

Philodemus' "On Anger" - General - Texts and Resources

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2022 at 5:36 PM

I have long suspected that a number of people who come to Epicurus from other philosophies or religious backgrounds tend to presume that Epicurus was very passive and frowned on all forms of anger. This topic comes back to mind after our most recent A Few Days In Athens Discussion (on Chapter Eight) in regard to the exchange between Metrodorus and Epicurus on the subject near the end of the Chapter.

Frances Wright does not develop this issue very far, but I think it's important for us to bring out that Epicurus did not rule out all forms of anger from his philosophy. There's a hint of that already in several aspects of Diogenes Laertius's biography (such as in the passage that the wise man will experience his emotions more deeply than others) and probably in other places at all. But maybe the most extensive material will be found in the surviving portions of Philodemus "On Anger."

I feel sure that some of our other readers (particularly [Scott](#)) will find this material interesting too, especially passages that bear on anger as a motivating force, such as : " (natural anger) is a feeling that is more than enough to motivate a forceful and decisive response (41.2-8)." (from page 40 of the Armstrong / McOsker book).

It looks like the best collection of surviving texts is here: <https://www.amazon.com/Philodemus-Ang...d/dp/1628372699>



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This is not material I am familiar with, and I need at least a passing understanding of the main topics. I will post here as I go through it and of course I invite others interested in the topic to do the same.

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2022 at 5:49 PM

In terms of commentary, the Preface helpfully suggests that those wanting an immediate overview should refer to sections 4 and 5 of the Introduction. I see that section 3 discusses the prior position of Plato and Aristotle, so that looks good too.

Here is a good baseline for comparison with the stoics: The Stoics held that there is no such thing as any kind of rational or natural anger, and this will be different from the Epicurean position, who are apparently going to focus on "vengeance" as a bad thing, but who don't consider all types of anger as bad:

So by the five words of the Stoic definition, taken in their Stoic meanings, Aristotle's view is systematically negated. There is no such thing as rational or natural anger for the Stoics. That, in fact, is the only aspect of their position that is explicitly mentioned in the surviving parts of *On Anger*. Philodemus asks his Epicurean opponent Nicasicrates, who wanted to avoid even natural anger to the extent possible, if he is not merely abandoning their school's position to "those who take away anger entirely from the sage" (39.23-25). These can only be the Stoics.⁹⁵

And this is what I expected to find - the Epicurean will take action against the offender (of course this is commentary, so we need the backup to confirm):

ON ANGER 38.1-2
The Epicureans had more to say about harm. Epicurus said that "harms from other people come about because of hatred, envy, or scorn, and the sage gets round these by reasoning and reflection."⁹⁹ The sage, however virtuous and friendly, may be the object of hatred, envy, or scorn from those who do not respond rationally to her good behavior, and thus she may be in danger of harm. By *logismos*, she can learn to avoid the harm that may result from those people. Nonetheless, if others intentionally harm her, she

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Philodemus, *On Anger*

can and will inflict punishment on them to deter them and others from acting similarly in the future, whenever this is a practical option.

I don't know that I agree with the following in its opinion that "punishment for harm done is itself not harm..." -- it may be simply that the harm done to the offender is justified -- I would expect this to be an issue of definitions of "harm"

The sage is entitled to do this because of the Epicurean view of natural justice (τὸ τῆς φύσεως δίκαιον), which is a sort of social contract, i.e. a "guarantee of mutual advantage, with a view to neither harming one another nor being harmed" (σύμβολον τοῦ συμφέροντος εἰς τὸ μὴ βλάπτειν ἀλλήλους μὴδὲ βλάπτεσθαι, *KD* 31).¹⁰⁰ As *KD* 31-37 argue, this agreement, after primitive societies arrive at it by reasoning from experience, becomes the foundation of justice and a normative guide to the development of laws. All just laws reflect this natural justice, developing it in further detail and clarifying its terms, and they can be adjusted as societies change and develop. There can be unjust laws, which hinder human nonaggression, and laws that are neutral from the point of view of justice, since they neither promote nor hinder it. Accordingly, members of human society, which is founded on a code based in this normative idea of justice, can expect that their good behavior will be matched by good behavior on the part of others. Punishment for harm done is itself not harm, but an attempt to restore justice and set an example for others. In the context of the *On Anger*, anger, in its full sense, requires an intentionally inflicted harm, that is, a damaging violation of just laws, which are those based in the foundational agreement not to harm or be harmed.

