

# Response to Donald Robertson Question: "Was Thomas Jefferson More Stoic Or Epicurean?" (Answer: Epicurean!)

Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2020 at 9:57 AM

Donald Robertson to recently [linked to an article](#) he wrote and asked the question: "Was Thomas Jefferson more Stoic or Epicurean?" In answering "Epicurean" I will break down my response into three categories in order of importance:

(1) **Be sure you understand what it means to be "Epicurean" and to be "Stoic."**

The Stoic and Epicurean schools developed very clear doctrines that are totally incompatible, and for that reasons Stoics and Epicureans in the ancient world were bitter enemies of each others' views. Just scratching the surface, we can compare the big picture of both schools as follows:



In physics, Epicurus held that there area no supernatural gods or supernaturally imposed "order" or "fate," that the universe is eternal in time and boundless in space, and that the earth is not only not the center of attention for divine beings, but only one of countless locations in the universe where life thrives. In epistemology, Epicurus held that the senses, the feelings of pleasure and pain, and the intuitive faculty he called "anticipations" are the methods by which we determine all that is true to us. Epicurus specifically campaigned against abstract dialectical logic as misleading and unhelpful for determining a natural philosophy of life. In ethics, Epicurus taught that humans have agency to influence the outcome of their own lives, that pleasure is the goal of living, that the feelings of pleasure and pain are the guides which nature gave us for determining ethical decisions, and that the term "virtue" has no independent meaning other than as a description of tools which are useful for living pleasurably.

The Stoics could not have been more different or opposed to these Epicurean views.

In physics, the Stoics held that the universe was created by one or more divine beings who impose order on the entire universe and "fate" on the lives of humanity, and that the earth and humanity are essentially the center of the universe and the focus of the gods' attention and manipulation. In epistemology, the Stoics took Plato to new extremes and held that abstract dialectical logic alone is the key to understanding the divine nature of the universe, and that

the senses are deceptive and lures to unworthy living. In ethics, the Stoics taught that the goal of life should be to live virtuously, which essentially means in conformity with the will of the gods, who dictate the outcome through fate, that pleasure is destructive, that emotion is to be suppressed in favor of reason, and that virtue has independent existence and is its own reward -- and that in fact to seek a reward for living virtuously would be by definition **un**-virtuous.

The ancient Stoics and Epicureans realized that there was no middle ground between these two positions, and the deeper you study the two schools the more clearly you can understand why they reached that conclusion, despite what muddy thinkers like Marcus Aurelius centuries after the schools were formed would have you believe.

## **(2) Thomas Jefferson wrote clearly and forcefully in favor of Epicurus and against Stoicism.**

Like Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Jefferson was both a practical man and a politician, and Jefferson was willing to state publicly things that he saw as true regardless of who may have said them first. Unlike Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Jefferson was not a muddy thinker, and in his private correspondence he was very clear as to his own views. What follows is [an assortment of those statements](#). In reading them, remember that both Cicero and the Stoics saw themselves as continuances and extensions of the Platonic line, so that every time Jefferson attacks Cicero or Plato, he is attacking the Stoics as well by implication:

### **Jefferson to William Short, 1819:**

As you say of yourself, **I too am an Epicurean**. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus indeed, has given us what was good of the stoics; **all beyond, of their dogmas, being hypocrisy and grimace. Their great crime was in their calumnies of Epicurus and misrepresentations of his doctrines; in which we lament to see the candid character of Cicero engaging as an accomplice. Diffuse, vapid, rhetorical, but enchanting. His prototype Plato, eloquent as himself, dealing out mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind, has been deified by certain sects usurping the name of Christians; because, in his foggy conceptions, they found a basis of impenetrable darkness whereon to rear fabrications as delirious, of their own invention. These they fathered blasphemously on him who they claimed as their founder, but who would disclaim them with the indignation which their caricatures of his religion so justly excite.** Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the Memorabilia of Xenophon; for Plato makes him one of his Collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies under the mantle of his name; a liberty of which we are told Socrates himself complained. Seneca is indeed a fine moralist, **disguising his work at times with some Stoicisms**, and affecting too much of antithesis and point, yet giving us on the whole a great deal of sound and practical morality....

