

Vaughn (Lewis) - "Living Philosophy"

Post by "Charles" of January 12, 2020 at 12:23 PM

A brief textbook on the history of philosophy from the pre-Socratics all the way up to the late twentieth century. There's a section on the Hellenistic Era that opens up with Epicurus, I mentioned this book to Cassius during today's (1/12/2020) Skype Call and said that I would copy it, so here it is attached below, as well as the link down below.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2...z7re0fmylXa/pub>

Post by "Cassius" of January 12, 2020 at 5:01 PM

Well this quickly illustrates what we were also talking about, how everybody in the world seems to share the same view that Epicurus's view of the ideal life was as an ascetic hermit cave-dweller. There's no wonder that so many people who read the modern material get the view that they do -- and why so many of them ignore Epicurus thereafter. I would certainly ignore him myself if I thought this was an accurate summary.

Read DeWitt and there is nothing whatsoever stated in summary form that looks remotely like this.

And if you read the Gosling & Taylor book, along with backup articles by [Nikolsky](#) and Wentham, you see that's there's very little justification for writing like this other than that you have a pre-conceived notion that Epicurus was essentially a Stoic.

There is no way that the ancient Stoics and Epicureans would have found among themselves like they did if this is what Epicurus taught, UNLESS they were simply playing word games and haggling over meaningless definitions, because a life such as is described here is indistinguishable from Stoicism.

Epicurus

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-271 BCE) is considered the founder of Epicureanism, the hedonistic theory that life's highest aim is happiness attained through moderate pleasures and the avoidance of mental disturbance. Hedonism is the doctrine that pleasure is the supreme good, a perspective that many others after Epicurus also maintained (including, for example, the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill). But Epicurus' hedonism is of a peculiar kind and is often misunderstood. Contrary to popular myth, he did not propose what Epicureanism has sometimes been taken to mean: recklessly sensual, overindulgent living. He believed the true life of pleasure consists in an attitude of imperturbable emotional calm that needs only simple pleasures, a sensible diet, a prudent moral life, and good friends. As he puts it:

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2020 at 6:29 PM

Charles I was thinking about this further. You're less than 30 years old - a lot less. When I was 25 or so if someone had tried to tell me that the goal of life was moderate pleasure, avoidance of disturbance, "imperturbable emotional calm, "simple pleasures" a sensible diet, and a "prudent" moral life, I would have told them what they could do with their philosophy. There's no way that Epicurus could have taught that kind of asceticism and been widely applauded and followed as being the "master builder of human happiness" as Cicero recorded it. That description is Stoicism through and through, and no young person, young animal, or young of any kind, which is what we look to as the model to determine Nature's standard "before they have been corrupted" would ever buy into that unless and until they had been thoroughly corrupted by Stoicism/Platonism/religion. At this later point in my life I am much older than 30, but I still feel the same way.

Post by “Charles” of January 12, 2020 at 8:14 PM

Well said Cassius.

I think there are two parts to the most common misconception, the first being revisionism and strawman-esque argumentation against the philosophy. If Epicurean Philosophy was the minimalist life built on virtue and freedom from mental disturbances, then surely the only point of contention between the dominant Hellenistic philosophies would have been the epistemology and physics, yet the argumentation and disagreements always seem to boil down to **pleasure**. For the Stoics always say that you should be indifferent to pleasure, but not pursue it, and the others say that pleasure itself is evil, but why antagonize the Epicureans as overindulgent hedonists like Diotimus the Stoic did, because if its to be "expected" that they weren't the overindulgent hedonists, he would have been laughed at and his trial would've ended with an innocent verdict.

No, its far easier to mis-characterize your opponents arguments so that you may better defeat them. For us the Stoics are the unemotional and uncaring husks who say

"Do not worry that your sister fell ill, be virtuous and all will be well"

Or the Platonists, in which our straw man might appear as: pseudo-mystics who only speak of philosophy in tricky games to confuse all others to give the image of intelligence

Clearly those two examples are gross caricatures, but the point still stands. It makes little sense to say that Epicurean Philosophy is somehow both the overindulgent and ultra-hedonist school of red wine waterfalls and brothels for every street corner while simultaneously being the school of frugal minimalism where even a grand feast is bread and water, and socializing consists of only platonic friendship, and that we must all limit our desires and pursue only the smallest, and static pleasures of the mind.

Obviously this false schism must be mended. Since EP can only resemble one side to this broken dichotomy, which one is it? This brings me to my next point.