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2022 at 5:52 PM

Verification through a cite to the text - that the wise man will be "insane" not to "grit his teeth and come back at him (the offender) in one way or another."

really is, not allowing any false beliefs into the *symmetrisis* of the harm done, and (thus) into the chastisements of those who harm us" (fr. 37.32-39; cf. Epicurus, *Mor.* 129).¹⁰² Thus, the sage is in a position to know better than anyone whether the punishment is possible and appropriate. If it is, then she will inflict it to deter further offenses: if the sage is harmed and "when punished, he (the adversary) will be checked and will rein in the

Introduction

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others, he (the sage) would be insane not to grit his teeth and come back at him in one way or another" (fr. 41.2-8).¹⁰³ If the sage cannot carry out the punishment for whatever reason, she simply avoids the wrongdoer in the future.

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2022 at 5:56 PM

sure in taking vengeance. ~~~

Sages and good people have an alternative, at any rate, if it appears that punishment for the harm intentionally done them is not in their power to inflict, and their natural anger cannot lead to action. They can, and in any case will, simply feel "alienation" from and "hatred" for the offender, and to any degree of intensity they like (41.39-42.4). At any rate, as we will discuss in more detail later, it is made very clear that natural anger is brief and does not cause great mental disturbance (*ταραχή*) to them any more than great physical pains do (42.4-12). But it is a feeling that is more than enough to motivate a forceful and decisive response (41.2-8).

Post by "Cassius" of April 1, 2022 at 6:00 PM

Couple more quotes from the Philodemus text:

From page 41 of the Armstrong book:

37.24-39: "the emotion itself, taken in isolation, is an evil, since it is painful or is analogous to something painful, but if taken in conjunction with one's disposition, we think that it is something that may even be called a good. For it (anger) results from seeing what the nature of states of affairs is and from not having any false beliefs in our comparative calculations of our

losses and in our punishments of those who harm us.”

From page 42:

Philodemus explicitly says in *On Anger* that anger is an evil that is “inescapable, and therefore called natural” (ἀνέκφευκτον καὶ διὰ τοῦτο φυσικὸν λεγόμενον, 39.29–31; cf. 40.18–26). It is something “most necessary and most unpleasant” (ἀναγκαιότατον, ἀηδέστατον δέ, 44.19–21), and it cannot be entirely rejected by anyone. Natural anger can suit the third and fourth categories also: it is advantageous, since it prods the Epicurean to self-defense, 111 and it is so-called because the name has the characteristic of “first utterances” or “primal appellations”: “direct, one-to-one correspondence with their objects.” 112

From page 43 (this is commentary but apparently a high-level summary:

The main thrust of *On Anger*’s argument is that anger for its own sake is never compulsory merely because one supposes oneself intentionally harmed. In a person of reflective disposition, suppositions of intentional harm are always contextualized and submitted to *symmetrēsis*, which requires knowledge and experience of the world and the possible consequences of anger. Only these can tell us whether our anger is natural and whether we can punish the offender (see 37.32–39). If the answer is no, we can simply profess ourselves “alienated,” hate and avoid the person who wronged us, and drop the relationship (see 42.1–4); hatred and avoidance are available to the sage who has suffered harm but cannot punish the wrongdoer and guarantee her continuing security. If the answer is yes to both questions, then the anger becomes necessary and inescapable in a completely different way: it would be absurd not to punish the wrongdoer.

As we gain wisdom, anger does not disappear from our lives any more than grief or love, but it is more and more framed in protective layers of cognition and reflection; we are more likely to feel natural anger. Of course, there are various ways in which this ideal progression can go astray: most people do not have the calm and awareness of circumstances and causes that the Epicurean sage does, and even sages can make mistakes. That said, a reflective and aware person, and the sage most of all, can reluctantly “accept” (ἀναδέχεσθαι) anger, however strong one’s resistance to it, and can certainly retaliate under the right conditions with confidence.

Post by “Don” of April 1, 2022 at 10:56 PM

Dr. Voula Tsouna's *The Ethics of Philodemus* includes a look at anger.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 2, 2022 at 12:40 AM

Reading this, I think of the Oscars last week, which provided an interesting and practical case study on anger in a modern context.

Post by “Cassius” of April 2, 2022 at 5:53 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I think of the Oscars last week,

Just to document the thread that's the "[assault incident](#)". I didn't fully read into the details but my first impression was that it would be very hard to analyze the action taken there to have been worthy of an Epicurean sage :-). The motivation for the action seems to have been very slight and the ramifications far worse than any benefits from the action.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 2, 2022 at 11:48 AM

Yes, it's a case study in how not to respond to anger and of the ramifications of such action, both personally and in a wider context.

