

# Greenblatt and his Detractors

Post by “Joshua” of February 1, 2022 at 2:08 PM

## Quote

It's not my place to point out that the book conveniently disregards a key part of Epicureanism, *ataraxia*, that urges us to withdraw from the world and to "be indifferent to suffering and death in other people" — a disturbing apathy at odds with much of modernity, not to mention the civic ethics of the early modern period. "De rerum natura" actually proposes an apathetic, anesthetized calm that is as incompatible with empathy, compassion, affection, bodily pleasure, or joyful happiness as it is with pain. Hardly inspiring, and hardly an improvement on, well, anything.

Cassius' recent mention of Stephen Greenblatt has reminded me of one of my favorite hobby-horses---Greenblatt's detractors.

The above quote comes from an [article](#) in Vox, written by (of course) a Medievalist.

More:

## Quote

I am not a classicist or a philosopher, so I won't go into how actual philosophers point out that Epicureanism wasn't anywhere as widespread in the classical world as Greenblatt suggests [...]

Why it should be the province of philosophers to determine this 'fact' is beyond my power to say. But I am interested in the question. How should we go about determining how widespread Epicureanism was in Antiquity?

We know that geographically we can place ancient Epicureanism on three different continents. We can place them as far north and west as Autun in France, and as far south and east as Alexandria. We know from Cicero that the oldest Latin texts in his day were written by Epicureans (Amatinius?)

We know also from Cicero that Epicureanism was popular among the *hoi polloi*, and from Plotina herself that an Empress of Rome was sympathetic to them. Gravestones, finger rings, busts, papyrus scrolls...is there a way to collate all this information?

**Post by “Scott” of February 1, 2022 at 10:58 PM**

[Quote from Joshua](#)

is there a way to collate all this information?

I sure hope a way is found. This would be a great project for someone. Well beyond my pay grade but I'd love to see it and have an accurate (as possible) knowledge of how deep and far Epicureanism went in history!

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**Post by “Don” of February 1, 2022 at 11:11 PM**

I'm thinking maybe (at least) a Google map of relevant locations, color coded by century or other criteria?

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**Post by “Joshua” of February 2, 2022 at 12:58 AM**

A minor curiosity;

Galen

XVI. Τὰ πρὸς τὴν Ἐπικούρου φιλοσοφίαν ἀνήκοντα.}

ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤ' ἘΠΙΚΟΥΡΟΝ ΕΥΔΑΙΜΟΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΥ ΒΙΟΥ  
ΔΥΟ: ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤ' ἘΠΙΚΟΥΡΟΝ ἈΜΑΥΡΟΥΜΕΝΗΣ ἩΔΟΝΗΣ: ὍΤΙ ΤΑ  
ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΑ ΤΗΣ ἩΔΟΝΗΣ ἘΛΛΙΠΩΣ ἘΠΙΚΟΥΡῶ ΛΕΛΕΚΤΑΙ ἔν: ΠΕΡΙ  
ΤΗΣ ἩΔΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΙΡΕΣΕΩΣ: Εἰ ἡ ΦΥΣΙΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΧΡΗΣΙΜΟΣ ΕἰΣ ΤΗΝ  
ἨΘΙΚΗΝ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑΝ ἔν: περὶ τῶν ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΣΟΦΙΣΤΑΣ ἑννέα  
Μητροδώρου: ἘΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ ΠΡΟΣ ΚΕΛΣΟΝ ἘΠΙΚΟΥΡΕΙΟΝ: ἘΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ  
ΠΟΥΔΕΝΤΙΑΝΟΥ ἘΠΙΚΟΥΡΕΙΟΥ.

It appears that Galen wrote several treatise's on Epicurus (almost certainly lost).

Perhaps [Don](#) can help with these. I read it (badly) as;

XVI. *On the philosophy of Epicurus [anekonta?]*

*On Epicurus' Eudaimonia and the Happiness of Life*

*two: On Epicurus [?] Pleasure: [can't make anything of this...something about making and pleasure and imperfection]*

*On Choosing Pleasure: [?] The usefulness of Physiology in Moral Philosophy*

*On the (seven books? of the) Sophists*

*Metrodorus: Epistle to Celsus the Epicurean: Epistle to Pudentianus the Epicurean.*

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ἀμαυρόω: to make dim, faint

βίος, ὁ: life

ἔλλιπῶς: defectively

Ἐπικούρειος, -ον: Epicurean

Ἐπίκουρος, ὁ: Epicurus

ἐπιστολή, ἡ: a message, command

εὐδαίμων, -ον: happy

ἠθικός, -ή, -όν: ethical, moral

ἡδονή, ἡ: pleasure

ἡδονικός, -ή, -όν: for pleasure, hedonistic

Κέλσος, ὁ: Celsus

μακάριος, -α, -ον: blessed

Μητροδώρος, ὁ: Metrodorus

ποιητικός, -ή, -όν: productive

Πουδεντιανός, ὁ: Pudentianus

σοφιστής, -οῦ, ὁ: a sophist

φυσιολογία, ἡ: inquiry into natural causes

χρήσιμος, -η, -ον: useful

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Ἐπίκουρον: Epicurus (341-270 BCE), founder of his eponymous school of philosophy