The second reason why I think this misconception could happen is that it is a matter of unwilling ignorance, or taking things only at face value.

If we examine the surviving texts, its easy to see why someone could come to that conclusion of the minimalist perspective, especially when we read L to M, Laertius, and a few of the Selected Fragments (Ive only read Peter St. Andre).

But its just that, the face value. The same source telling us Epicurus ate only bread and water also tells us that he wrote over 300 books, of which a vast and overwhelming majority has been lost, and only very recently have the papyrus scrolls in Herculaneum begun to be deciphered

through new methods of technology that preserves them and reveal the charred characters.

Throughout all of history until perhaps the 20th century (barring DeWitt and a few others), Epicurean Philosophy was always seen as the indulgent hedonist school rather than the Neo-Epicurean one we see today. To assume that EP is the minimalist & removal of pain school given the surviving sources is as ridiculous to assume that its the ultra-hedonistic school that would make even Sade blush.

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2020 at 4:08 AM

I very much agree with your post, with these comments;

[Quote from Charles](#)

Clearly those two examples are gross caricatures,

In the case of the Stoics I do not think that the example you gave is a caricature. The entire thrust of Stoicism seems to have been explicitly to undermine emotion and convince people of its unimportance. Much of the Stoic literature survives in relatively intact form, and when i read Epictetus there seems no alternative but to believe that the common meaning of "Stoic" is not a misunderstanding, but is exactly what they were seeking to accomplish.

[Quote from Charles](#)

, or taking things only at face value.

If we examine the surviving texts, its easy to see why someone could come to that conclusion of the minimalist perspective

On this i would suggest that the issue is not that Epicurean philosophy is being taken at face value, but that it is being selectively read, from among fragments that has survived in large part because of their ability to be reconciled with Stoicism by taking them outside the context of the full philosophy.

As you have stated or implied, the thrust of Epicurus' conclusion was that pleasure (a feeling) rather than gods or idealism or rationalism/reason, deserves to be considered the goal Nature has set for life. The Epicureans devoted huge amounts of time to explaining that, most of which no longer exists. in explaining that it is pleasure as a feeling, rather than particular types of pleasure that are individually found to be most pleasing, Epicurus logically included mental

pleasures as very important, and also that an environment suitable to enjoying pleasure without distraction (pain) is desirable. Those are the passages on which commentators have focused because they find them compatible with their own views, rather than those which clearly state such things as that Epicurus would not recognize the good without the feelings of sex and other feelings which any ordinary uncorrupted living thing feels to be pleasurable.

Your excerpt from Vaughn illustrates the process. Instead of explaining how Epicurus was providing logical arguments for use in refuting Platonism, which places the letter to Menoecus in context, Vaughn immediately jumps to an unintuitive conclusion which effectively reverses the meaning of the philosophy, amounting to an assertion that when Epicurus used the word "pleasure" he did not really mean pleasure as we know it. The result is that no one who has not been corrupted by anti-pleasure philosophy is going to find Epicurus appealing, and he is abandoned to that segment of philosophical commentators who have no interest other than making Epicurus sound like he agrees with them - as Stoics.

Post by "Charles" of January 13, 2020 at 3:11 PM

Its worth adding as a final touch, that the intellectual heir of Epicurus, Metrodorus, espoused a sensual hedonism. He also disavowed the asceticism and poverty of the cynics in favor of affluence while also maintaining that wealth was not the means for happiness.

Post by "Cassius" of January 13, 2020 at 3:17 PM

I agree that you are probably correct Charles -- but for purposes of the thread (if you get a chance) on what do you base this statement? Are you thinking of a particular cite or comment about him?

Post by "Charles" of January 13, 2020 at 3:24 PM

[Cassius](#) here are the proper sources

More sensual claim: Cicero's [*De Rerum Deorum*](#), Chapter 40, paragraph 113, 2nd to last line prior to Chapter 41

"As for Metrodorus, Epicurus's co-partner in philosophy, he supplied him with many still more outspoken quotations; in fact Metrodorus takes his brother Timocrates to task for hesitating to measure every element of happiness by the standard of the belly, nor is this an isolated utterance, but he repeats it several times. I see you nod your assent, as you are acquainted with the passages; and did you deny it, I would produce the volumes. Not that I am at the moment criticizing your making pleasure the sole standard of value — that belongs to another inquiry."

