

Lucian: Hermotimus, The Rival Philosophies

Post by "Cassius" of February 4, 2026 at 7:22 AM

Just as Lucian praises Epicurus' skepticism in Alexander the Oracle Monger, Lucian provides here an example of a practical skepticism that demolishes aggressive Stoicism and the pursuit of "philosophy" as an end in itself.

I find his argument very compatible with that of Epicurus. Lucian is not nihilistically attacking all philosophers. He is approaching the argument looking for the practical benefit (in this case of the pursuit of virtue) and attacking inconsistent claims without claiming that no knowledge of any kind is possible.

In the course of his argument he provides us valuable information about Stoicism that shows why its claims were always word games that made no sense from a practical point of view. The questions he asked have to be answered by anyone advocating a consistent philosophical position.

It appears to me that Epicurus meets this test, and it is the purpose of this forum to provide a place for productive discussion for those of us who agree with Lucian's assessment of Epicurus as stated in Alexander the Oracle Monger. These are words that Lucian placed in his own mouth, I would argue that the approach in Hermotimus illustrates why they are correct:

[Quote from Lucian - Alexander the Oracle Monger](#)

My object, dear friend, in making this small selection from a great mass of material has been twofold. First, I was willing to oblige a friend and comrade who is for me the pattern of wisdom, sincerity, good humor, justice, tranquillity, and geniality. But secondly 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. Yet I think causal readers too may find my essay not unserviceable, since it is not only destructive, but for men of sense, constructive also.

When I quote that passage I don't generally include that last line, but it applies directly here. Lucian here is not just demolishing the claims of Stoicism, he is doing so in the service of pointing out that Stoicism is pursuing claims that make no sense at the expense of actually living life in a practically happy way.

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As an aside it's also important for me to say this in an Administrator role.

It's perfectly clear (always has been - always will be) that not everyone is going to agree with Epicurus' approach to truth and reality. Some people (especially the "Academic" type) are dedicated to eclecticism and radical skepticism. They are far more comfortable being critical of everyone and all claims of knowledge than they are taking the side of Epicurus on any positive question. That' kind of skepticism (and worse) was the position Socrates and the majority of other Greek philosophers who speak so highly of Socrates. [In contrast, the Epicureans were very clear in denouncing the Socratic approach.](#)

No doubt we have plenty of lurkers who admire the Socratic view. Many of them probably even prefer to criticize Socrates for being confident that he knew nothing. They will want to argue that Lucian was, and we should be, just as dismissive of Epicurus as of anyone else who claims to know any amount of "truth."

It's natural for new readers to ask about this radical skeptic approach, and essential for anyone advocating an Epicurean position to be able to provide answers to it. If you can't do that then you're not even "in the arena" in the first place.

But let's be clear. Epicurus held that some things are true and others false, and that is possible to be confident about the difference. Some people are never going to be willing to agree with that. We can learn a lot through reading Cicero and Lucian about people who are like that. Those people will argue skepticism ad infinitum, just as Cicero did.

This forum is not the place for the Socrates' and Cicero's of the world. They have plenty of places to go, including Reddit and similar "philosophy" forums. As we make clear in all our organizational documents and participation rules, this is not a "philosophy" forum - it's an *Epicurean* forum.