Post by “Cassius” of April 2, 2022 at 1:27 PM

I've now read to the end of the preserved texts described in the book, and I am reminded of my usual caveat to the Philodemus material: In many cases the text is so damaged that it's little short of speculation to try to derive any meaning from it. Even longer sections that appear to be well preserved could in many cases be sections where opinions he is writing *against* are being stated.

But all in all I am impressed with what I read in the introductory and summary material. The authors are frank in their disagreement with what other authorities (such as Asmis) have written and construed from the material. It appears to me that I am personally in the unusual position of finding commentators (other than Dewitt) with whom I agree - Armstrong and McOsker seem to agree with my take that Epicurus was in many ways an "activist" and was much less a passivist as some (including Asmis) make him out to be. The introduction lays out these disagreements pretty clearly.

The conclusion of all this seems to be about as is stated on page 301 of the text (Column 46 of the roll):

So, then, having laid down these things on our own behalf and concerning us, with arguments that prove it, in support of there being a natural kind of anger, we have [indeed] replied *that the sage will become angry*.

(my emphasis on the last six words)

The main distinction seems to be that the wise person will in fact become angry when the situation calls for it, and will in fact act on his anger, but only after evaluating the situation coolly so as to determine if he does have the capacity to act in a way that will deter future conduct of the same sort. The other significant premise seems to be that the wise man will not let his anger turn into "rage," with the point apparently being that the wise man will feel his emotions deeply, but will not let those deeply-felt emotions interfere with his clear thinking.

All this may appear simple and straightforward enough, but it flies in the face of the Stoic or the "emotion-suppression" model that a lot of people seem to attribute to Epicurus. And it also flies in the face of the view that the Epicurean will above all avoid disturbance. But that should surprise no one, since it is elementary Epicurean doctrine from Menoecus that:

Quote

Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

Post by "Pacatus" of April 2, 2022 at 2:52 PM

A rather sage therapist friend of mine (who both helped me through a really rough patch, and helped me to look into myself), said that anger and fear arise from the survival/defense response - fight, flight or freeze. And thus, in appropriate context, can be very helpful emotions. This seems to me to accord with your analysis here - of "natural anger".

But, partly through layers of socialization, many of our emotions can become maladapted: anxiety over future events that may never come to pass, anger at perceived slights, and the like.

The trick is to recognize the difference. And to practice "calm and awareness" before we get caught up, so that it is available to us when needed. (Still working on that ...) I have sometimes used a simple gesture: raising my hand in a ward-off position - just like a batter stepping out of the box - and sometimes actually say to myself "step out." If in the company of others, I might make the gesture very slight as to be unnoticeable (but I still feel it). The idea is just to create some mental/emotional space. (But, as I say, still working on it all ...)

Post by “Matteng” of November 24, 2024 at 5:46 PM

Hi I found an article which supports the Epicurean view of anger as taught by Philodemus and speaks out against the view of the Stoics (although unfortunately only Aristotle's philosophy is mentioned in passing as more realistic, I think Epicurean themes are unfortunately still too unknown in some circles):

[Stoics in Need of Anger Management | Issue 163 | Philosophy Now](#)

Post by “Cassius” of November 24, 2024 at 6:45 PM

Too bad it doesn't mention Epicurus, but the sections "Anger as Morally Virtuous" and "Creative Anger" seem very good to me.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 26, 2024 at 9:38 AM

Here are some thoughts on anger:

---Get clear about who or what you are angry at:

A person? What exactly did they do? -- describe as objectively as possible as if a video camera had recorded it.

A situation or event that occurred? -- this could involve multiple people, yourself, plus unforeseen circumstances, describe as objectively as possible as if a video camera had recorded it.

An ideology or group of people? -- perhaps something political or religious that feels morally wrong and beyond control -- get clear about what you believe and value, as well as what is and isn't in your control.

Yourself? -- this could be a particular standard of competence that you thought you "should" be able to maintain -- Shift to seeing that we are all human and make mistakes, and then see the situation as a learning experience by taking note of what you would do differently next time.

---Get clear about your feelings of anger what (level of intensity and where in your body you feel it) and if you are also feeling frustrated or disappointed.

Anger is motivating but if you are too angry (out of control) or not clear about what the problem is then it isn't very useful.

---Understand the root causes of anger:

1) you think that something should or ought to be different than it is -- because it is unfair, immoral, or "wrong"/"incorrect" -- and you are judging a situation according to your internal principals (which may be different than the other party involved).

2) the situation seems very unpleasant or unbearable.

3) there is a problem that seems difficult to change and you feel a lack of power to implement changes or it feels like it is out of your realm of control.

