

Cicero Fighting It Out "Horse And Foot" With Epicurus (Cicero's References to Epicurus in "On Duties")

Post by "Cassius" of July 23, 2025 at 12:29 PM

Our "friend" Cicero says:

*Now that these schools are out of date, Epicurus has come into vogue—an advocate and supporter of practically the same doctrine. **Against such a philosophy we must fight it out "with horse and foot," as the saying is, if our purpose is to defend and maintain our standard of moral rectitude.***

[Quote from Cicero - On Duties - Gutenberg - Miller Edition](#)

116 XXXIII. We have still left our fourth division, comprising propriety, moderation, temperance, self-restraint, self-control.

Can anything be expedient, then, which is contrary to such a chorus of virtues? And yet the Cyrenaics, adherents of the school of Aristippus, and the philosophers who bear the name of Anniceris find all good to consist in pleasure and consider virtue praiseworthy only because it is productive of pleasure. Now that these schools are out of date, Epicurus has come into vogue—an advocate and supporter of practically the same doctrine. Against such a philosophy we must fight it out "with horse and foot," as the saying is, if our purpose is to defend and maintain our standard of moral rectitude.

117 For if, as we find it in the writings of Metrodorus, not only expediency but happiness in life depends wholly upon a sound physical constitution and the reasonable expectation that it will always remain sound, then that expediency—and what is more, the highest expediency, as they estimate it—will [399]assuredly clash with moral rectitude. For, first of all, what position will wisdom occupy in that system? The position of collector of pleasures from every possible source? What a sorry state of servitude for a virtue—to be pandering to sensual pleasure! And what will be the function of wisdom? To make skillful choice between sensual pleasures? Granted that there may be nothing more pleasant, what can be conceived more degrading for wisdom than such a role?

Then again, if anyone hold that pain is the supreme evil, what place in his philosophy has fortitude, which is but indifference to toil and pain? For however many passages there are in which Epicurus speaks right manfully of pain, we must nevertheless consider not what he says, but what it is consistent for a man to say who has defined the good in terms of pleasure and evil in terms of pain.

And further, if I should listen to him, I should find that in many passages he has a great deal to say about temperance and self-control; but "the water will not run," as they say. For how can he commend self-control and yet posit pleasure as the supreme good? For self-control is the foe of the passions, and the passions are the handmaids of pleasure.

118 And yet when it comes to these three cardinal virtues, those philosophers shift and turn as best they can, and not without cleverness. They admit wisdom into their system as the knowledge that provides pleasures and banishes pain; they clear the way for fortitude also in some way to fit in with their doctrines, when they teach that it is a rational means for looking with indifference upon death and [401]for enduring pain. They bring even temperance in—not very easily, to be sure, but still as best they can; for they hold that the height of pleasure is found in the absence of pain. Justice totters or rather, I should say, lies already prostrate; so also with all those virtues which are discernible in social life and the fellowship of human society. For neither goodness nor generosity nor courtesy can exist, any more than friendship can, if they are not sought of and for themselves, but are cultivated only for the sake of sensual pleasure or personal advantage.

Let us now recapitulate briefly.

119 As I have shown that such expediency as is opposed to moral rectitude is no expediency, so I maintain that any and all sensual pleasure is opposed to moral rectitude. And therefore Calliphon and Dinomachus, in my judgment, deserve the greater condemnation; they imagined that they should settle the controversy by coupling pleasure with moral rectitude; as well yoke a man with a beast! But moral rectitude does not accept such a union; she abhors it, spurns it. Why, the supreme good, which ought to be simple, cannot be a compound and mixture of absolutely contradictory qualities. But this theory I have discussed more fully in another connection; for the subject is a large one. Now for the matter before us.

120 We have, then, fully discussed the problem how a question is to be decided, if ever that which seems to be expediency clashes with moral rectitude. But if, on the other hand, the assertion is made that pleasure admits of a show of expediency also, there can still be no possible union between it and moral rectitude. For, to make the most generous admission [403]we can in favour of pleasure, we will grant that it may contribute something that possibly gives some spice to life, but certainly nothing that is really expedient.

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