

Review of the "What is Epicureanism and Is It Compatible with Stoicism?" video by Vox Stoica

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 10:04 AM

Thanks to [shahabgh66](#) for bringing this to our attention. Let's make comments on it below

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hl4hBb4_y4

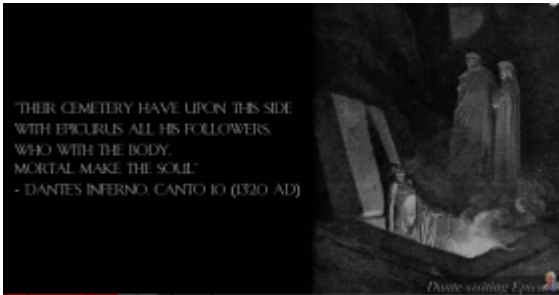
Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 10:08 AM

I will come back here and organize my main comments in a list in this post, but this is a start:

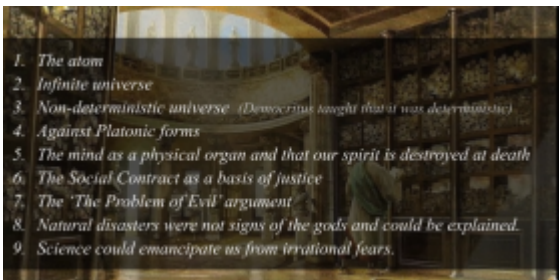
1. This chart at the three minute mark is indicative of several aspects (I am ignoring the audio commentary on it for a moment). I would largely agree with the line on virtues, but I would disagree with the second line on "pleasures." The very strong thrust I believe is most fairly to be taken from Stoic writings is that pleasure is not only not necessary for the good life, but it is an obstacle and a thing to be avoided. The line on the Gods is also not accurate, as Epicurus did not say to "ignore" the gods, but to pay close attention to a true understanding of the gods due to the benefits that brings and the burdens it avoids. As to the last line, the video itself is marked that this line is incorrect as to the Stoics - the stoics did look to the gods for guidance.

	EPICUREANISM	STOICISM
VIRTUES	Useful but not 'goods'	The highest good They are their own rewards
PLEASURES	The highest good What we should seek in life	'Preferred Indifferents' Not essential for a good life
THE GODS	Don't impact our lives. Ignore them	Do impact our lives. Honour and revere them
SUPERSTITION & DIVINATION	False and to be avoided	False and to be avoided

I am glad to see him include these two slides as I think it is very useful to keep in mind that there has always been violent opposition to Epicurus which does not come from differences as to the meaning of pleasure, but to the much deeper conflict with the Epicurean worldview:



A pretty decent list of important points that Epicurus wrote about (with the exception of referring to "social contract as a basis of justice" - probably "social contract is debatable term but the core concept is that agreement over harm is THE (not "a") basis of justice:



Oh NO - I strongly disagree with this next slide. If the stoics want to look for the "humanists" all they need to do is look in the mirror --



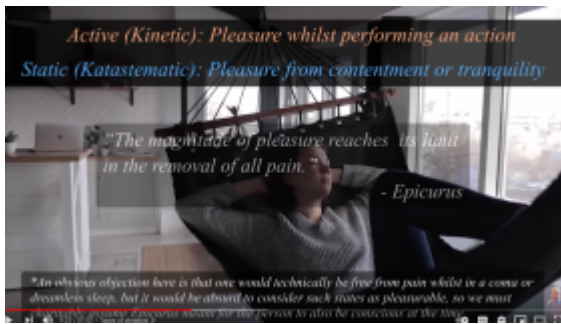
Here's the root flow in so much analysis -- as detailed most succinctly by [Nikolsky](#) and in much more detail by [Gosling & Taylor](#). This distinction is not Epicurean at all - to the extent Epicurus concerned himself with these categories, Epicurus embraced **both**, as Diogenes Laertius himself says, and he did not prioritize one over the other.



