

# Why pursue unnecessary desires?

Post by "Don" of May 4, 2025 at 10:19 AM

Quote

Could better evidence be cited to prove that Epicureans were pamphleteers?

Uh, yeah. That's the "evidence" for Epicureans being "pamphleteers"?

Here's the context of the Horace quote:

Quote

THE FIRST BOOK OF THE EPISTLES OF HORACE.  
EPISTLE I.

TO MAECENAS.

*The poet renounces all verses of a ludicrous turn, and resolves to apply himself wholly to the study of philosophy, which teaches to bridle the desires, and to postpone every thing to virtue.*

Maecenas, the subject of my earliest song, justly entitled to my latest, dost thou seek to engage me again in the old lists, having been tried sufficiently, and now presented with the foils? My age is not the same, nor is my genius. Veianus, his arms consecrated on a pillar of Hercules' temple, lives snugly retired in the country, that he may not from the extremity of the sandy amphitheater so often supplicate the people's favor. Some one seems frequently to ring in my purified ear: "Wisely in time dismiss the aged courser, lest, an object of derision, he miscarry at last, and break his wind." Now therefore I lay aside both verses, and all other sportive matters; my study and inquiry is after what is true and fitting, and I am wholly engaged in this: I lay up, and collect rules which I may be able hereafter to bring into use. And lest you should perchance ask under what leader, in what house [of philosophy], I enter myself a pupil: addicted to swear implicitly to the ipse-dixits of no particular master, wherever the weather drives me, I am carried a guest. One while I become active, and am plunged in the waves of state affairs, a maintainer and a rigid partisan of strict virtue; then again I relapse insensibly into Aristippus' maxims, and endeavor to adapt circumstances to myself, not myself to circumstances. As the night seems long to those with whom a mistress has broken her appointment, and the day slow to those who owe their labor; as the year moves lazy with minors, whom the harsh guardianship of their mothers confines; so all

that time to me flows tedious and distasteful, which delays my hope and design of strenuously executing that which is of equal benefit to the poor and to the rich, which neglected will be of equal detriment to young and to old. It remains, that I conduct and comfort myself by these principles; your sight is not so piercing as that of Lynceus; you will not however therefore despise being anointed, if you are sore-eyed: nor because you despair of the muscles of the invincible Glycon, will you be careless of preserving your body from the knotty gout. There is some point to which we may reach, if we can go no further. Does your heart burn with avarice, and a wretched desire of more? Spells there are, and incantations, with which you may mitigate this pain, and rid yourself of a great part of the distemper. **Do you swell with the love of praise? There are certain purgations which can restore you, a certain treatise, being perused thrice with purity of mind.** The envious, the choleric, the indolent, the slave to wine, to women—none is so savage that he can not be tamed, if he will only lend a patient ear to discipline.

It is virtue, to fly vice; and the highest wisdom, to have lived free from folly. You see with what toil of mind and body you avoid those things which you believe to be the greatest evils, a small fortune and a shameful repulse. An active merchant, you run to the remotest Indies, fleeing poverty through sea, through rocks, through flames. And will you not learn, and hear, and be advised by one who is wiser, that you may no longer regard those things which you foolishly admire and wish for? What little champion of the villages and of the streets would scorn being crowned at the great Olympic games, who had the hopes and happy opportunity of victory without toil? Silver is less valuable than gold, gold than virtue. "O citizens, citizens, money is to be sought first; virtue after riches:" this the highest Janus from the lowest inculcates; young men and old repeat these maxims, having their bags and account-books hung on the left arm. You have soul, have breeding, have eloquence and honor: yet if six or seven thousand sesterces be wanting to complete your four hundred thousand, you shall be a plebeian. But boys at play cry, "You shall be king, if you will do right." Let this be a [man's] thus his forms? What does the poor man? Laugh [at him too]: is he not forever changing his garrets, beds, baths, barbers? He is as much surfeited in a hired boat, as the rich man is, whom his own galley conveys.

If I meet you with my hair cut by an uneven barber, you laugh [at me]: if I chance to have a ragged shirt under a handsome coat, or if my disproportioned gown fits me ill, you laugh. What [do you do], when my judgment contradicts itself? it despises what it before desired; seeks for that which lately it neglected; is all in a ferment, and is inconsistent in the whole tenor of life; pulls down, builds up, changes square to round. In this case, you think I am mad in the common way, and you do not laugh, nor believe that I stand in need of a physician, or of a guardian assigned by the praetor; though you are the patron of my affairs, and are disgusted at the ill-pared nail of a friend that depends upon you, that reveres you.

In a word, the wise man is inferior to Jupiter alone, is rich, free, honorable, handsome, lastly, king of kings; above all, he is sound, unless when phlegm is troublesome.

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I didn't see any indication here of the "certain treatise" being an Epicurean one.

As for Cicero:

[Cicero: In Pisonem \(2\)](#)

[25.] L [59] But, since we cannot alter the past, why does not this mannikin, this Epicurus of mud and clay, hasten to instil these sublime and philosophical doctrines into that great and illustrious commander his son-in-law \*\*? Believe me, it is fame that bids that great man soar; he burns, he is ablaze with desire for a splendid and a well-earned triumph. He has not learnt the lessons that you have learnt. **Send him a tract** ; nay, if at this stage you can contrive to meet him in person, meditate what phrases you can use to quench and stifle the flames of his desire....

"Send him a tract (libellum)"? That's it? That could easily refer to [Principal Doctrines](#) or a section of *On Nature*.

libellus., a little book, pamphlet, esp. a book written in pages, and not in long rolls

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, libellus](#)

It is of paramount importance to remember that the ancient world didn't have printing presses and didn't distribute broadsheets like in Colonial America. All texts were manuscripts. Copying existed, of course, often copied by skilled enslaved people. But they weren't using bulk mail to blanket a community with flyers or pamphlets.