

Episode One Hundred Thirty-Four - The Letter to Menoeceus 01- Context and Opening of the Letter

Post by "Cassius" of August 2, 2022 at 8:50 AM

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Thirty-Four of Lucretius Today.

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

I am your host Cassius, and together with our panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Today we begin our discussion of [Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus](#). Now let's join Martin reading today's text:

Bailey:

[122] Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away. Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come. We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it.

Hicks:

[122] Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search thereof when he is grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come, or that it is past and gone, is like

saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is now no more. Therefore, both old and young ought to seek wisdom, the former in order that, as age comes over him, he may be young in good things because of the grace of what has been, and the latter in order that, while he is young, he may at the same time be old, because he has no fear of the things which are to come. So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed toward attaining it.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/50847157>

Post by “Cassius” of August 2, 2022 at 8:55 AM

Couple of notes here as we begin the letter to Menoecus:

(1) Since the material here is so dense and so important, we probably ought to take it fairly slowly, and try to divide it up by topic, so the text this week is a little shorter than normal. This week contains the introduction and the call to pursue happiness, and what is essentially [PD01](#) as to the reason we believe that there are no supernatural gods controlling the universe.

(2) I will try to post these further in advance than in the past. I want to see [Don's work on the translation](#) entered here into the thread for each week, but I am not sure yet whether it is best (and he has the time) for Don to paste it in the thread and add any additional comment he has, or whether I will paste it here. If Don doesn't paste it here before long then I will do so. 😊

(3) I especially want us as we discuss these to keep in mind what we've previously read and discussed in Lucretius and in the letters to Herodotus and Pythocles as discussed in our prior podcast episodes. It seems to me too many people go straight to this letter and think that it contains all they need to know about Epicurean ethics, so both in the podcast and in the discussion I hope we can spend a lot of time relating what we are reading here to what we know from other sources.

Post by “Don” of August 2, 2022 at 9:36 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoecus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

You've bitten off a LOT in those first two sections!! I'd suggest aiming for everything up to "First, believe..." You have plenty to talk about up to there 😊 Once the gods walk on stage, you're in deep!

I'll see what I can do to paste, but there's always just posting that link to the PDF.

Post by "Cassius" of August 2, 2022 at 9:52 AM

OK good point. Let's just spend a session entirely on the issue that the goal is happiness, discuss the relationship of happiness to pleasure, etc. We have plenty of time! 😊 So we will go only with 122.

Post by "Cassius" of August 2, 2022 at 9:56 AM

Here's a test of just pasting the section, and I am not sure this works. It would really be desirable to have a link to which someone could click and see the particular page for each section. Don do you have this uploaded to Archive.org where we might be able to do that?

[Don](#) : Yes. It's now available here:

[Letter To Menoikeus: A New Translation With Commentary : Don Boozar : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

A new translation of the Letter to Menoikeus (Menoecus) by Epicurus with commentary.
archive.org

Going forward, I think we're just going to post links to the pages. But this over we'll cut and paste.

(Note: This is [Don](#) editing [Cassius](#) 's original post using by document to cut and paste like he initially asked me to do...)

122a: Μήτε νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν, μήτε γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

This sentence begins with μήτε... μήτε... meaning "Neither... nor..." so we are being set up for two things, both of which are to be negated. These two are:

1. νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν
2. γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

Epicurus echoes each line, ending them both with forms of φιλοσοφῆω (philosopheō), the word meaning literally "to love wisdom" or what we know as "philosophy." Most modern translations simply use "it" in the second phrase, losing the immediacy and importance of that word. The word also implies not only "loving" but "living" what you love, talking the talk and walking the walk, practicing what you preach, and so on. Epicurus's decision to use the same word should inform your translation decision. If it was good enough for Epicurus to repeat the word, maybe it would be a good idea to continue that in translation.

Let's examine our two negated phrases closer:

νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν

- νέος (τις ὦν) "(One who is) young (neos)"
 - English: prefix neo- as in Neolithic, neologism, neonatal etc.
- μελλέτω: 3rd person singular imperative active present of μέλλω
 - to think of doing, intend to do, to mean to
 - to be about to do
 - (by fate), to be destined to do, to be fated to do
 - (by the will of other men, rare)
 - (to denote a foregone conclusion)
 - (to mark a strong possibility) to be likely to do
 - (to mark mere intention, to be always going to do without ever doing) to delay, put off, hesitate
 - "(he) must intend to..."