---Shift the anger into solving a problem:

Get clear about what the problem is and what you would want instead. Get specific about what you would want, but also come up with several options for solving the problem.

Get clear about what the other side feels and wants -- sometimes they want the same end result but just have a different strategy for getting there. Find a solution that both sides can feel good about (there are a lot of modern resources on conflict mediation).

If you were harmed, decide if you want to ask for acknowledgement or restorative justice. (Remember that vengeful punishment will most likely result in perpetuating a cycle of violence,

which will bring more harm than good. And trying to "teach" someone will only result in that person digging in their heels furth to defend their position).

Post by "Don" of November 26, 2024 at 12:11 PM

I just came across a passage in [The Deipnosophists \(13.92\)](#))

But Theotimus, who wrote the books against Epicurus, was accused by Zeno the Epicurean, and put to death; as is related by Demetrius the Magnesian, in his treatise in *People and Things which go by the same Name*.

Διότιμος δ' ὁ γράψας τὰ κατ' Ἐπικούρου βιβλία ὑπὸ Ζήνωνος τοῦ Ἐπικουρείου ἐξαιτηθεὶς ἀνηρέθη, ὡς φησι Δημήτριος ὁ Μάγνης ἐν τοῖς Ὀμωνύμοις. '''

I'm assuming Zeno is [Zeno of Sidon](#), teacher of Philodemus and scholarch of The Garden.

ἐξαιτηθεὶς - demand the surrender of a person, esp. a criminal

ἀνηρέθη - ttake up, ἀνελόντες ἀπὸ χθονός having raised the victim from the ground, so as to cut its throat; make away with, destroy, of men, kill

It would appear to me that, if this story is actually true, Zeno was angry enough to accuse Theotimus of something as written in the books against Epicurus, to have him brought up on charges and eventually executed! There's a story I'd like to hear!

Post by "Martin" of November 27, 2024 at 4:13 AM

This may be a related snippet of the "story" (but tentatively, the timing does not match):

Quote

a certain Theotimus, convinced that he had composed infamous letters, addressed to some of the women who frequented his gardens, was condemned to lose his life.

from Charles' thread on the article on Epicureanism in Diderot's encyclopedia:

Post

[\(Diderot\) Denis - "Epicureism, or Epicurism", Vol. 5 of The Encyclopedia](#)

EPICUREISM or EPICURISM, noun. m. (*History of Philosophy* .) The Elean sect gave birth to the *Epicurean sect* . Never has philosophy been less heard and more slandered than that of *Epicurus* . This philosopher was accused of atheism, although he admitted the existence of the gods, that he frequented the temples, and that he had no reluctance to prostrate himself to the feet of the altars. He was regarded as the apologist for debauchery, he whose life was a continual practice of all the virtues,...



Charles

April 13, 2020 at 8:55 PM

I recall another snippet indicating that someone (probably Theotimus) was sentenced to death because he was found guilty of slander. However, the search did not reveal that other snippet on epicureanfriends.com.

Post by "Cassius" of November 27, 2024 at 7:36 AM

That would be interesting to pursue -- I wonder what crimes beyond the likely murder etc carried the death penalty in ancient Greece.

Post by "Don" of November 27, 2024 at 8:20 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That would be interesting to pursue -- I wonder what crimes beyond the likely murder etc carried the death penalty in ancient Greece.

Well, we know impiety was: Socrates.

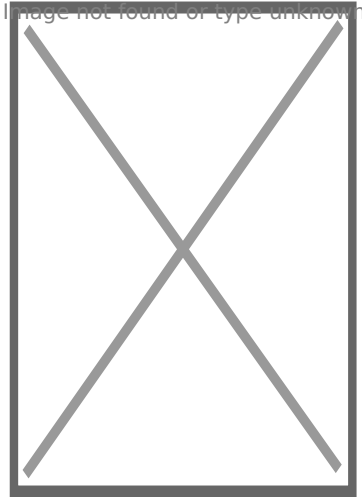
Post by "Cassius" of June 30, 2025 at 6:15 AM

This topic is going to be relevant to our discussions of Part 3 of Cicero's "Tusculan Disputations."

At the moment the primary source is probably the 2020 SBL Press version translated by David Armstrong and Michael McOsker.

