

New Article on the Inscription (And the "Bitter Gift" Misattribution)

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2022 at 8:29 PM

Edit: This thread concerns the article here, but much of the discussion focuses on the "bitter gift" reference.

<https://greekreporter.com/2022/10/02/ancient-inscription-benefits-epicuranism/>

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2022 at 10:07 PM

Bitter gift? Apparently this person has read a different version of the letter to Menoecus than I have:

Quote

While the pursuit of pleasure formed the focal point of the philosophy, this was largely directed to minimizing pain, anxiety and suffering. In fact, Epicurus referred to life as a "bitter gift" in his "Letter to Menoecus".

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2022 at 10:16 PM

Lots of stress on "absence of pain" that I think leaves the wrong balance as if pain must be avoided at all cost, but overall much more detailed than the average generalist article.

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2022 at 9:07 AM

That "bitter gift" reference now has me curious. Doesn't seem like something someone would come up with at random, and even the "gift" part doesn't sound really like Epicurus. I wonder if this person has totally transposed this thought from someone else and that "life as a 'bitter gift'" is a core thought of a competing philosopher.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 3, 2022 at 10:32 AM

The author proposes that Epicureanism “propounded the avoidance of all things that would cause pain in life” which contradicts Epicurus’ statement that “sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time [...] For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.” The author seems to extrapolate an avoidant, escapist interpretation of Epicurean philosophy.

They gloss over Epicurus’ explicit recognition that “**Hēdonē** [and **not** *ataraxia*] is the Greatest Good” and then interprets Epicureanism as being a mild form of asceticism (like the “Middle Way” of Buddhism, of which I make additional criticism below). Note the incoherence of the author’s following statement: “Although Epicureanism is a form of hedonism [...] it [is] very different from hedonism”. As usual, the author equates the word “hedonism” with something gross and morally bankrupt, and implies that only a rejection of “true” hedonism can be considered justifiable.

I also find the following proposition dubious: “Today, [the stone inscription at Oinoanda] remains the only ancient philosophical text from the Greek and Roman world to have survived in its original form, according to *Archaeology Magazine*.” The author later contradicts this assertion when acknowledging that “Deciphered carbonized scrolls obtained from the library at the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum contain a large number of works by Philodemus, a late Hellenistic Epicurean, and even Epicurus himself, attesting to the school’s enduring popularity.”

I do agree, however, with his statement that “The philosophy is often misunderstood.”

The author goes on to propose that “Epicureanism rejects immortality”, which *feels* right to critical, modern eyes, however, it reduces the nuanced employment of “immortality” in Epicurean philosophy. The animal gods have become indestructible as described by Epicurus. The measurement of daily pleasure is also immortal. Friendship is an immortal good. Indeed, we do not have immortal lives, and we are not born again, however, like “the gods”, the idea of “immortality” is re-fashioned in Epicurean terminology, so the author slightly misses the mark on this point.

I also found another very common, very false comparison between Epicureanism and Buddhism, which, again, I **emphasize**, are on opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum: "The Epicurean way of life also resembles Buddhism in its temperateness, including the belief that great excess leads to great dissatisfaction." This always indicates to me that the author does not have a thorough understanding of the nuances of either tradition, and, like many perennialists, chooses to find similarities between their philosophies-of-choice, regardless of their original, historical context.

Overall, the author repeats a number of common misconceptions about the philosophy, while mostly hitting the bullet points. This is a good article to demonstrate some of the widespread misunderstanding of Epicureanism.

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2022 at 12:42 PM

Nate that's a superb summary of which I think Epicurus would be proud, and I know I find greatly helpful myself. Thank you!