I'll use "he" here for the 3rd person singular since the letter is specifically addressed to Menoikeus and the word νέος is masculine; however, I would urge readers to consider Epicurus's practice of welcoming all people into the Garden. He could just as readily, I believe, have used a phrase to include both young men and women with a 3rd person plural verb. But that could have been awkward and clumsy grammatically if he tried to maintain a personal letter to Menoikeus. So, readers are encouraged to remember Epicurus's unprecedented inclusivity in the Garden, to look for universally applicable themes and advice in the Letter but also to remember this is also an intimate letter to one individual that has been preserved for posterity. It was obviously preserved and passed down for its value as an epitome or summary of Epicurus's ethical teaching for the wider Epicurean community, just as the letters of the later Christian apostles to specific people (Timothy) and communities (Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, etc.) were preserved as general teachings for everyone. However, being Epicurus's letter is addressed to one person, the letter shows Epicurus's concern for each individual looking to lead a more pleasureable life. The letter is addressed to one and all at the same time.

μέλλω shows up again in 122f and 125b: διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων· (3rd person plural present active imperative of μέλλω). We'll dissect this in detail later, but we should keep in mind this sense of intention or "about to do (something)" when we reach that section, although this word comes with a wide variety of shades of meaning.

Therefore:

μήτε νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν

"Neither must one who is young delay (or be about to engage in) the study and love of wisdom..."

Now, our second phrase to be negated:

γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

- γέρων (gerōn) "one who is old"
 - English: gerontology
- ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω "begin to grow weary/tired of"

ὑπάρχων has a wide variety of meanings, but here connotes beginning, coming into being, arising, springing up.

Therefore:

μήτε γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

"Nor should one who is old grow tired of studying and loving wisdom."

122b: οὔτε γὰρ ἄωρος οὐδεὶς ἐστὶν οὔτε πάρωρος πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν ὑγιαίνειν.

This sentence begins with οὔτε... οὔτε... which, similar to μήτε...μήτε..., conveys negation: "and not... and neither..." Again, we're saying "not this and not that." So, Epicurus is mirroring μήτε ... μήτε... from the first sentence thus reinforcing them both. We'll notice this parallel/mirror style in his writing throughout the Letter.

γὰρ. A conjunction meaning variously "for, since, because, etc." According to Liddell, Scott, and Jones' *Ancient Greek Lexicon* (LSJ), γὰρ introduces the reason or cause of what precedes it. So this sentence will provide the reason for why one is never too young or too old to love and practice wisdom.

γὰρ is required to come after the first word in the sentence in Greek but needs to be translated into English as the first word. We'll be encountering a *lot* of these kinds of short words and pairs of words in our exploration. They are very common in Ancient Greek. Technically, these kinds of words are called particles, enclitics, proclitics, etc., but I'll try to keep the technicalities to a minimum unless it's going to impact significantly on the meaning. They add much of the

complexity and nuance to the language. Small but mighty.

ἄωρος and πάρωρος "untimely, unseasonable" from α- a- "not" + ὥρα (h)ōra (per LSJ) "any period, fixed by natural laws and revolutions, whether of the year, month, or day" or "the fitting time or season for a thing" So, literally "not the fitting time" or "not the season." πάρωρος (parōros) may convey παρα + ὥρα (para + (h)ōra) "out of season, untimely."

οὐδεὶς (oudeis) "no one, nobody, none, nothing"

πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν ὑγιαῖνον

"for the health/soundness (ὑγιαῖνον (hygiainon)) of the the mind/soul/'animating life principle' (ψυχὴν (psykhē))"

- psykhēn: English psychology, psyche
- hygiainon: English hygiene

If we're discussing the health of the *psykhē*, what is the *psykhē*? The *psykhē* is often spoken of in relation to the physical body: e.g., "the health of the body (τὴν τοῦ σώματος ὑγίαιαν) and the *serenity* of the *psykhē* (τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραξίαν (*psykhēs ataraxian*) from later in this letter). Epicurus also uses *psykhē* to refer to that which senses so there's an aspect of the mind, albeit spread throughout one's body: καὶ μὴν ὅτι ἔχει ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς αἰσθήσεως τὴν πλείστην αἰτίαν δεῖ κατέχειν: "Further, we must keep in mind that *psykhē* has the greatest share in causing *sensation*" (from the *Letter to Herodotus*). But remember that the soul/mind or *psykhē* is composed of atoms and void just like the body but of a very subtle kind to be able to move swiftly so we can sense our sensations. So, just because translators often use the word "soul" for *psykhē*, do not bring along the semantic baggage that that word has in English. The Epicurean *psykhē* is definitely not an immortal thing that exists independent of the body that lives on after death or transmigrates to another life as expounded by almost every religion and argued vehemently against by Epicurus.

122c: ὁ δὲ λέγων ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ἢ παρεληλυθέναι τὴν ὥραν ὁμοίός ἐστι τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν ἢ μήπω παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν ἢ μηκέτ' εἶναι.

We're going to break this down since the combination of ἢ... ἢ... means 'either... or...' or 'whether... or...' so there are two pairs of ἢ's in that first section. Again, an example of Epicurus's mirror writing style.