ἀμαυρουμένης: pr. part., “diminished pleasure”

τὰ ποιητικά: “the efficient causes”

Ἐπικούρω: dat. of agent after λέλεκται, “by Epicurus”

λέλεκται: perf. pas. of λέγω, “have been described”

χρήσιμος: pred., “is useful”

τῶν ... ἐννέα: “on the seven (books)”

Μητροδώρου: Metrodorus of Lampsacus (331-287 BCE), a major proponent of Epicureanism

Κέλσον: Celsus the Epicurean (2nd. CE)

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**Post by “Joshua” of February 2, 2022 at 1:00 AM**

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Haven't finished this yet, it may give us nothing new. [Eikadistes](#) has already done quite a lot in this area.

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## Post by “Joshua” of February 2, 2022 at 1:08 AM

### Quote

Diogenes. . .waged from the mountain fastness of Oenoanda his own war against the superstitions of his age: the base popular conceptions of the gods, oracles, dreams, and the philosophers' belief in the transmigration of the soul.

The article is worth it for this sentence alone!

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## Post by “Don” of February 2, 2022 at 7:33 AM

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

Perhaps Don can help with these.

Yay! A translation exercise! Wheee! 😊 Nice work on the transliteration, [Joshua](#) .

I should be able to puzzle through this unless someone with more fluent knowledge of ancient Greek comes along. I'll make this a priority tonight. Let me see if I can add anything with yours as a jumping off point:

XVI. On the things belonging to the philosophy of Epicurus

On Epicurus' Eudaimonia and the Happiness of Life (Trivia: That 2nd to last word is makariou - the word used in the first PD1)

two: On the Weakening/Obscuring(?) Pleasure according to Epicurus: That the produced things(?) of Greek pleasure said by Epicurus

one (ἐν hen "one"; evidently referring to the number of books?)

On Choosing Pleasure: (Good job!! I'll dig in if there's something else going on with the grammar there, too)

ἐννεα = "nine"

That's all I can do right now (off to work), but I'll dig back in tonight!

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### **Post by “Don” of February 2, 2022 at 8:16 AM**

I neglected to look at the vocabulary you provided, [Joshua](#) . I was making it harder than it needed to be! 😁 I'll try and provide a more thorough translation tonight (unless Elli stops by here 😊 )

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### **Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2022 at 10:30 AM**

I see that occasionally [Elli](#) is dropping in so it would probably be worth "tagging" her when you have a need for translation support. But I know she's extremely busy so we'll have to take that into account!

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### **Post by “Titus” of February 2, 2022 at 7:11 PM**

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

How should we go about determining how widespread Epicureanism was in Antiquity?

The proper question is: How should we go about determining that there was any philosophy more widespread than Epicureanism?

Is there any inscription larger than that of Oinoanda? Or was there any Roman library found other than focusing on Epicurean philosophy? Historians hoped to find traces of early Christianity in Pompeii. What did they find nearby? "I will be faithful to Epicurus, according to whom it has been my choice to live." Inside of a magnificent building, inhabited by the rich and influential.

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### **Post by “Don” of February 2, 2022 at 11:00 PM**

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

Perhaps Don can help with these.

Let's try these. I'll admit, I'm intrigued... And I'm sure they're all lost to history 😭 :

Those things pertaining to the philosophy of Epicurus

On Eudaimonia and a Blessed Life According to Epicurus

two: On Diminished Pleasure According to Epicurus: That which produces pleasure defectively according to Epicurus

one: On the Pleasure of Choice:

If the Inquiry into Natural Causes (is) Useful in Regard to Moral Philosophy

one: On the Nine Books of Metrodorus's Against the Sophists:

Letter Against Celsius the Epicurean

Letter of Poudentianus the Epicurean

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### **Post by “Don” of February 2, 2022 at 11:33 PM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

one: On the Nine Books of Metrodorus's Against the Sophists

Note that Diogenes Laertius mentions "Against the Sophists, in nine books" too. That vocabulary list got εννέα wrong. It's 9 not 7. Seven is ἑπτὰ (hepta).

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### **Post by “Joshua” of February 3, 2022 at 10:54 AM**

Thank you, Don! I am of a kind with Shakespeare on this point; "small Latin and less Greek," or so Ben Jonson styles it.

Quote

On the Pleasure of Choice:

*That* is interesting.

I knew the word αἰρέσεις, "choice", because of its modern English derivative; *Heresy*. Your translation seems to my ear to invite the comparison, as it was precisely the pleasure of choice that would have been so anathema to later Christians.

Quote

If the Inquiry into Natural Causes (is) Useful in Regard to Moral Philosophy

This is interesting as well, and bears on our most recent and upcoming podcast episodes. We'll have a *lot* to talk about on this question on Sunday!

Thank you again for your efforts!

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**Post by “Don” of February 3, 2022 at 11:47 AM**

And I double-checked. ΑΙΡΕΣΕΩΣ is the "genitive singular form of [αἵρεσις](#)" so "of choice"

Yeah, the fact that it goes from meaning "choice" to "heresy" is so sad.