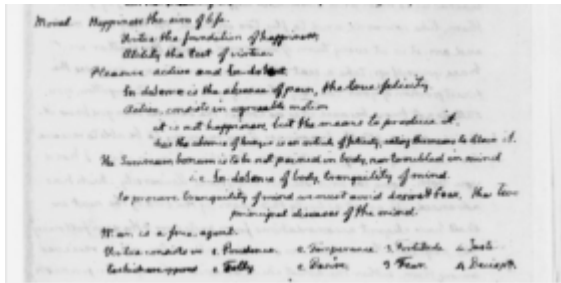


Thomas Jefferson's Epicurean Outline

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2021 at 7:19 AM

I was looking over the [William Short 1818 letter](#) this morning and a couple of questions came to mind (focusing here only on the ethics part):



(1) I wonder what Jefferson was following in composing this outline? Was he working from the letter the Menoeceus, or from Diogenes Laertius' entire biography, or perhaps even from Cicero's 'On Ends' -- or all of the above plus Lucretius?

(2) I didn't clip this part, but it's interesting that he included a section on physics and ethics, but nothing on canonics. For someone as interested in "Reason" as Jefferson appears to have been, that's curious.

(3) "Virtue the foundation of happiness" and "utility the test of virtue" sounds almost like "On Ends." That precise point is not a focus of the letters, and I am not sure it stands out in Diogenes Laertius, does it? Does that then point to Cicero? I seem to remember a commentator pointing out that the list of virtues mirrors the listing in Torquatus.

(4) "Pleasure active and indolent" and the "agreeable motion" -- That's not in the letters, is it, but might be drawn from Diogenes Laertius but also from Cicero, correct?

(5) It's interesting that he would choose to use the word in-dolent, which I've never seen anyone else use for the resting / static / katastematic category referenced in DL and Cicero. I wonder why he chose that word, and chose to write it with the dash, almost as if he were emphasizing the "in-" part?

(6) The "it is not happiness, but the means to produce it." Is "it" referring to pleasure in general, or to his observation about active / agreeable motion?

(7) Does the "summum bonum" sound like a direct reference to Cicero's formulations in "on ends"?

(8) It is interesting that he chooses to say "utility" is the test of virtue rather than "produces pleasure" if he was following "On Ends." Maybe that is a reflection of the Utilitarianism movement (?)

These are just some of the questions that arise but I think it's interesting to consider what this outline indicates about which Epicurean sources Jefferson was reading. I note that he says in this 1819 letter that he wrote the outline some twenty years beforehand, which I gather would have been a very busy period for Jefferson.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 4, 2025 at 8:42 AM

I am just now seeing this thread and Cassius' post about the outline in above, posted April 2021(...Jefferson's outline was our topic at last night's Zoom).

I am also reflecting on the letter itself and the following quote:

"As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece & Rome have left us."

Especially the phrase "the genuine, not the imputed doctrines" --- and this would refer to "the actual" rather than anything that detractors would say.

Post by “Cassius” of March 4, 2025 at 9:05 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Especially the phrase "the genuine, not the imputed doctrines" --- and this would refer to "the actual" rather than anything that detractors would say.

Also, "actual" as opposed to what is imputed *both* by (1) detractors who intentionally misrepresent, and (2) by those who think they re interpreting fairly, but who are mistaken. Not so many detractors nowadays take the time to argue against Epicurus directly. Of those who are actually writing about Epicurus there may be more in the "mistaken" camp than in the "unfriendly" camp.

CHAP. IV.

That the Pleasure, wherein consists Felicity, is Indolence of Body, and Tranquillity of Mind.

Jefferson's

There being (as before is intimated) two kinds of pleasures; one in station or rest, which is a placability, calmness, and vacuity, or immunity from trouble and grief; the other in motion, which consists in a sweet movement, as in gladness, mirth, and whatsoever moveth the sense delightfully, with a kind of sweetness and oscillation, as to eat and drink out of hunger and thirst: It may be demanded, Whether in both, or in either, and in which consists Felicity?

We say, that pleasure, wherein felicity consists, is of the first kind, the stable, or that which is in station; and so can be no other than indolence of body, and tranquillity of mind.

When therefore we say in generall terms, Pleasure is the end of happy life, we are far from meaning the pleasures of luxurious persons, or of others, as considered in the motion or act of fruition, by which the sense is pleasantly and sweetly affected; as some, either through ignorance, dissent, or ill will, interpret. We mean no more but this, (to repeat it once more) *Not pained in body, nor troubled in mind.*

For it is not perpetuall feasting, and drinking; not the conversation of beautiful women; not rarities of fish, nor any other dainties of a profuse table, that make a happy life; but reason, with sobriety, and a serene mind, searching the causes, why this object is to be prefer'd, that to be rejected; and expelling opinions, which occasion much trouble to the mind.

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