Even this next slide, when you think about it, illustrates how misleading it is to focus on these categories. So all pleasures that arise from performing an action are kinetic? Well the very act of living is "performing an action," so according to that definition **all** pleasures experienced while living are kinetic, and nothing is experienced in death, so there are no pleasures **except** kinetic pleasures. Epicurus did not get caught up in such useless word games as these, which endlessly appeal to the Stoic-minded (such word games as Seneca himself complained against).



The video "charitably" points out an obvious contradiction of this viewpoint, but Epicurus and Epicureans do not need the Stoics' charity - the people who really need charity are those who are so full of hubris that they think themselves superior in reasoning to Epicurus, and that he did not realize this "obvious objection" to his viewpoint. The answer, of course, is that what is described was not Epicurus' viewpoint at all. And yes, the key to understanding all this is to have a proper understanding of the statement in the center of the slide - PD3 - and that it does NOT mean that Epicurus held nothingness to be the highest and most pleasurable way of life.



Looks to me like he's getting totally mixed up here, as there is no reason to think that "aponia" (absence of pain) is limited to absence of **physical** pain. It appears he's just getting mixed up more and more as he chases the "kinetic/katastematic" distinction - so he can no doubt enhance is ultimate viewpoint that there are in fact deep similarities between Epicurus and the Stoics.

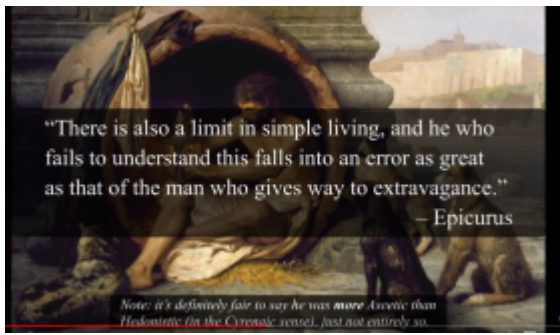


This is the full slide on categories of the desires. I note here that he's still chasing rabbits when he concludes that natural and unnecessary desires "offer kinetic pleasure but present a risk of katastematic pain." That arrangement is totally off course but a further illustration of the false premise and his expectation that katastematic pleasure is the highest type. The pain and pleasure calculation for this category is the same as all the rest - it is a mix of "physical pain" and "mental pain" (another difficult distinction in itself). And the red-letter "avoid entirely" in the third column is a further extension of the same error.

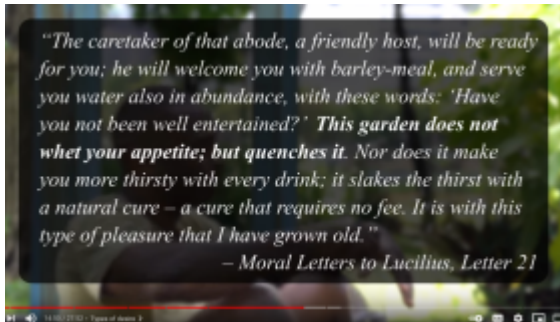
Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 10:54 AM

More credit where credit is due: The video producer is aware of the Vatican Saying on excessive frugality and actually includes it in the video:

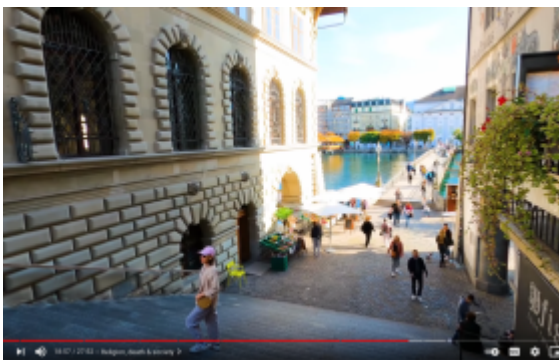
<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2138-review-of-the-what-is-epicureanism-and-is-it-compatible-with-stoicism-video-by-v/>



This quote from Seneca can be considered accurate without considering either Epicurus or Seneca themselves to have been, or to be talking about, asceticism. The point is to set one's appetite on pleasure, rather than on luxuries, because if you set your sights on luxuries you will likely end up with neither luxury nor pleasure, but if you set your sight on pleasure you can end up with pleasure regardless of the level of luxury you may happen to enjoy.