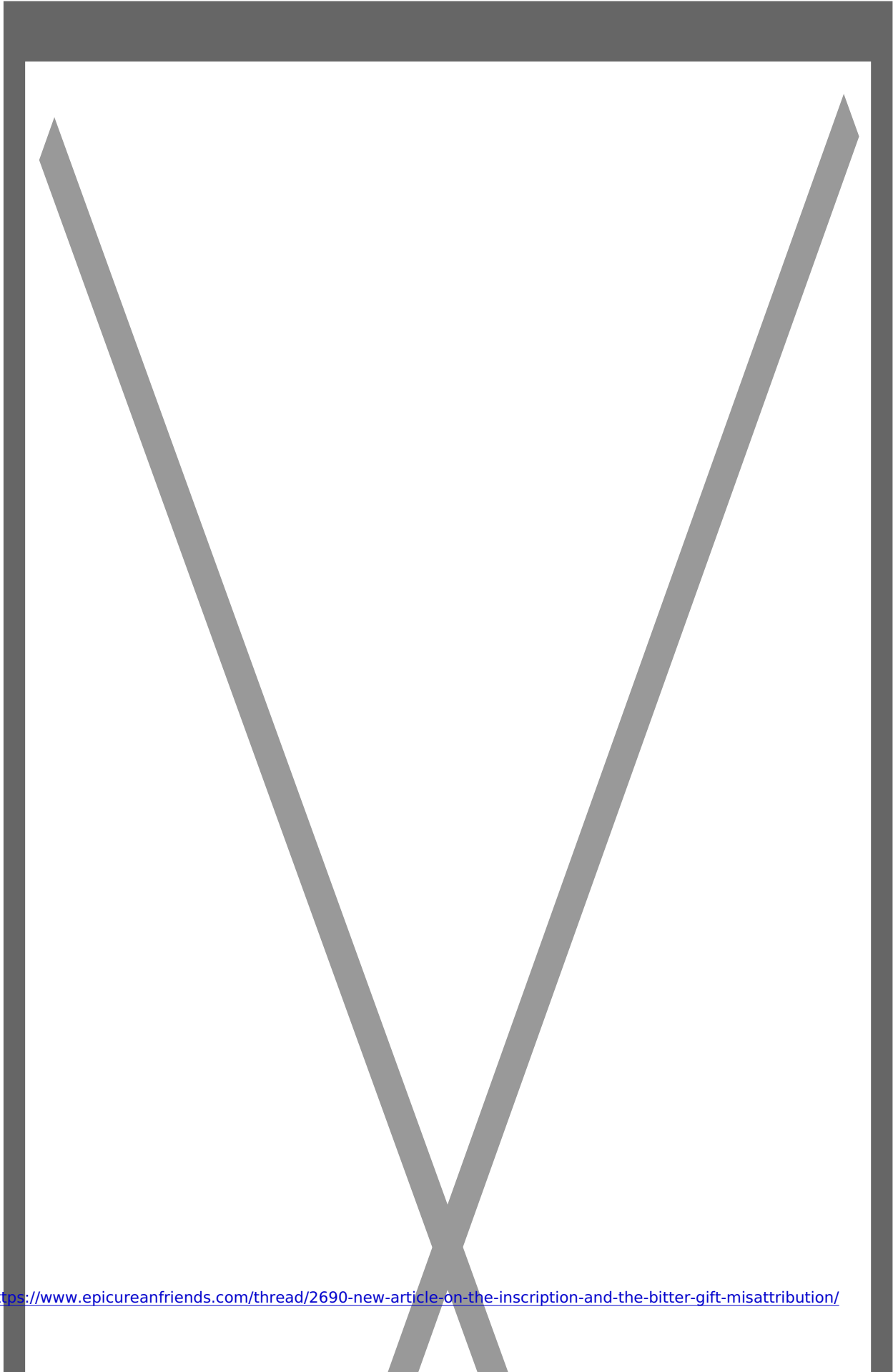
Post by "Don" of October 3, 2022 at 2:06 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That "bitter gift" reference now has me curious. Doesn't seem like something someone would come up with at random, and even the "gift" part doesn't sound really like Epicurus. I wonder if this person has totally transposed this thought from someone else and that "life as a 'bitter gift'" is a core thought of a competing philosopher.