ὁ δὲ λέγων "(and) one who says..."

i. ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ὥραν "either the season (ὥραν) to love and practice wisdom is not yet arrived"

ii. ἢ παρεληλυθέναι τὴν ὥραν, "or the season (ὥραν) has passed by"

ὁμοίός ἐστιν τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν...

"is like someone who is saying [i and ii below] for eudaimonia..."

i. ἢ μὴ παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν "either the proper time has not arrived"

ii. ἢ μηκέτι εἶναι. "or is no more." (i.e., has passed)

Note how Epicurus again - as he did in the previous section - uses ὥραν "the proper time or season for something" to drive the point home. There is no "proper" time or season to love and practice wisdom. The time is always *now*!

122d-f. ὥστε φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι, τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων, τῷ δ' ὅπως νέος ἅμα καὶ παλαιὸς ἦ διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων.

122d: ὥστε φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι,...

- ὥστε has a number of uses but here we can say that it is being used at the beginning of the sentence to mark a particularly strong conclusion and can translate it "therefore, consequently" or even "so."
- φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι
 - "both young (νέω) and old (γέροντι) must pursue wisdom"
- φιλοσοφητέος is related to φιλοσοφέω and means "one must pursue wisdom"
- καὶ...καὶ... gives the sense of "both x and y."

122e: τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

This is the first of two parallel phrases to round out this section. We see the μὲν "on the one hand..." setting up the pair of phrases, so we then look for the δὲ "... on the other hand..." and, sure enough, we find that in 122f. This "on the one hand... on the other hand..." is a translation trope for μὲν...δε..., but it's also a handy tool when breaking down a larger passage. It doesn't always make sense in the final translation, but it's not a bad starting place. Even though both μὲν and δε must come second in their respective phrases (for grammatical reasons too complicated to get into here), they should be considered to be (in English) the introductory word of the phrase.

[μὲν] [ὅπως] τῷ γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς

- ὅπως has a number of meanings including "so, in order that" or used in comparisons "like, as."

τῷ γηράσκων (tō gēraskōn < geron) "for one who has grown old" (a dative construction, so translate as "to, for"). Consider this as not someone who is just old but someone who has experienced life and has *become* old.

νεάζῃ (neazē < neos) "to grow or become young again" (in dative to go with τῷ γηράσκων)

τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς "for the good things"

This is a significant phrase! Remember the Tetrpharmakos's third line is:

καὶ τὰγαθὸν μὲν εὐκτητόν "and, on the one hand, The Good is easy to obtain"

Note our old friend μὲν is setting us up for the δε in the last line of the Tetrpharmakos. So, τὰγαθὸν here is τ- from the definite article + ἀγαθὸν "good", so "The (greatest) good" is being conveyed, which according to Epicurus is pleasure, that to which everything else points. τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς here in the *Letter to Menoikeus* is simply the dative form. So, I strongly contend that we should translate τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς here as "for the pleasures."

...διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

διὰ is a preposition meaning "through" or "by means of."

- English diameter (διὰ (dia) + meter "measure through")

διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,..."by means of the gratitude (χάριν) of that which has happened, that which has taken place" or, to more poetically paraphrase, "by means of the grace of memories of past events."

Bailey's commentary gives "*by the grateful recollection of the past, ie. of the philosophic truths which he learnt in earlier life.*" I think Bailey is far too timid and narrowly-focused in his "philosophic truths" comment. Consider Vatican Sayings 17 and 19, both mentioning the "good things" that have happened in the past:

Vatican Saying 17

It is not the young man who is most blessed but the old man who has lived nobly, because, being at his very peak, the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds, but the old man has settled into old age as if in a harbor, secure in his gratitude for the good things he was once unsure of.

οὐ νέος μακαριστὸς ἀλλὰ γέρων βεβιωκῶς καλῶς· ὁ γὰρ νέος ἀκμῇ πολὺς ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἕτεροφρονῶν πλάζεται· ὁ δὲ γέρων καθάπερ ἐν λιμένι τῷ γήρα καθώρικεν, τὰ πρότερον δυσελπιστούμενα τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀσφαλεῖ κατακλείσας χάριτι.

Vatican Saying 19

The one who forgets the good things they had yesterday becomes an old man today.

τοῦ γεγονότος ἀμνήμων ἀγαθοῦ γέρων τήμερον γεγένηται.

The academic discipline of Positive Psychology has documented the benefits of practicing gratitude. Epicurus expressed this two thousand years ago in this letter and elsewhere in his writings. We should be grateful for the pleasures we have experienced in the past, and, by

reliving them in our memory, gain present pleasure from them.