No good graphic for this one, but here (below) is where he makes the astounding statement "Many Epicureans, including Epicurus himself, were also celibate." Wow - absolutely no foundation for that!



I am so tired of this argument: "We can say that Epicureanism is technically hedonistic, but it is probably more useful to think of it as "tranquillistic." The first "hedonistic" is a manner of

reference that Epicurus himself did not use, for good reason, and the second ("tranquillistic") is an absolute distortion of the basic point.

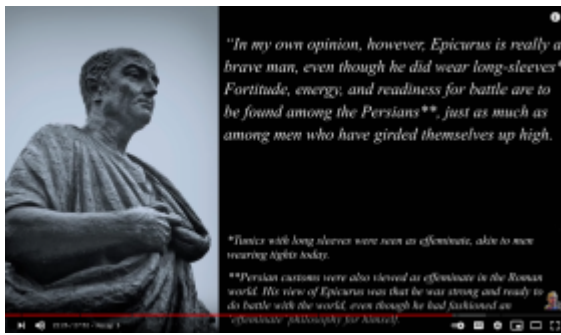


So based on all these flawed observations, this is what you are led to as the ascetic / stoic view on how to practice Epicurean philosophy:

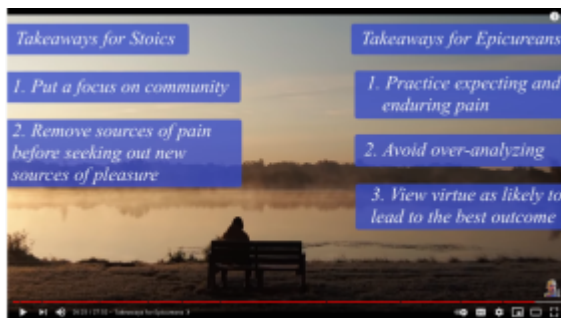


The slide below is interesting and worth inclusion here - presumably Seneca is in fact crediting Epicurus fortitude, energy, and readiness for battle, even though on the surface Epicurus appears "effeminate." "Fortitude, energy, and readiness for battle" are not attributes that modern stoics, or most moderns of any kind, give credit to Epicurus for being, though I think he was exactly that. So if one sees anywhere a suggestion that the Epicureans were not in fact in possession of "fortitude, energy, and readiness for battle" then the person making that suggestion is probably lost wandering in the field of katastematic rabbit-holes.

Reference Thomas Jefferson's letter to William Short for the same point: "*I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road. Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up...."*

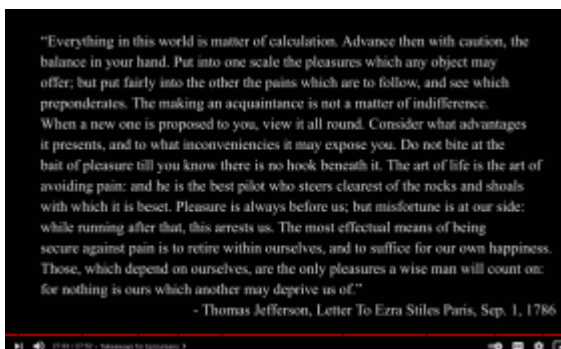


Lots to be said about this slide, but he actually thinks that it is the **Epicureans** who need avoid over-analyzing? Likewise there is no reason to view "virtue" as likely to lead to the best outcome if you don't have a proper understanding of what virtue is, nor is there any reason to practice expecting pain unless you understand that the goal is pursuit of pleasure.



Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 11:31 AM

It's interesting that he closes the video with this quote from Jefferson. As I write this I don't recall the details of this letter and I need to go back and research it -- it appears to be a condensation and shorter statement of what Jefferson expounded on at much greater length in his "Head and Heart" letter. The basic point is the same, with the added benefit of the "head and heart" letter making clear that there are competing perspectives of which in the end the "heart" must be held to win out.