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was

that “that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided.” Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road.

(There is much more in this letter, including an outline of Epicurean thought, that illustrates how closely Jefferson had studied Epicurus.)

### **Jefferson to John Adams 1814:**

Having more leisure there than here for reading, I amused myself with reading seriously Plato’s *Republic*. I am wrong, however, in calling it amusement, for it was the heaviest task-work I ever went through. I had occasionally before taken up some of his other works, but scarcely ever had patience to go through a whole dialogue. **While wading through the whimsies, the puerilities, and unintelligible jargon of this work,** I laid it down often to ask myself how it could have been, that the world should have so long consented to give reputation to such nonsense as this? How the *soi-disant* Christian world, indeed, should have done it, is a piece of historical curiosity. **But how could the Roman good sense do it? And particularly, how could Cicero bestow such eulogies on Plato! Although Cicero did not wield the dense logic of Demosthenes, yet he was able, learned, laborious, practised in the business of the world, and honest. He could not be the dupe of mere style, of which he was himself the first master in the world. With the moderns, I think, it is rather a matter of fashion and authority. Education is chiefly in the hands of persons who, from their profession, have an interest in the reputation and the dreams of Plato. They give the tone while at school, and few in their after years have occasion to revise their college opinions. But fashion and authority apart, and bringing Plato to the test of reason, take from him his sophisms, futilities and incomprehensibilities, and what remains? In truth, he is one of the race of genuine sophists, who has escaped the oblivion of his brethren, first, by the elegance of his diction, but chiefly, by the adoption and incorporation of his whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity.** His foggy mind is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen through a mist, can be defined neither in form nor dimensions. Yet this, which should have consigned him to early oblivion, really procured him immortality of fame and reverence.

### **Jefferson to John Adams, 1820:**

But enough of criticism: let me turn to your puzzling letter of May 12. on matter, spirit, motion etc. It’s crowd of scepticisms kept me from sleep. I read it, and laid it down: read it, and laid it down, again and again: and to give rest to my mind, **I was obliged to recur ultimately to my habitual anodyne, ‘I feel: therefore I exist.’ I feel bodies which are not myself:**

**there are other existencies then. I call them *matter*. I feel them changing place. This gives me motion. Where there is an absence of matter, I call it *void*, or *nothing*, or *immaterial space*. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.** I can conceive *thought* to be an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it's creator, as well as that *attraction* in an action of matter, or *magnetism* of loadstone. When he who denies to the Creator the power of endowing matter with the mode of action called *thinking* shall shew how he could endow the Sun with the mode of action called *attraction*, which reins the planets in the tract of their orbits, or how an absence of matter can have a will, and, by that will, put matter into motion, then the materialist may be lawfully required to explain the process by which matter exercises the faculty of thinking. When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. **To talk of *immaterial* existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise:** but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke, Tracy, and Stewart.

**Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 1786 (written as an address responding to an advocate of the "Head" / Logic):**

Let the gloomy monk, sequestered from the world, seek unsocial pleasures in the bottom of his cell! Let the sublimated philosopher grasp visionary happiness while pursuing phantoms dressed in the garb of truth! **Their supreme wisdom is supreme folly; & they mistake for happiness the mere absence of pain.** Had they ever felt the solid pleasure of one generous spasm of the heart, they would exchange for it all the frigid speculations of their lives, which you have been vaunting in such elevated terms. Believe me then my friend, that that is a miserable arithmetic which, could estimate friendship at nothing, or at less than nothing. Respect for you has induced me to enter into this discussion, & to hear principles uttered which I detest & abjure. **Respect for myself now obliges me to recall you into the proper limits of your office. When nature assigned us the same habitation, she gave us over it a divided empire. To you she allotted the field of science; to me that of morals. When the circle is to be squared, or the orbit of a comet to be traced; when the arch of greatest strength, or the solid of least resistance is to be investigated, take up the problem; it is yours; nature has given me no cognizance of it.** In like manner, in denying to you the feelings of sympathy, of benevolence, of gratitude, of justice, of love, of friendship, **she has excluded you from their controul.** To these she has adapted the mechanism of the heart. Morals were too essential to the happiness of man to be risked on the uncertain combinations of the head. **She laid their foundation therefore in sentiment, not in science.** That she gave to all, as necessary to all: this to a few only, as sufficing with a few. **I know indeed that you pretend authority to the sovereign controul of our conduct in all its parts: & a respect for your grave saws & maxims, a desire to do what is right, has sometimes induced me to conform to your counsels.**