[Philodemus, On Anger \(Writings from the Greco-roman World\) \(Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 45\)](#)

It appears that the edition linked below may be the same as that listed on Amazon:

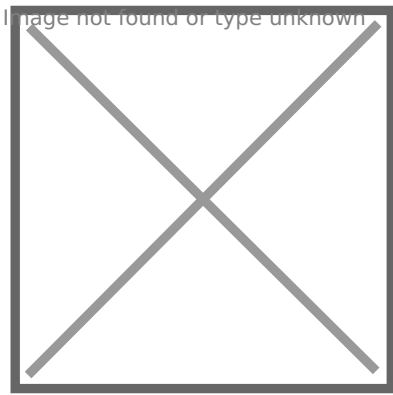


[An Epicurean Theory of Anger: A New Edition of Philodemus' De Ira \(PHerc. 182\)](#)
www.rivisteweb.it

If anyone knows of any material on "On Anger" that is publicly accessible on the internet, please post here in this thread.

Post by "Don" of June 30, 2025 at 8:54 AM

[Reasonings About Philodemus' On Anger | Society of Friends of Epicurus](#)



[Philodemus on the Therapy of Vice](#)

Philodemus on the Therapy of Vice

www.academia.edu

[Philodemus and Seneca on anger - ORA - Oxford University Research Archive](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 8, 2025 at 7:33 AM

A few of last night's Zoom slides were on Philodemus' *On Anger*:

Tsoukala's over-view says that various sections of *On Anger* contain:

- a response to Timasagoras, a professional rival of Philodemus
- a refutation of certain Peripatetics whom encouraged one to lose one's temper
- whether anger is a good thing or a bad thing
- Philodemus' distinction between natural anger and empty anger
- a defense against Nicasistrates
- Philodemus' answer to the question whether the sage ever feels great anger and, if so, in what sense
- whether the sage experiences no less anger than the common man

Notes from what Koula Tsoukala says about Philodemus' *On Anger* (from her book *The Ethics of Philodemus*):

The papyrus originally contained about 320 columns, but roughly the first half of the text has disappeared; the second half consists of fifty well-preserved columns, a number of fragments some of which are quite substantial, and roughly 1700 stichoi which are almost illegible.

On Anger reflects a widespread ancient preoccupation with the nature, use, and control of anger, from Homer onwards.

It is a major contribution to the relevant Epicurean literature, and occupies an important place in the ongoing debate about the emotions.

Much of the extant remains of the work is taken up with a diatribe, or sermon, against anger which 'sets/reflects/develops' closely aspects, the virtuous rationality of the emotion and its terrible consequences.

The remainder is a dialectical treatment of the positions of various opponents both outside and inside the Epicurean school and, at the same time, a defense of Philodemus' own view, which appears to have been held also by Zeno of Sidon and his associates. It is not always easy to identify either what the opponents were or what positions they held.

Stylistic features, such as elaborate and/oratorical references and indications of irony, indicate that *On Anger* was written quickly and quite carelessly, and was intended for an inner circle rather than the wider public. Philodemus gives indirect advice, as to how to deal with one's own anger, and perhaps the lost part of the work may have proposed specific strategies for the therapy of anger.

Philodemus, On Anger - Translation by David Armstrong and Michael McCosker

On the Painfulness of Natural and Empty Anger

... [18] [some] supposing [the emotion] itself to be a blessed thing, others an evil because they experience its sting. [20] But because a kind of false reasoning occurs because of the word, [23] we do not make a simple judgment but show that the emotion itself, taken in isolation, is an evil, since it is painful or is analogous to something painful, but if taken in conjunction with one's disposition, we think that it is something that may even be called a good. [32] For it [anger] results from seeing what the nature of states of affairs is and from not having any false beliefs in our comparative calculations of our losses and in our punishments of those who harm us. [35] [36] And so, in the same way as we were calling [empty] anger an evil because it results from an utterly base disposition and entails countless troubles, one must say that natural one is not an evil, but, insofar as it is something bring[ing], [37] it happens in relation to very fine things, and in the way in which we apply... [seven lines missing or untranslatable]... [41] (as, when it comes?) from a good [disposition], it is not an evil but even a good, thus we will say it is an evil not to accept natural anger—[22] For he who "is not enraged when men speak ill of him" and maltreat him "is giving the greatest proof of business," [36a] Menander says, and sometimes of a predisposition [to excitement] or of insensitivity regarding other matters. [29] that is why he obviously willy nilly out of his mind suddenly about utter trifles that appear in front of him. [18] but it is a good thing to submit to the natural kind of anger. [34] Now in Micaele's case it is said that "the natural kind of anger is painful not only in its own nature, but also it darkens one's reasonings, to the extent that is in its power," and "impairs the perfect tolerability and untroubled character of one's communal life with friends" and brings with it many of the disadvantages. ?

Notes in first two slides were taken from the book: *The Ethics of Philodemus*, chapter 9 "Anger and the Desire for Revenge"