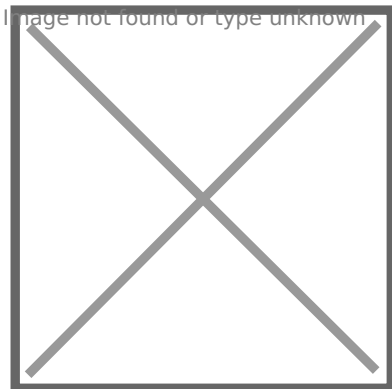
Post by “Godfrey” of August 7, 2021 at 12:39 PM

Having not watched the video, the "takeaways" slide looks to me like total gibberish! It looks like he's trying way too hard to morph the two philosophies into one, and in the distorting the essential ideas of (at least) Epicurus.

[Cassius](#) I'm curious to see what you find out about the closing quote by Jefferson. At first reading there are several things that I don't agree with, but going to the source may put them in a better context.

Post by “Don” of August 7, 2021 at 1:31 PM

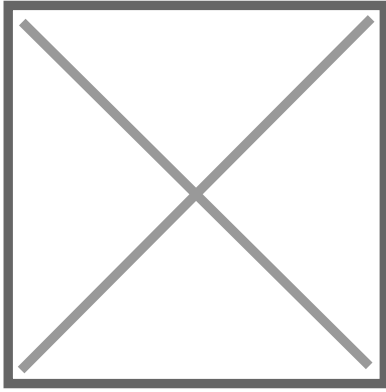
Well, the Jefferson quote is NOT from a letter to Ezra Stiles but is from the Heart/Head letter:



[Founders Online: From Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786](#)

founders.archives.gov

The Stiles letter from Sept 1, 1786 is here:



[Founders Online: From Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles, 1 September 1786](#)

founders.archives.gov

That doesn't bode well for the other citations.

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2021 at 2:21 PM

Thank you for those links Don! I thought it sounded like Head and Heart - I should have checked myself. Hard to understand how that citation got mixed up.

I also noted a strange phrase in one of the quotes attributed to Epicurus - I will go back and look for that. It sounded like a variation I have never seen but it wasn't too far from the standard so I did not comment.

Godfrey I guess as to Jefferson I have a combination of reactions -- I cut him some slack for his usefulness and his perceptiveness in seeing Epicurus to be the superior of all Greek philosophers, but there are definitely some phrasings as you point out that tend toward asceticism. For example in the letter to William Short he combines the "don't be a slacker" comment (which is good) with some comments in his outline about "In-dolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity." That plays right into the hands of those who are giving the "absence of pain" idea an absurd construction, and Jefferson should have realized that and been more articulate.

It's been a while since I read the "head and heart" letter but I do seem to remember that if you read the whole thing, and drill down to the conclusion, that Jefferson makes clear that pleasure / feeling trumps the dictates of "reason," so that is excellent. So that's the context if I recall correctly that that "retire within ourselves" comment may occur - but again I'd have to go back to the source. If indeed he meant "the art of life is the art of avoiding pain" as a stand-alone point that he emphasized as if it were clear on its own -- that definitely would be a huge problem for the way he is articulating the theory -- and certainly does not seem to be consistent with the

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2138-review-of-the-what-is-epicureanism-and-is-it-compatible-with-stoicism-video-by-v/>

way he lived his own life, so that would be very hypocritical.

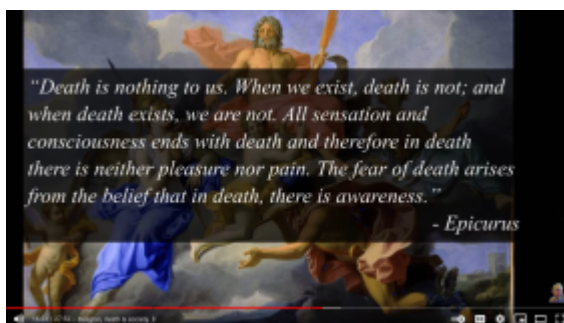
Also Godfrey if you were to watch the video and listen to the narration, the writer goes significantly further in the wrong direction than the slides indicate. Maybe I will find the time to flesh out more of the transcript, but there are indeed statements made in the narration that are worse than the slides, and deserve to be pulled out and provided a response.

