicurus makes him appear to be "in womanish dress."

Quote from From Chapter XV

225 - "Happy is that man that eats only for hunger, and drinks only for thirst; that stands upon his own legs, and lives by reason, not by example; and provides for use and necessity, not for ostentation and pomp! Let us curb our appetites, encourage virtue, and rather be beholden to ourselves for riches than to Fortune, who when a man draws himself into a narrow compass, has the least mark at him. Let my bed be plain and clean, and my clothes so too: my meat without much expense, or many waiters, and neither a burden to my purse nor to my body, not to go out the same way it came in. That which is too little for luxury, is abundantly enough for nature. The end of eating and drinking is satiety; now, what matters it though one eats and drinks more, and another less, so long as the one is not a-hungry, nor the other athirst? Epicurus, who limits pleasure to nature, as the Stoics do virtue, is undoubtedly in the right; and those that cite him to authorize their voluptuousness do exceedingly mistake him, and only seek a good authority for an evil cause: for their pleasures of sloth, gluttony, and lust, have no affinity at all with his precepts or meaning. It is true, that at first sight his philosophy seems effeminate; but he that looks nearer him will find him to be a very

brave man only in a womanish dress."

In this second excerpt specifically mentioning Epicurus, from Chapter XVI, the underlined part (at least as translated "the wise man will bear all injuries) sounds like an almost Jesus-like "turn the other cheek" directive. Instead, it's much more likely to be a reference to PDO4, which is not an excuse for "bearing" all injuries and doing nothing about them, but a statement that pain is short if intense, manageable if long, and always ultimately escapable if truly intolerable. Most of this is Seneca just being a normal Stoic and posturing that virtue allows someone to rise above whatever may happen to him, but his reference to Epicurus obscures what it is that Epicurus is talking about.

Quote from From Chapter XVI

Epicurus will have it, that a wise man will bear all injuries; but the Stoics will not allow those things to be injuries which Epicurus calls so. Now, betwixt these two, there is the same difference that we find betwixt two gladiators; the one receives wounds, but yet maintains his ground, the other tells the people, when he is in blood, that it is but a scratch, and will not suffer anybody to part them. An injury cannot be received, but it must be done; but it may be done and yet not received; as a man may be in the water, and not swim, but if he swims, it is presumed that he is in the water. Or if a blow or a shot be levelled at us, it may so happen that a man may miss his aim, or some accident interpose that may divert the mischief. That which is hurt is passive, and inferior to that which hurts it. But you will say, that Socrates was condemned and put to death, and so received an injury; but I answer, that the tyrants did him an injury, and yet he received none. He that steals anything from me and hides it in my own house, though I have not lost it, yet he has stolen it. He that lies with his own wife, and takes her for another woman, though the woman be honest, the man is an adulterer. Suppose a man gives me a draught of poison and it proves not strong enough to kill me, his guilt is nevertheless for the disappointment. He that makes a pass at me is as much a murderer, though I put it by, as if he had struck me to the heart. It is the intention, not the effect, that makes the wickedness. He is a thief that has the will of killing and slaying, before his hand is dipped in blood; as it is sacrilege, the very intention of laying violent hands upon holy things. If a philosopher be exposed to torments, the ax over his head, his body wounded, his guts in his hands, I will allow him to groan; for virtue itself cannot divest him of the nature of a man; but if his mind stand firm, he has discharged his part. A great mind enables a man to maintain his station with honor; so that he only makes use of what he meets in his way, as a pilgrim that would fain be at his journey's end.

Again, these are just a couple of instances where Epicurus is mentioned directly. There's a lot more to say about this book and how it contributes to making Epicurean philosophy almost unrecognizable, and how Seneca's version of Epicurus is unfortunately what prevails today.