χάριν (accusative of χάρις) is used in Christian texts for "grace (of God)." It also carries this idea of being thankful for or having gratitude for a favor being done. It also shares a root with χαίρειν, the salutation we met at the beginning, and χαρά "joy," one of the "kinetic" pleasures listed with euphrosyne in the (in)famous passage about katastematic and kinetic pleasures.

That was a lot to work, so let's review this "on the one hand" portion that we just dissected:

122e: τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζη τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

A *very* literal translation would be:

"On the one hand, in order that 'one who has grown old' can be young through gratitude of the "good things" (pleasures) which have taken place in the past,..."

So that person who has grown old can look back over their life and fondly remember those pleasures - those good things - they have experienced when they were younger, literally making themselves feel young again.

122f: [δὲ] τῷ ὅπως νέος ἅμα καὶ παλαιὸς ἦ διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων.

- Here's our δε "... on the other hand..." and our second ὅπως "in order that..."
- τῷ νέος "for one who is young"
- ἅμα καὶ παλαιὸς ἦ
 - "and at the same time be old"
 - ἦ is a subjunctive of "to be," and παλαιὸς carries the sense of being old in years, being venerable. The subjunctive is a mood of verbs that expresses something imagined or wished for or possible.
- διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων
 - "by means of/through the fearlessness of what is intended to be done, what is to come."
 - As mentioned in 122a above, no matter how we translate μελλόντων we should keep in mind that sense of intention of what is to be done, the sense of anticipation.

Just as one who has grown old can relive past pleasures to feel young again, the one who is young can get the benefits of growing old without living the years yet by being fearless in looking ahead and weighing the consequences of their actions in the future, i.e., seeing themselves as being older and experiencing the consequences of their actions.

122g: μελετᾶν οὖν χρὴ τὰ ποιοῦντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν, εἴ περ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν, ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- [οὖν] μελετᾶν χρὴ
 - "[then] one must study, meditate on."

- *χρή* expresses necessity! It is essential - to study, reflect, and meditate on...
- *μελετᾶν* carries the sense of attending to something closely, studying it, or meditating on it. It also means "to practise an art" and is akin to the Latin word *meditari*. We see this word again in verse 123 and 135.
- τὰ ποιοῦντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν
 - "that which produces eudaimonia."
 - We're going to leave eudaimonia untranslated for now. We'll revisit that word soon since we've encountered it twice already in just the first verse. For now, you can think of it as the woefully-inadequate English rendering of "happiness."
- εἴπερ "if indeed, if really"
 - This is a strengthened or fortified version of εἴ "if"

Note in the last two parts of 122g we again discover a *μεν...δε...* pair:

εἴπερ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν,

ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- [μὲν] εἴπερ παρούσης αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν,...
 - "on the one hand, if this is present we have everything..."
- παρούσης "being present"

[δέ] [εἴπερ] ἀπούσης πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- ἀπούσης "not being present, gone away, departed"
- "[on the other hand, if] this is not present or gone away, we do everything (πάντα πράττομεν)..."
- πάντα (*panta*) includes the familiar English prefix *pan-* "all, every, etc." in *Pantheon* (all gods), *panacea* "all cure," etc.
- πράττομεν "we do, practice, make, achieve"
- ...εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν. "... with regards to having that (i.e., eudaimonia)."

Note *πράττομεν* is the present active tense: "We do, make...etc." not "we would, should, might, may do..." There's no equivocation, no hedging: if we don't have ["that which produces eudaimonia"], we do everything to have it.

A quick digression on eudaimonia is appropriate here. *εὐδαιμονία* is defined by LSJ as "prosperity, good fortune, opulence; true, full happiness."

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57%3Aentry%3Deu\)daimoni%2Fa](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57%3Aentry%3Deu)daimoni%2Fa)

The word is derived from *εὖ-* (*eu-*) "well, good" + *δαίμονία* (*daimonia*) "spirit, divine power." This is where English gets the word "demon" but it could be either benevolent (*eudaimon*) or malevolent (*kakodaimon*). If you have a good, benevolent in-dwelling spirit, you will lead a

prosperous, healthy, flourishing, fortunate life. Socrates claimed to be listening to his daimon for guidance which was used against him at his trial as evidence of impiety. But the term generally in common parlance means what LSJ refers to. However, it encompasses a range of qualities but is often pared down in English to simply "happiness" which is woefully inadequate. It's much more than that, encompassing that and q more. Translators try to convey this with paraphrases like "complete happiness," but our comparative translations just use "happiness." Sometimes it's left untranslated and only transliterated eudaimonia, but this is somewhat of a cheat, too. A cheat I may be guilty of shortly! If you look up that word in Merriam-Webster, it gives "well-being, happiness." So you see we can go in circles. Personally, I think "well-being" is better than "happiness" since it is almost a literal translation with a twist: eu- "well" + daimon "being" (the latter having a little double entendre). So, when you see any of those -- happiness, well-being, flourishing, eudaimonia -- remember that it's that word plus a little more. That's why I advocate using eudaimonia itself. There's a rabbit hole of papers, essays, and websites that convey the deep meaning of εὐδαιμονία if you feel intrepid. Consider this a taste of what awaits you.