My comments here are rambling -- sorry -- but the ultimate point on Jefferson, Godfrey, would be that if Don is correct and that paragraph is an excerpt from the very long and detailed "head and heart" letter, then the probable response to the section that is quoted is that that is a part of the back and forth "debate" which is used a device in the letter, and by the time you get to the end of the letter it seems clear that Jefferson is rejecting excessive rationalism in favor of the position that the values of the heart - which presumably means pleasure - are what is really important in life.

If someone goes back and reviews the Head and Heart letter and disagrees with my characterization of it, please let me know. It's basically a love letter to a married woman (if I recall) so it's not written as an absolutely clear philosophical piece, and if I recall the very last part of it trails off into the ambiguity that arises from the context in which it is written. But I remember the effect it had on me was to very strongly state a winning case for "the heart" against the case for "the head."

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 2:29 PM

Here's the slide that bothered me. It's probably pretty close to the thrust of Epicurus' doctrine, but it's not a direct quote from the letter to Menoecus or the [Principal Doctrines](#), is it?



The Bailey version of the letter to Menoecus is below; I don't recognize the part of the graphic starting with "...and therefore in death..."

Quote

Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2021 at 2:43 PM

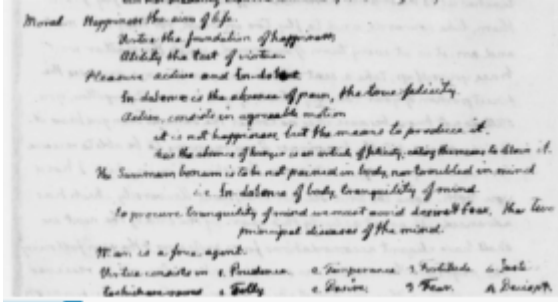
Further as to Jefferson, presuming this is his own handwriting this is a key part of his letter to William Short - his "outline" at the end of the letter. To me he seems to clearly get that "utility is the test of virtue" correctly, but it worries me that he isn't then also clear (utility toward what? - to which the answer should be 'pleasure' in the full context that Epicurus places it).

Then in combination with "happiness the aim of life" he is again muddying the identification of happiness with pleasure, but you can cut him slack there for following the passage in the letter to Menoecus. But while Epicurus then proceeds to articulate the clear central role of pleasure, Jefferson really doesn't.

By the time Jefferson gets to stating that the summum bonum is not to be pained in body or troubled in mind, he has pretty well botched the clear statement in "On Ends" (which he surely read) identifying the summum bonum as pleasure. He has also contradicted his conclusion in the head and heart letter, and much of the implication of what he has previously written in the same letter to William Short.

It's as if we're seeing in Jefferson's writing the same wrestling we continue to have today about how to state these issues clearly, and that Jefferson himself left the issues unclear. Of course he wasn't writing a philosophical treatise, so again I cut him a lot of slack, but I am afraid he was doing exactly what we tend to do try -- trying to make the issue more palatable to orthodox case by intentionally putting a gloss on the role of "pleasure" -- something I don't think Epicurus himself was guilty of doing, despite the controversial passages of the letter to Menoecus that

"can" be read in that direction.



Post by “Marco” of August 7, 2021 at 2:48 PM

‘If the stoics want to look for the "humanists" all they need to do is look in the mirror.’

Why, Cassius?

Post by “Don” of August 7, 2021 at 3:37 PM

[Quote from Marco](#)

‘If the stoics want to look for the "humanists" all they need to do is look in the mirror.’

Why, Cassius?

I was wondering that, too.

