

# References to Epicurus' Attitude Toward The "Place of the Sciences And Liberal Arts"

Post by "Cassius" of May 15, 2020 at 9:37 AM

This is an effort to collect in a single place the references that are available to the Epicurean attitude toward the place of "the sciences and the liberal arts" (to borrow the phrase from Frances Wright).

Epicurus was criticized both in the ancient world and by today's commentators for this attitude, which on its face would conflict with Epicurus' focus on physics and observation as the foundation of his philosophy. There is an issue here which needs to be understood in order to understand Epicurus' perspective.

Here is an example of the issue from [Cicero's On Ends](#):

Quote

"You are pleased to think him uneducated. The reason is that he refused to consider any education worth the name that did not help to school us in happiness. Was he to spend his time, as you encourage Triarius and me to do, in perusing poets, who give us nothing solid and useful, but merely childish amusement? Was he to occupy himself like Plato with music and geometry, arithmetic and astronomy, which starting from false premises cannot be true, and which moreover if they were true would contribute nothing to make our lives pleasanter and therefore better? Was he, I say, to study arts like these, and neglect the master art, so difficult and correspondingly so fruitful, the art of living? No! Epicurus was not uneducated: the real philistines are those who ask us to go on studying till old age the subjects that we ought to be ashamed not to have learnt in boyhood."

Here is another, that while not mentioning Epicurus in this passage, is from Lucian, who can be argued to have held many Epicurean viewpoints:

Lucian's Dialog "[Icaromenippus, An Aerial Expedition:](#)"

Quote

**"Menippus. Ah, but keep your laughter till you have heard something of their pretentious mystifications. To begin with, their feet are on the ground; they**

are no taller than the rest of us 'men that walk the earth'; they are no sharper-sighted than their neighbors, some of them purblind, indeed, with age or indolence. And yet they say they can distinguish the limits of the sky, they measure the sun's circumference, take their walks in the supra-lunar regions, and specify the sizes and shapes of the stars as though they had fallen from them. Often one of them could not tell you correctly the number of miles from Megara to Athens, but has no hesitation about the distance in feet from the sun to the moon. How high the atmosphere is, how deep the sea, how far it is round the earth— they have the figures for all that. Moreover, they have only to draw some circles, arrange a few triangles and squares, add certain complicated spheres, and lo, they have the cubic contents of Heaven.

Then, how reasonable and modest of them, dealing with subjects so debatable, to issue their views without a hint of uncertainty; thus it must be and it shall be; *contra gentes* they will have it so. They will tell you on oath the sun is a molten mass, the moon inhabited, and the stars water-drinkers, moisture being drawn up by the sun's rope and bucket and equitably distributed among them."

Although this does not qualify as an ancient text, Frances Wright comments at length on this issue in [A Few Days In Athens Chapter 9](#):

Quote

"This recalls to me," said Theon, "that I have heard among the various reports concerning the gardens current in the mouths of the Athenians, very contradictory ones as to the place allowed in it to the sciences and liberal arts, and to music in particular."

"I suppose," said Metrodorus, " that you heard our whole employment was eating, drinking, and rioting in all licentiousness. "

"True, I did hear so; and I fear I must confess, half believed it. But I also heard your licentiousness described in various ways: sometimes as grossly sensual, enlivened by no elegances of art; veiled, adorned, if I may use the expression, by no refinement. In short, that Epicurus laughed as well at the fine arts as the grave sciences. From others, again, I learnt that music, dancing, poetry, and painting, were pressed into the service of his philosophy; that Leontium strung the lyre, Metrodorus the harp, Hedeia moved in the dance, Boidion raised the song to Venus; that his halls were covered with voluptuous pictures, the walks of his garden lined with indecent statues."

“And you may now perceive the truth,” replied Metrodorus, “with your own eyes and ears.”

“But,” said Leontium, “the young Corinthian may be curious to know the sentiments of our master, and his advice regarding the pursuit of the sciences and the liberal arts. I can readily perceive,” addressing herself to Theon, “the origin of the two contradictory reports you have just mentioned. The first you would hear from the followers of Aristippus, who, though not acknowledging the name, follow the *tenets* of his philosophy, and have long been very numerous in our degenerate city. These, because Epicurus recommends but a moderate culture of those arts, which by them are too often made the elegant incentives to licentious pleasure, accuse him of neglecting them altogether. The cynics, and other austere sects, who condemn all that ministers to the luxury, ease, or recreation of man, exaggerate his moderate use of these arts into a vicious encouragement of voluptuousness and effeminacy. You will perceive, therefore, that between the two reports lies the truth. Every innocent recreation is permitted in the garden. It is not poetry, but licentious poetry, that Epicurus condemns; not music, but voluptuous music; not painting, but licentious pictures; not dancing, but loose gestures. Yet thus he displeases alike the profligate and the austere; for these he is too moderate, and for those too severe. “With regard to the sciences, if it be said, that they are neglected among us, I do not say that our master, though himself versed in them, as in all other branches of knowledge, greatly recommends them to our study but that they are not unknown, let Polyoenus be evidence.

“He, one of the most amiable men of our school, and one most highly favored by our master, you must have heard mentioned throughout Greece as a profound geometrician.”

“Yes,” replied Theon, “but I have also heard, that since entering the garden, he has ceased to respect his science.”

“I am not aware of that,” said Leontium, “though I believe he no longer devotes to it all his time, and all his faculties. Epicurus called him from his diagrams, to open to him the secrets of physics, and the beauties of ethics; to show him the springs of human action, and lead him to the study of the human mind. He taught him, that any single study, however useful and noble in itself, was yet unworthy the entire employ of a curious and powerful intellect; that the man who pursued one line of knowledge, to the exclusion of others, though he should follow it up to its very head, would never be either learned or wise; that he who pursues knowledge, should think no branch of it unworthy attention; least of all, should he confine it to those which are unconnected with the business, and add nothing to the pleasures of life; that further not our acquaintance with ourselves, nor our fellows; that tend not to enlarge the sphere of our affections, to multiply our ideas and sensations, nor extend the scope of our inquiries. On this ground, he blamed the devotion of Polyoenus to a science that leads to other truths than those of virtue, to

other study than that of man.”

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There are other examples that discuss this issue, especially in regard to Polyoenus. If you know of others that should be added here, please post.