Which finally brings us to the end of verse 122!

Post by “Don” of August 2, 2022 at 9:56 AM

Wow! I'm drunk with power! What else can I get [Cassius](#) to agree to? 🤔 😄

Post by “Don” of August 2, 2022 at 9:59 AM

Oh, and don't forget the salutation. Here's my take on that ...

The beginning of the Letter to Menoikeus comes at the very end of verse 121 in Diogenes Laertius's Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, Book X.

Verse 121: Ἐπίκουρος Μενοικεῖ χάρειν.

"Epicurus to Menoikeus: Greetings!"

Ἐπίκουρος is, of course, Epicurus himself, author of the letter.

Μενοικεῖ

Next comes the name of the recipient - Μενουκεύς (Menoikeus) - in the dative case, Μενουκεῖ, signifying "to/for..." You most likely see the name of the recipient most often referred to as Menoeceus. This is simply the Latin form of his name. However, he was Greek! Menoeceus simply results from the penchant for scholars to have once felt it necessary to translate everything into Latin. We'll try to avoid that proclivity here and refer consistently to him using his transliterated Greek name: Menoikeus. I have seen references online that state Menoikeus was from Lampsacus (one of Epicurus's former residences before coming to Athens), but I can find no authoritative source for confirming this.

χαίρειν

And finally, the salutation: χαίρειν which can be translated: Greetings, Hail, Joy(-fully), Rejoice (as a salutation). As will be seen in 122e, this word shares a root with χαρά "joy" (one of the "kinetic" pleasures) and χάρις "gratitude, grace." See more at 122e.

Then, no other pleasantries. Epicurus gets right down to work!

It's important to remember that the letter is, unfortunately, without context. We know nothing about Menoikeus himself. We may theorize he was younger than Epicurus although this is relative to Epicurus's age. We don't know what prompted Epicurus to write the letter to him other than a desire by Menoikeus to have a summary of the ethical teachings of Epicurus. All we have, thanks to Diogenes Laertius, is the text of the letter. In some ways, this is beneficial in that this allows us to imagine Epicurus writing his letter to all of us.

Post by "Cassius" of August 5, 2022 at 9:24 AM

As we get ready to record our first session of the letter to Menoeceus this Sunday morning, I'd like to make a special request that if anyone has comments or questions about this section of the letter (or the letter in general, since this is our first session) please add those to the thread and we will do our best to include them in the episode.

The Letter to Menoeceus is probably the letter that is far and away the one of most general interest to people, and we'd be happy to include any comments or questions you have as we try to go through the letter slowly and bring out the highlights.

Post by "Kalosyni" of August 5, 2022 at 9:25 AM

From [Tufts website](#):

"Writings that urged young men to study philosophy formed a distinct literary genre among the ancients under the name "protreptics." The [Epistle to Menoecus](#) of Epicurus is an extant example."

And this article: "Ancient Philosophic Protreptic and the Problem of Persuasive Genres"

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rh.1986.4.4.309>

Quote

"The protreptic has as its explicit aim the winning of a student for philosophy. The student must be won at different levels--for the love of wisdom generally, for the choice of a particular school, for full commitment to the rigors of an advanced discipline."

Post by "Kalosyni" of August 5, 2022 at 9:49 AM

Found this on Wikipedia (which lists two ways to pronounce the name):

Menoecus ([/məˈniːsiəs, -sjuːs/](#);

[Ancient Greek](#): Μενοικεύς *Menoikeús* "strength of the house" derived from *menos* "strength" and *oikos* "house"

Post by "Cassius" of August 5, 2022 at 10:11 AM

Wow I never knew "strength of the house."

We should ask [Elli](#) what she knows about the name Menoecus!

Post by "Don" of August 5, 2022 at 10:17 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoecus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Found this on Wikipedia (which lists two ways to pronounce the name):

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[Ancient Greek](#): Μενοικεύς *Menoikeús* "strength of the house" derived from *menos* "strength" and *oikos* "house"

Ah, the idiosyncrasies of pronunciation.

The məˈniːsiəs is an *English* pronunciation of the Latin orthography. (Stress on the NI (nee))

Classical Latin would be something like 'men-oy-keh-oos'

Which is directly parallel with the Ancient Greek pronunciation of Μενοικεύς and my preferred pronunciation.

And Modern Greek or even mid- to late Koine Greek pronunciation would probably be something like 'men-ee-kefs' (yes, that's how much pronunciation has changed in the last several thousand years!)

