

Ongoing Discussion of Jack Gedney's "Untroubled" Substack Blog

Post by "wbernys" of May 29, 2026 at 12:28 PM

I tend to be much more sympathetic more to Jack Gedney than [Cassius](#) in this question so my thoughts on both.

Criticism of Jack Gedney

His dismissal of Torquatus on "vivid pleasures" is rather "bleh" he merely says that Cicero is slandering Epicureans, which I think is extremely ad hoc.

Quote

Both are from Cicero, who, as Cassius points out, is a hostile critic rather than a sympathetic Epicurean. As I would interpret that fact, that suggests that he is more likely to distort or misunderstand the teaching. If Cicero is the most explicit voice one can find describing Epicureanism as advocating "a life crammed with pleasures," you should be suspicious.

I for one consider the speech of Torquatus to be wholly epicurean and regularly call back to it!

So to call the part on "vivid pleasures" a distortion because you disagree with it but accept other parts, like Torquatus talking about the absence of pain, as genuinely epicurean seems like cherry picking to me, and it's clear Torquatus considers vivid pleasures as genuinely very good for us, and how the best life is pictured.

I also think his treatment of famous Epicurus quote on kinetic pleasures is a little odd.

Quote

What does Epicurus actually recommend in regard to food, sex, and aesthetic stimulation? Mostly prudential avoidance.

However, this seems too strong. I also strongly imagine that this is influenced by selection bias of ancient philosophers mainly quoting things which an ancient hedonist would not ordinarily say. This is evidently the reason for why Plutarch sometimes quotes Epicurus for example on saying that it is more pleasant to give than to receive and Marcus Aurelius holding up Epicurus as an example of pain not being so bad or Seneca quoting Epicurus extolling virtue.

Sure Epicurus wants us to avoid pain if we can find a healthier way to get the pleasure we want (such as having sex before or after dinner) or avoid pleasures outweighed by pains but I don't

think him giving advice on how to avoid pain from certain activities means those activities are not actually good and desirable, and Epicurus is clear these kinetic pleasures are truly part of THE GOOD. Saying he can't imagine the good without these pleasures clearly indicate they have great value and are worth pursuing, so long as we do it within the hedonic calculus of going after pleasures that are not outweighed by pains and choosing pains that have more pleasures.

Criticism of Cassius.

Quote

2. People who claim that the Letter to Menoeceus emphasizes the avoidance of pain are considering only "a single sentence torn from context."

This is just wrong in my view, and Jack is absolutely right to point out that it's a lot more than just the one sentence. This is his strongest point by far. It's several sentences and given the fact that the letter to Menoeceus is only supposed to be a short summary which mentions several other subjects, saying that the absence of pain is not important to me is like saying the classification desires, or views on the future, or all pain being short or manageable is not important or "just a single sentence" (about one to two sentences each) even though it has much more length than either of these.

Also Cassius has sometimes made the arguments that pain reduction is the incorrect emphasis because of joys like friendship or owning a pet, which has "inevitably ends in grief" but Jack is right to point out that these things also lead to removal of pain in their own right, such as feelings of loneliness or anxiety, this is explicitly what makes Friendship necessary for Epicurus, and Jack is right to point out that [PD40](#) seems to say grief is not inevitable, perhaps a natural missing of pleasure, but not really extreme grief.

I also think Jack is right when he says

Quote

Cassius is right in pointing out that PD 3 is not an isolated maxim, but part of an intentional series of [Principal Doctrines](#) 1-4 (abbreviated further in the tetrapharmakon). However, looking at this context only underlines the importance of pain reduction in Epicureanism: all four are about pain reduction in the broad sense I describe.

PD3 is meant to be read as an affirmation that pleasure, its limits understood by reason, can serve as a guide, and that guide seems to be "don't chase after higher and higher pleasures of more stimulation, pleasure reaches its height in pain removal, calmness and healthiness is as good as sex or fine food". So don't accept those supposedly higher pleasures which have greater pains than they are worth.

Quote

10. The “absence of pain” reading arose from Stoic, religious, and Humanist filters, rather than an objective look at the original Epicurean texts.

Heavily agree with Jack's criticism of this in the blog! I certainly consider this emphasis on absence of pain as purely Epicurean and don't interject other ideas, In fact I tried to do away with other ideas that I had earlier such as Epicurus being a "virtue ethicist" from a previous thread. and I dislike this sort of behavior of seeing any disagreement as a "corruption". I certainly don't think you intentionally do this Cassius but sometimes you come close and I hope we all know that we are fellow hogs of Epicurus and not "corrupters".