A few facts however which I can readily recall to your memory, will suffice to prove to you that **nature has not organized you for our moral direction**. When the poor wearied souldier whom we overtook at Chickahomony with his pack on his back, begged us to let him get up behind our chariot, you began to calculate that the road was full of souldiers, & that if all should be taken up our horses would fail in their journey. We drove on therefore. But soon becoming sensible you had made me do wrong, that tho we cannot relieve all the distressed we should relieve as many as we can, I turned about to take up the souldier; but he had entered a bye path, & was no more to be found; & from that moment to this I could never find him out to ask his forgiveness. Again, when the poor woman came to ask a charity in Philadelphia, you whispered that she looked like a drunkard, & that half a dollar was enough to give her for the ale-house. Those who want the dispositions to give, easily find reasons why they ought not to give. When I sought her out afterwards, & did what I should have done at first, you know that she employed the money immediately towards placing her child at school. If our country, when pressed with wrongs at the point of the bayonet, had been governed by its heads instead of its hearts, where should we have been now? Hanging on a gallows as high as Hamans. You began to calculate & to compare wealth and numbers: we threw up a few pulsations of our warmest blood; we supplied enthusiasm against wealth and numbers; we put our existence to the hazard when the hazard seemed against us, and we saved our country: justifying at the same time the ways of Providence, whose precept is to do always what is right, and leave the issue to him. **In short, my friend, as far as my recollection serves me, I do not know that I ever did a good thing on your suggestion, or a dirty one without it. I do forever then disclaim your interference in my province. Fill papers as you please with triangles & squares: try how many ways you can hang & combine them together. I shall never envy nor controul your sublime delights. But leave me to decide when & where friendships are to be contracted.**

Additional detail can be found in Jefferson documents collected at <http://www.newepicurean.com/jefferson>.

**(3) Analyzing the "Rules of Life," to the extent a Stoic said any of them they are commonplace truisms that even a Stoic could not get wrong.**

If after reading the above, especially Jefferson's Head and Heart letter, you are still tempted to think that Jefferson was in any substantial way a Stoic, let's look at the list of "ten rules" and quickly comment on each. Over time we can come back and address each in more detail, but for now:

1. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do to-day. << This is a commonplace observation equally supportable by any of several Epicurean doctrines, such as Vatican Saying 10, "*Remember that you are mortal, and have a limited time to live, and have devoted yourself to discussions on Nature for all time and eternity, and have seen "things that are now and are to come and have been,"*" and Vatican Saying 14: "*14. We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination, and each*

*one of us dies while occupied."*

2. Never trouble another for what you can do yourself. << Another commonplace observation that is not intrinsically Stoic, but is stated in such Epicurean doctrines as Vatican Saying 45. *"The study of nature does not make men productive of boasting or bragging, nor apt to display that culture which is the object of rivalry with the many, but high-spirited and self-sufficient, taking pride in the good things of their own minds and not of their circumstances."*
3. Never spend your money before you have it. << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all.
4. Never buy what you do not want, because it is cheap; it will be dear to you. << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all.
5. Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst and cold. << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all.
6. We never repent of having eaten too little. << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all. There is plenty of Epicurean advice about accustoming oneself to doing without when necessary: *"And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest enjoy luxury pleasure in luxury who least need it....To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a man alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune."*
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly. << A commonplace observation, and to the extent this statement implies agency or "free will," it is not Stoic
8. How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened! << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all.
9. Take things always by their smooth handle. << A common sense observation not intrinsically Stoic.
10. When angry, count ten, before you speak; if very angry, an hundred. << Simple common sense and not intrinsically Stoic at all.

#### **(4) Conclusion:**

Thomas Jefferson fully understood the essential characteristics of Stoic and Epicurean philosophies, and he emphatically embraced Epicurus and condemned Stoicism and its variants. **You should too.**