[The Official Wheelock's Latin Series Website](#)

For Ancient Greek pronunciation, there are several YouTube channels including ScorpioMartianus and Podium-Arts.

PS

[Μενοικεύς - Wiktionary](#)

Pronunciation starting with Classical to Modern

/me.noj.kěʏs/ → /me.ny'keʔs/ → /me.ni'cefs/

Post by “Elli” of August 6, 2022 at 12:39 PM

The name Μενοικεύς (Menoikeus) consists of two words, the verb “μένω”+ “οίκος” (meno+oikos) and I have the impression that this name means: "the one who stays at his home permanently".

The antonym is "the one who is wandering around" i.e. the wanderer or in slang "the vagrant", and the antonym is "the settled", or "the resident".

In new Greek, if we want to know by someone where is his/her home, we use the same verb "μένω" [meno], as we ask : "πού μένεις;" (pron. pou meneis?) means literally "where do you stay?" (where do you live?), where is your home/residence, where is your city and your address?

I think for teaching the epicurean ethics to someone with the name "Menoikeus" it's an appropriate name for him to accept more easily ethical exhortations, such as : 😊

«For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit».

Post by "Cassius" of August 6, 2022 at 1:19 PM

Thank you Elli!

Post by "Don" of August 6, 2022 at 1:46 PM

I did not realize there were several characters from Greek mythology named Menoikeus:

[Menoceus - Wikipedia](#)

I also like Elli's alternative etymology using μένω instead of μένος for the first element of the name. That adds a nice twist!

Post by "Elli" of August 6, 2022 at 3:36 PM

In greek texts the word "μένος" [menos] usually means rage, fury, anger.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoceus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

[μένος - Ελληνοαγγλικό Λεξικό WordReference.com](#)

"μένος" [menos] as "strength" its meaning has to do with things. If we accept that "menos" means "strength" then we could say that the name Menoikeus means "the strength of the house". But this meaning is so vague, since Menoikeus is a person who has passions/emotions. Usually when the ancient greeks gave a name to a person, this name was based on feelings and whatever the parents wished for their children to have as characteristics and to become/behave as a person in general.

Post by "Don" of August 6, 2022 at 5:54 PM

I found this page from the Center for Hellenic Studies at Harvard interesting in explaining the differences and similarities between μένος (menos) and μήνις (mēnis):

[Core Vocab: menos | The Kosmos Society](#)

Post by "Don" of August 7, 2022 at 5:21 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

From [Tufts website](#):

"Writings that urged young men to study philosophy formed a distinct literary genre among the ancients under the name "protreptics." The Epistle to Menoeceus of Epicurus is an extant example."

And this article: "Ancient Philosophic Protreptic and the Problem of Persuasive Genres"

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"The protreptic has as its explicit aim the winning of a student for philosophy. The student must be won at different levels--for the love of wisdom generally, for the choice of a particular school, for full commitment to the rigors of an advanced discipline."

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoceus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

FYI:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protrepis...sis?wprov=sfla1>

Display More

Post by “Elli” of August 7, 2022 at 6:12 AM

μένος (menos) and μήνις (mēnis)

Yes, [Don](#) both words had to do with "anger" and both have a duration in time. The first word "menos" had to do with the anger of humans that remains for searching a revenge, and the latter word "mēnis" had to do with the anger of gods. For the word "mēnis", we use this word, in newgreek until now, when we want to describe catastrophic natural phenomena as we say, the word "theomenia". (theos=god) + mēnis. 😊

Post by “Don” of August 7, 2022 at 8:30 AM

[Quote from elli](#)

the latter word "mēnis" had to do with the anger of gods

... and Achilles, too 😊

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

Of the wrath of Achilles, Peleus' son, sing, O goddess...

(*Iliad*, Book 1, line 1)

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 7, 2022 at 12:11 PM

Post-show notes:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoceus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

On the meaning of the word eudaimonia, from [Wikipedia article, which contains entries on Classical/Hellenistic philosophical understanding of the word.](#)

Eudaimonia (Greek: εὐδαιμονία [eudajmonía:]; sometimes [anglicized](#) as **eudaemonia** or **eudemonia**, /ju:di'moʊniə/) is a Greek word literally translating to the state or condition of 'good spirit', and which is commonly translated as '[happiness](#)' or '[welfare](#)'.