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2021 at 4:11 PM

This is a good question and -- without trying to open a can of political worms that would contradict one of our other core principles here at the forum - this is a point that we discussed back when we were developing the "Not NeoEpicurean But Epicurean" graphic and statement for the forum itself: [Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean](#)

I believe we discussed this in one or more Lucretius Today episodes, and I think we have some longer posts on this here and at facebook. I remember Elayne having some very pointed things on this position with which I agreed as well. It's also very possibly included in the lengthy thread we had about [the proposed statement of principles of the Society of Epicurus](#). I will compile some links and supplement this post but in the meantime I will summarize by saying that: most definitions of humanism appear to be consistent with this page by the [American Society of Humanists](#). Among the key aspects of that are statements like this:

Quote

Definition of Humanism

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good.

- *American Humanist Association*

Terms like "progressive," "ethical lives," "responsibility," "personal fulfillment," and "greater good" point to the unifying aspect of Humanism being an essentially idealist or even political movement which asserts a "best" way of life for all men, which would contradict Epicurus's view of the universe in which there is no natural basis for such an assertion. One of the most clear statements of this conclusion comes in the final ten [principal doctrines](#) that maintain that there is no such thing as absolute justice.

I think it's pretty clear from many popular articles that Stoicism is, like humanism, a philosophy that asserts that there is a "greater good" which can be stated in absolute moral terms (virtue) that is the same for all people. Now of course many humanists will disagree with many Stoics as to how the "greater good" should be defined, but that simply points out the commonality further -- their unifying aspect is that they agree that there is a "one size fits all" morality and virtue. I would argue that Epicurus would reply that there is no standard of judgment at all other than pleasure and pain.

Maybe an even shorter way to capsulize the issue would be to say that there is a strong case to be made that most versions of "humanism" are in essence a form of "idealism" not so far at all from "Platonism.". And that commonality helps draw the parallel between humanism and Stoicism.

This is how we stated it in the original Not-NeoEpicurean graphic:

8. But "humanism," "individualism," "collectivism," "capitalism" or "socialism" or "social programs," but friendship which "is formed and maintained by means of community of life among those who have reached the fulfills of pleasure."

1. Diogenes Laertius (Diogenes) "That friendship has practical needs as its motive one must indeed by its foundations (for we use the ground law for the sake of crop), but it is formed and maintained by means of community of life among those who have reached the fulfills of pleasure"

2. PD 17: The just man is next free from disturbance, while the unjust is full of the utmost disturbance.

3. PD 14: Pleasures from other men, secured in some extent by the power to equal and by material prosperity in its pursuit have come from a quiet life withdrawn from the world.

4. PD 27: Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life by far the most important is friendship.

PD 21: Mutual justice is a pledge of reciprocal benefit, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another.

5. PD 22: These articles which are incapable of making binding agreements with one another not to inflict harm suffer from an affliction of justice or injustice, and therefore for those people who either could not or would not establish some binding agreements not to inflict one another harm.

6. PD 30: There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the affliction or suffering of harm.

7. PD 24: Justice is not owed in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions.

8. PD 38: It is impossible for a man who severely violates the terms of the agreement not to harm or be harmed to feel confident that he will remain undisturbed, since if he has already escaped ten thousand times, he will be deathly in terror, sure that he will not be detected.

9. PD 36: In general, justice is the same for all, for it is something found mutually beneficial in men's dealings, but its application to particular places or other circumstances for the same thing is not necessarily just for everyone.

10. PD 23: Among the things held to be just for law, whatever is proved to be of advantage in men's dealings has the stamp of justice, whether or not it be the same for all, but if some makes a law and it does not prove to be mutually advantageous, then this is no longer just. And if what is mutually advantageous varies and only for a time corresponds to our concept of justice, nevertheless for that time it is just for those who do not trouble themselves about empty words, but look simply at the facts.

11. PD 35: Where without any change in circumstances the things which are just by law are seen not to correspond with the concept of justice in actual practice, such laws are not really just, but whatever the laws have seemed to be advantageous because of a change in circumstances, in their case the laws were for that time just when they were advantageous for the mutual dealings of the citizens, and subsequently ceased to be just when they were no longer advantageous.

