

Recent Article on Why Stoicism Remains So Popular (Vis-à-Vis Ancient Rivals)

Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2025 at 7:24 PM

I will address this on several levels, first for Pacatus himself, who has been unfailingly friendly and positive in his participation here, who will always be welcome, and who has a good understanding of the issues involved. Secondly I want to address this for lurkers who might not be sure exactly what is being discussed or the reasons for the disagreement.

Pacatus is aware from his lengthy participation here that I welcome postings like this thread, which bring to our attention articles that may or may not be positive about Epicurus. In the spirit of frank speech which Epicurus advised, and with the knowledge that we are speaking here at the forum with others who fully understand that we are here for the study and promotion of Epicurean philosophy, we regularly share frank criticisms of outside materials and perspectives.

One of the perspectives that is inconsistent with Epicurean views in most instances is eclecticism, which blurs distinctions about or misrepresents what Epicurus really taught. Epicurus himself complained about misunderstanding and misrepresentation of his work in the letter to Menoeceus.

I have made the observation many times that it is a characteristic pattern to see some people want to Stoicize or otherwise water down Epicurean philosophy. Such people follow a repeated pattern: Most often, they praise peripheral aspects of Epicurean ethics with which they agree (prudent and self-sufficient living), but totally omit aspects with which they do not agree. Almost unfailingly, such an approach involves the omission of the keystone of the ethics, the focus on "Pleasure" as the highest good. Such watering down efforts also characteristically totally omit reference to Epicurean physics (the rejection of supernatural forces) and Epicurean canonic (the affirmation that knowledge is possible based on the senses). These latter omissions aren't quite as important as the omission of the "Pleasure," focus, but in many cases the omission of physics and canonic probably explains why such writers fail to see the error in what they are doing.

The article referenced in this thread exhibits all those characteristics, and thus I consider it unhelpful to a good understanding of Epicurus. That's the lens through which it's most important and appropriate to analyze the article here at the forum. Articles can contain good information in part, but still be articles which would not be good to recommend to people who don't already have a good understanding of Epicurus. In this case, the article is a pro-Stoic article written for Stoic sympathizers mildly acquainted with modern Stoicism. As such, it is what it is, and provides a good example for us to talk about. So to repeat -- posting it here is

helpful, because it affords the opportunity for exchanges like this, which open the eyes of many people to the real issues.

Another thing to repeat is that the writer of the article didn't ask for my opinion, and I am not offering it to him by providing it here, or offering my comments to the world at large. The writer is obviously sympathetic to Stoicism and probably semi-Stoic himself, which is certainly his prerogative. Our discussion is for consumption here, by those who are interested in understanding and promoting Epicurean philosophy. From that point of view, it's helpful to observe how much he omits, both from an Epicurean and a Stoic perspective. As I said in my comments, I suspect the ancient Stoics, and modern fundamentalist Stoics, probably share my criticism of the omission of commentary about the fundamentals on which Stoicism is based. For all I know, the writer's failure to understand the role of Pleasure arises from him never being exposed to writers like Norman Dewitt or Emily Austin. Very many good people hold their opinions because all they have been exposed to is orthodox academic commentary.

So I am glad to have the opportunity to revisit my comments in the above thread. I continue to see no reason to revise them, and this gives me the opportunity to expand them. Pacatus properly understands, and his post conveys, that there is a wide gulf between eclecticism and Epicurean philosophy.

There's a big world of generalist philosophical discussion on the internet. On the other hand, there are few if any other places where people who study Epicurus and come to see him as did Lucretius or Lucian of Samosata or Diogenes of Oinoanda or even Diogenes Laertius -- as someone whose philosophy is uniquely valuable and worthy of focus on its own. Providing such a place is the goal of this forum and while disagreements about that goal might be temporarily unpleasant, I am firmly convinced that everyone profits by our firmly standing by that goal.

Quote from Lucian of Samosata, Alexander the Oracle-Monger 61

"I was still more concerned (a preference which you may be far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him."