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2022 at 11:08 PM

Episode 134 - The Letter to Menoecus 01 - Context and Opening - is now available. This week Kalosyni joins the panel and we begin the Letter to Menoecus.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/50847157>

Post by “Joshua” of August 7, 2022 at 11:27 PM



Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2022 at 11:38 PM

This letter is so important we need maximum time for reflection and comment! 😊

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2022 at 12:21 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoecus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

The word used in the first section is φιλοσοφείν , the infinitive of the verb φιλοσοφῶ 'philosopheō'

The word literally is composed of:

φίλος philos φιλία philia "love/friendship" (deeper than this but we'll let it stand for now)

+

σοφία sophia "wisdom"

Philos/philia is the same component in Philadelphia "love + brotherly"

As well as things like anglophile "England-love"

& philanthropy "love (of) human beings ('anthropoi')"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φι^λί-α](#)

The word philia has more of a connotation of friendly love, affection, friendship, distinct from ἔρως erōs "erotic, romantic love"

So, to be philosopheō had the sense to me of having an affection for wisdom, being close friends with wisdom.

And here are the definitions of sophia:

σοφία

1. skill in handicraft and art, Il., Xen., etc.:— ζ. τινός or περί τινος knowledge of, acquaintance with a thing, Plat.
2. sound judgment, intelligence, practical wisdom, such as was attributed to the Seven Wise men, Theogn., Hdt.; in not so good a sense, cunning, shrewdness, craft, like δεινότης, Hdt.

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2022 at 12:31 AM

GREAT episode! I even stayed up late listening 👍 👍 Excellent thought-provoking, conversation! Well done!!

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2022 at 8:06 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoceus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

[Quote from Joshua](#)



Always 👍👍 for a Tolkien meme 😄

So... "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." Gandalf (JRR Tolkien), *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Post by "Cassius" of August 8, 2022 at 8:08 AM

One thing I wish I had commented on more emphatically was when Joshua responded to Kalosyni's point about happiness.

At 15:30 Kalosyni says "Everyone knows what happiness is - that it's a feeling."

At 16:20 in part of his response Joshua says "Epicurus says the feelings are two - pleasure and pain."

Joshua didn't pursue that particular point further, but I don't think we can hammer it hard enough:

In the Epicurean worldview, Nature gives us only TWO faculties by which to determine what to choose and avoid, pleasure and pain. There are only TWO feelings - pleasure and pain. And that means that if something is a feeling - if something can be felt - then it is either pleasure or pain, one of the two most comprehensive and basic categories.

And that means that since happiness can be felt, happiness is a pleasure, "by definition." It's not the other way around - pleasure is not properly thought of as being "a happiness." Pleasure is the wider and most basic category, not happiness.

So when the word happiness is used, the Epicurean context demands that happiness be understood as a form of pleasure, not pleasure as a form of happiness.

I think if we keep that hierarchy in mind and apply it rigorously it's much easier to avoid the pitfalls of weird definitions of happiness which are not "feelings" at all.

Post by “Don” of August 8, 2022 at 7:29 PM

So, both [Kalosyni](#) and [Joshua](#) are right, depending on one's perspective. While eudaimonia is a feeling, and - in analyzing it - the feeling is pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2022 at 3:07 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

So, both Kalosyni and Joshua are right, depending on one's perspective.

That wording reminds me of how big an issue "perspective" is in Epicurean philosophy. Over the years so many times I see people bounce between "All truth is absolute" and the go for "objective-ism" and then others will bounce to "absolutely nothing is absolute and absolutely everything is "relative."

A lot of the key to Epicurus I think is getting a more firm grip on this issue. Yes our "perspective" is a huge determinant of what is "true" in many situations, but in others (our perspective on a train coming down the track toward us) our perspective is really of very little relevance.

So neither extreme of relativism or absolutism is correct, but on the other hand it doesn't help much to say that the truth is "in the middle." The "truth" has to come from understanding our makeup as humans and evaluating exactly what is and is not relevant to us. And those are questions that can't be answered without the information that the Epicurean physics and epistemology gives to us.

Post by “Don” of August 9, 2022 at 3:21 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So neither extreme of relativism or absolutism is correct, but on the other hand it doesn't help much to say that the truth is "in the middle."

Oh, I wasn't even going the absolute/relative track in my mind. I just meant that one "feels" eudaimonia. And eudaimonia is, by definition, a pleasurable feeling.

You're going deeper than I was 😊

Post by "GnothiSeauton" of December 5, 2024 at 11:20 PM

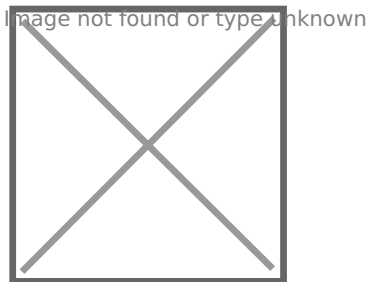
This is a fabulous podcast and post discussion. It helps put into context what happiness is. Thank you. I'll be playing this podcast for our philosophy group next Thursday.

Post by "Don" of December 6, 2024 at 6:19 AM

[Quote from GnothiSeauton](#)

This is a fabulous podcast and post discussion. It helps put into context what happiness is. Thank you. I'll be playing this podcast for our philosophy group next Thursday.