Poverty claim: Philodemus, *On Property Management*, XXV 3. Philodemus' Approach to Property Management and the Debate between the Epicureans and the Cynics.

I don't have the actual pdf of Philodemus, or rather one that is unrestricted. But here's the citation.

"The debate between Metrodorus and the Cynics focuses on the issue whether wealth has any value and, if it does, of what kind. While the Cynics are staunch advocates of *πεινιά* or *πτωχεία*, "poverty or pensury [sic]," denying that wealth has any value at all, Metrodorus treats it as an instrumental good whose practical value is determined by its good or base use. His position is closer to Zeno's position than one might expect: like Zeno and other Stoics, Metrodorus views (natural) wealth as a preferred indifferent of some sort. Philodemus highlights that aspect when he suggests that, on the one hand, the wise man will be hopeful and content with a frugal life, but, on the other hand, "he feels more inclined, prompted by his will, toward a more affluent way of living" (XVI.4-6) Woolf (2009) argues that this was Epicurus's position as well"

Maybe I can look into Raphael Woolf, to find that argument and see if it points to any other sources.

Edit: The Woolf Section cited is from "The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism", Chapter 9 which was written by Woolf titled "Pleasure and Desire" (Which right away opens with "pleasure is the absence of pain").

Fragments of Metrodorus' books were found at Herculaneum, likely that Philodemus was versed or had access to them.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2020 at 2:52 PM

Excellent Charles, thank you!

[Quote from Charles](#)

Metrodorus views (natural) wealth as a preferred indifferent of some sort.

I suspect Metrodorus would view this statement, as I do, as fairly ridiculous. No action or tool is "intrinsically" a pleasure, unless it is some form of pleasure itself. So Metrodorus would never call ANYTHING a "preferred indifferent" which is a peculiarly Stoic manner of talking in fairly ridiculous terms -- not terminology an Epicurean would use -- only someone who likes talking in pretzels, like the Stoics love to do.

Post by "Charles" of January 14, 2020 at 2:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I suspect Metrodorus would view this statement, as I do, as fairly ridiculous.

I'm fairly skeptical about that claim, especially since the author immediately points to Zeno and even admits that its a surprising conclusion to reach.

However, there were copies of "On Wealth" by Metrodorus at Herculaneum, so its more than likely that Philodemus was acquainted with it. Perhaps [Hiram](#) can provide some clearer explanations, as I'm not well versed in Philodemus.

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2020 at 2:59 PM

Just to be clear, i am agreeing with you and what Metrodorus is saying, Charles. I am just saying that Metrodorus would not use the term "preferred indifferents" to express that weath is not INTRINSICALLY valuable. I think Metrodorus would say that of course wealth CAN have value, in order to purchase things for pleasure, but it may NOT have value if it used in a way that brings pain. That is how an Epicurean would evaluate any tool or any choice, contextually, rather than whether it fits in some artificial category of "preferred indifferent" which is Stoic terminology.

Are we together or still not yet? We may be talking about different things.

Post by “Charles” of January 14, 2020 at 3:04 PM

We are on the same page, I'm just explaining how skeptical I am of the claim regarding Zeno and Metrodorus claiming indifference, since I could not find a proper source for Philodemus' "On Property Management" (On Household Economics), but what is perhaps worth looking into is the Woolf argument.

Post by “Hiram” of January 14, 2020 at 3:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I suspect Metrodorus would view this statement, as I do, as fairly ridiculous. No action or tool is "intrinsically" a pleasure, unless it is some form of pleasure itself. So Metrodorus would never call ANYTHING a "preferred indifferent" which is a peculiarly Stoic manner of talking in fairly ridiculous terms -- not terminology an Epicurean would use -- only someone who likes talking in pretzels, like the Stoics love to do.

Yes, that seems like something that the author who was commenting on the Philodeman scroll may have been saying, not something Metrodorus would have said. However, it's not inaccurate to say that Metrodorus would have "preferred" wealth over poverty, particularly considering that he was VERY concerned with autarchy.

It would be inaccurate to classify wealth as an "indifferent" good from an Epicurean perspective. Philodemus classifies "the natural measure of wealth" as that which is needed to secure what is natural and necessary, and anything beyond that we can assume qualifies as natural and unnecessary wealth. Indifference is not a qualifier to us.

Post by “Cassius” of January 14, 2020 at 3:45 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

Indifference is not a qualifier to us.

Yes that's exactly the point I agree with.