

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

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2020 at 7:37 AM

Donald Robertson's responses:

You place a lot of emphasis at the beginning on your claim that Jefferson is a clear thinker compared to what you call the muddy thinking of Marcus Aurelius. But I think anyone reading that first letter you quote to William Short is going to find that clashes very much with the claim because what Jefferson says there most people will probably find very muddy indeed. He both criticizes and praises the Stoics repeatedly in the space of a few sentences but by the end he hasn't stated clearly what the reasons for his disagreement, if any, actually are. Surely you have to admit that most people reading that are going to be left scratching their heads if asked to explain what Jefferson is actually saying about the Stoics?

[Donald Robertson](#) With respect, I also think very few people will agree with your premise stated at the outset: "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." You'd have to try to substantiate that somehow. As it stands, I would think most readers will find that a questionable basis for the argument that you're making in the rest of the piece.

Then we get the criticisms of Plato's Republic. But the Stoics were not Platonists. They argued fiercely with the Platonists. Their school originated with Zeno's critique of Plato's Republic. So unless you can provide some argument to prove that Jefferson's criticisms fall equally on the Stoics, I doubt most people reading this will go along with you this far in your argument.

[Donald Robertson](#) "Their supreme wisdom is supreme folly; & they mistake for happiness the mere absence of pain." Strangely, on the face of it, that sounds a lot more like a criticism of Epicurean ataraxia than of Stoic virtue. It seems to echo the typical wording of ancient criticisms of Epicureanism. It's not a criticism normally levelled at the Stoics because it doesn't seem to correspond with what they actually believed. In this letter, Jefferson perhaps sounds more like Cyrenaics criticising the Epicureans than an Epicurean himself.

[Donald Robertson](#) "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." - I thought Epicurus

denied the existence of a natural bond of affection between friends and argued instead that friendship was a sort of social contract based on the utility of friends in securing the goal of ataraxia.

[Donald Robertson](#) "Never spend your money before you have it. << A commonplace observation not intrinsically Stoic at all", etc. I did not claim that those statements were intrinsically Stoic. So this part of your article contains a series of Straw Man fallacies.

[Donald Robertson](#) "Take things always by their smooth handle. << A common sense observation not intrinsically Stoic." - I think most people will recognize that's a reference to Epictetus' Enchiridion, the book Jefferson says he admired, recommended his friends should read, and which he had intended to translate himself. The historian I cited who edited his papers, and others, have already made this point. So, again, I think you'd have to make a case for your skeptical position by providing some sort of argument.

[Donald Robertson](#) "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." -- Wait, what happened??? You didn't actually seem with respect, to provide any argument at all. Just a lot of quotes, which certainly don't appear to contradict what I wrote in my article. I hope you don't mind me pointing this out but you didn't actually directly address the evidence or arguments I cited in the article.