Given the topic of this episode, you may be interested in my deep dive into the letter:



[Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus - A New Translation with Commentary - Epicureanfriends.com](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoikeus-01-context-and-opening-o/)

An in-depth translation and commentary of Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus.

www.epicureanfriends.com

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2024 at 8:04 AM

Thank you for the kind words GnothiSeauton and hope you find it useful!

Post by “GnothiSeauton” of December 6, 2024 at 10:32 AM

Don, what a remarkable piece of work you have accomplished. Your explanation of the problems concerning translation bring into focus for me a more contemporary work of literature, Arthur Rimbaud's poetry. Originally written in French, his poems lose their power when one stumbles through them in English despite the best efforts of the translator (Wallace Fowlie). Your passion for embracing the original Greek reminds me that in order to truly understand the ancient wisdom available to us, one must dive into the original.

Post by “Don” of December 6, 2024 at 12:36 PM

[GnothiSeauton](#) Thanks for the kind words.

If you poke around the forum or stick around a while (hope you do), you'll see me jump on the "but what does the original text say!" soapbox fairly often 😊

Post by “GnothiSeauton” of December 14, 2024 at 4:38 PM

We had our philosophy evening last Thursday and used a portion of this podcast as a discussion point. It went really well. Fortunately, we had in attendance, Mark, the young man who first introduced me to Epicurus as a counterpoint to Stoicism. He had a solid understanding of Epicurus and shared it with the group, helping to inspire a number of interesting questions/discussions. However, despite my best efforts (and our group guidelines) to keep folks focused on the philosophy, we had a couple participants who wanted to argue about its merits and connect it with contemporary society. People appear to be trained these days to lead with judgement rather than curiosity.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2618-episode-one-hundred-thirty-four-the-letter-to-menoceus-01-context-and-opening-o/>

One particular point of contention regarded the avoidance of sexual relations. We emphasized that the principal should be seen today as a note of caution to be recognized (as opposed to dogma) as a number of participants agreed that sexual encounters had indeed ended up causing a lot of anxiety and loss of friendship in their lives.

We regained our focus by explaining that Epicurean thought is not a rigid list of laws enforced by some kind of authority (police force - their term), but rather guidelines to help one seek a pleasurable life no matter their position in society. Did we get this right?

I was reminded by the guidelines here to avoid argumentation regarding virtues, political positions, etc. It's a tough standard, but one that is essential if a group ever expects to engage in an enlightened conversation with the intent of understanding philosophy.

Looking forward to using more of the material from this site for future discussions. Thanks again for putting so much work into this valuable resource.

Post by “Cassius” of December 14, 2024 at 5:51 PM

Thanks for letting us know about that GnothiSeauton, and I hope your post here will spur lots of discussion. And more thoughts from you on it as well.

The issue of how to deal with people who have firm pre-existing ideas about what Epicurean philosophy is all about, when those ideas turn out in fact to be an eclectic blend of Stoicism, Buddhism, humanism, and general "virtue-based-ethics," is never going to go away.

Those who are committed to those viewpoints don't understand that they are not Epicurean, and they are unlikely to be interested in changing them. As pointed out in A Few Days In Athens, argument over core ideas accomplishes little but disruption and bad feelings.

What we have tried to do here on the forum is be straightforward at the very beginning about core controversial issues. Hopefully no one who glances over the opening page or the new member materials will have any illusions - IF they read them.

The idea of any effort to force people to hold ideas with which they disagree would be absolutely anti-Epicurean, but at the same time freedom of thought doesn't mean that we have to ignore the thoughts of those who want to participate. There are many fundamental points of Epicurean philosophy involving controversial issues of determinism, skepticism, and the nature of what "absence of pain" really means that are non-negotiable if you're going to have a truly "Epicurean" group.

One point I always make is that there are plenty of other places on the internet, or meetup groups in the world, for those who want to study Buddhism or Stoicism or just want to do

general riffing because they love to talk philosophy of any kind. It's my experience that trying to work with people who are committed to a generalist / eclectic / anything-goes approach rarely leads to anything truly beneficial and never lasts for long.

Every person and group has to decide for himself with whom they want to interact, but I think it's essential to have boundaries, and to be up-front and honest about where those boundaries are.

Here at the forum we have put a lot of time into refining our front page, our member rules documents, and our welcome messages about where those boundaries are. Those are there because it's a fact of life that Stoicism and Buddhism and humanism are much more popular than reading closely what Epicurus really wrote. And it's a fact of life that the prevailing view is that Epicurus was basically a Stoic or Buddhist who used different terminology. Therefore anyone who sets up any kind of "Epicurean" public endeavor has to expect that many who ask to participate are going to hold attitudes that are deadly to a "truly" Epicurean project.

So the first and most important comment I have is that your experiences are problems that we'll always be dealing with, but the rewards are worth dealing with them.