

# SOE15 - Diathesis

Post by "Hiram" of December 31, 2019 at 11:15 AM

Quote

Concerning [Cassius](#)' feedback:

**SOE15: Under normal circumstances, we are in control of our mental dispositions.**

Objection to SOE15: The "under normal circumstances" probably is so ambiguous that it negates any benefit from this tenet. The Epicurean point in my understanding is that we should work to remain in control of our mental dispositions (like we work to control everything else) so that we maximize pleasure and minimize pain. By mentioning mental dispositions without really stating anything significant about them, the implication is that you are endorsing some kind of Stoic mind control that leads to suppression of emotions. Presumably you would only want to suggest that painful emotions should be kept under control, but even that would likely be a non-Epicurean interpretation, since it is recorded in Diogenes Laertius that Epicurus said that the wise man feels his emotions more deeply than others, and this is no hindrance to his wisdom.

I was mainly thinking of Fragment 112 Diogenes, which states that the "*sum of happiness is our disposition, of which we are masters*". I [considered this against PD 20 in one essay](#), so this is not a Stoic insight at all. The goal of each Tenet is to start a more in depth conversation and commentary on each, not to close the discussion where the Tenet ends (as I mention in the introduction of the Tenets, where I discuss the problem of over-simplification).

When Philodemus addresses habitual fury or arrogance as moral diseases, he also refers to it as diathesis (a bad disposition) which needs to be replaced by a better, friendly, kind, disposition.

So diathesis / dispositions are an important concept in moral development, and they deserve further discussion.

I say "under normal circumstances" because of problems like drug use, addiction, and some mental health issues that I am not fully an expert on, but last night my neighbor texted me because he had a panic attack, and sometimes people (like when they lack sleep) can lose control of their dispositions. There are people who feel, maybe at times, unable to control their disposition. I can also think of diabetes and the emotional / mental problems that diabetes can generate. So it seems to me that, if we do not take care of our health (which is a natural and necessary pleasure), this affects our habitual disposition.

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## Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2019 at 11:42 AM

I see Martin Ferguson Smith on the [Oinoanda.cat website](#) has:

Fr. 112

The sum of happiness consists in our disposition, of which we are master. Military service is dangerous and one is subordinate to others. Public speaking is full of agitation and nervousness as to whether one can convince. Why then do we pursue an occupation like this, which is under control of others?

So that means:

(1) This is a fragment which he wasn't able to place clearly in context.

(2) We'd have to know how confident MFS word of this wording.

(3) "The sum of happiness consists in our disposition" is an extremely broad statement that seems to go further than anything we have read in Epicurus' letters, in Diogenes Laertius, or Lucretius, or anything that Cicero quoted. Before taking it as widely as you are taking it I think we'd need to reflect on the implication of there being nothing else which goes that far, and much else that can be read to be much more narrow and contextual, especially since as written this could easily be interpreted as something akin to stoicism, which we know Epicurus was not.

(4) As for the rest of the statement, to which we do not have further answer or explanation, I would argue that there are legitimate Epicurean reasons why someone would choose to pursue military action or public speaking, and that Epicurean philosophy does not stand for a blanket denunciation of these in all circumstances, such as when they are needed for the survival or happiness of ourselves and our friends. Cassius Longinus and other Epicureans he cited to Cicero, as well as Cicero's own example of Torquatus, did not reach the conclusion that Epicurean philosophy was incompatible with these things, at least when needed.

So where I see these issues going is more toward something like:

We should strive to be master of our dispositions just like we strive to master all our circumstances toward the goal of living pleurably.

As is this one is going to be read by most people as something akin to Stoicism.