12. PD 39: The man who feels himself bound to meet external demands makes into one family all the conditions he can, and those for ease not, for at any rate does not treat as aliens, and where he feels more this responsible, he avoids all dealings, and, on the other hand, is advantageous, including them from his life.

13. PD 40: Those who promise the power to defend themselves against demands by their neighbors, being thus in consequence of the sacred guarantee of security, live the most pleasant life with one another, and their enjoyment of the highest intimacy is such that if one of them dies, personally the others do not lament his death as though it called for pity.

14. As to "not all men" see also Diogenes Laertius "Epictetus' Definition And The Pleasures Of Contentment"

Additional references:

The first links one may be among the best:

Thread

[Epicurean Philosophy Vs. Humanism](#)

I have never considered Epicurean philosophy to be a form of "Humanist" philosophy any more than it is a form of Stoicism or Platonism. I haven't written extensively on this, in part because many Humanists are allies on certain important points, such as rejection of Supernatural Religion.

But I was reminded of this point today and I think it is time to start a thread on it. My position is that "Humanism" is just another "-ism" that has a goal at its center which is very different from...



Cassius

May 27, 2019 at 3:48 PM

Thread

[A Pattern I Observe In The Connection \(Or Lack Thereof\) Between Humanism And Epicurean Philosophy](#)

My goal in the discussion of "Humanism" has been to generate "light" rather than "heat," but since the goal of life is "light" (pleasure), and not the avoidance of "heat" (pain), I have more to add. The accompanying graphic is not a "proof" of anything. It is simply a summary of my observation, over many years, of a common thread that binds what I find to be the majority view of "Humanism" to what I find to be a popular but flawed view of Epicurus.

The text on the left is from an article that...

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2138-review-of-the-what-is-epicureanism-and-is-it-compatible-with-stoicism-video-by-v/>



Cassius

May 30, 2019 at 8:17 PM

Post

[RE: Why Does Stoicism Seem to Be More Popular Than Epicureanism, Especially In England?](#)

Yes that wikipedia article goes into what I would expect the issue to be: What does "positive" mean? Why use the word "positive" rather than 'pleasure'? Do they resolve "positive" as meaning things beyond pleasure? And yes according to this they head right back into the "virtue ethics" issues that seem to characterize humanism. And to these extent these categories are accepted as ends in themselves, this would definitely appear to be an Aristotelian, rather than Epicurean, approach:

...



Cassius

October 3, 2020 at 5:05 PM

Post

[Elayne Reviews Alan Reye's Editorial on Thomas Jefferson](#)

Elayne has undertaken an Augean Stables (not sure that is the correct analogy) of reviewing Alan Reyes' article on Thomas Jefferson. I don't personally share Elayne's feelings about Jefferson, but I think her thoughtful discussion of all the issues is well worth reading and does a great job of unwinding much confusion about Epicurus' views on virtue and justice.

I presume that at some point we will get a version of it here at Epicureanfriends.com, but I also see that it is unique exchange with...



Cassius

October 11, 2020 at 3:27 PM

Outside Article: [Nietzsche's Overcoming of Humanism](#)

Wikipedia: - Section on "[Criticisms of Humanism](#)" I suspect that wikipedia article is subject to a lot of changes, so here is how it appeared back in 2019: [RE: Epicurean Philosophy Vs. Humanism](#)

This post has a PDF attached to it which preserves some of the Facebook exchange - [RE: Epicurean Philosophy Vs. Humanism](#)

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2021 at 4:27 PM

If anyone wants to get into a longer discussion about humanism (and this evoked considerable debate before, and will again) let's do it over in this thread: [Epicurean Philosophy Vs. Humanism](#)

As you will see there, Hiram responded negatively, and dispute over this issue is probably fair to say the reason why this website and the Society of Epicurus ended up parting ways, leading to the "Not-NeoEpicurean" position statement and several of the other posting guidelines here against political debating.

[Note: Now that I have updated that last post with some links, let me put in a plug that "this is what an internet forum is all about." There's no way I could have so quickly found and put together our material about this issue so quickly without the organization provided by a forum software like the one we use here.]