It's also word for word in the Wikipedia article:

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[Epicureanism - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2022 at 4:07 PM

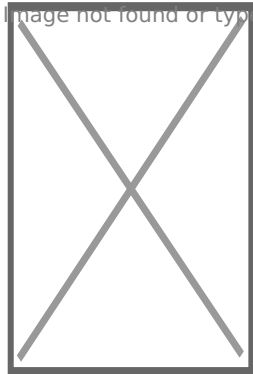
By Zeus! "Bitter gift" shows up everywhere!!

https://www.google.com/search?q=%22bitter+gift%22+Epicureanism+&client=ms-android-verizon-us-rvc3&ei=gEA7Y6-hNLKnptQP3sSCsAg&oq=%22bitter+gift%22+Epicureanism+&gs_lcp=ChNtb2JpbGUtZ3dzLXdpei1zZXJwEAMgws-wiz-serp

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 3, 2022 at 6:43 PM

Maybe [Joshua](#) has some insights, as I see a reference to "bitter gift" from an Ancient Greek tragedy Hippolytus by Euripides ("bitter gift" of Poseidon):

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[The Greek Plays](#)

books.google.com

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2022 at 7:13 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2690-new-article-on-the-inscription-and-the-bitter-gift-misattribution/>

I was a bit shocked to see "bitter gift" so widespread across the Internet!

It's just so counterintuitive if one knows anything about Epicurus's philosophy. Life is a precious gift if anything... Although "gift" sets up the idea that there's a giver so that's a bit problematic.

So, there's yet another topic that needs corrected... In addition to all the rest 😞

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 3, 2022 at 7:20 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

By Zeus! "Bitter gift" shows up everywhere!!

[Quote from Don](#)

Although "gift" sets up the idea that there's a giver so that's a bit problematic.

I have to say it is not necessarily "everywhere".

I think it may be an attempted smear campaign, because it is on a few [Christian](#) websites. But it is very upsetting that it is on the [wikipedia](#) website (and this wikipedia is poorly/incorrectly written).

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2022 at 7:24 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Maybe [Joshua](#) has some insights, as I see a reference to "bitter gift" from an Ancient Greek tragedy Hippolytus by Euripides ("bitter gift" of Poseidon):

<https://books.google.com/books?id=s7wvD...polytus&f=false>

Oh, this is fun! That line is also translated:

Hippolytus

Poseidon your father's gifts, what woe they brought!

In Greek:

Ἰππόλυτος

ὦ δῶρα πατρὸς σοῦ Ποσειδῶνος πικρά.

That last word of the Greek πικρά "bitter" is the same word that shows up in Democritus's quote about "by convention" we've been discussing elsewhere.

So, ὦ δῶρα πικρά. is literally "the bitter gift."

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2022 at 7:29 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

But it is very upsetting that it is on the wikipedia website

Yeah, I'm going to need to go in and take that out of the Wikipedia article with a "citation needed" if someone's going to say "Epicurus called life a "bitter gift."" I've spent some time with the letter to Menoikeus and I can say for certain that that phrase is *not* in there.

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2022 at 8:13 PM

Sounds like the Greek Reporter website might have picked it up at Wikipedia. Correcting that reference would be highly desirable since so many people start there.

Post by “Don” of October 30, 2022 at 4:54 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Yeah, I'm going to need to go in and take that out of the Wikipedia article with a "citation needed" if someone's going to say "Epicurus called life a "bitter gift.""

Done. And I've added a note to the article's Talk page that someone's going to need a citation to add it back in.

Post by “Cassius” of October 30, 2022 at 7:13 PM

Great work!

Post by “Don” of June 18, 2023 at 12:11 AM

I see that "bitter gift" referred to on this Jehovah's Witness site:

<https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1997805>

"Lacking “the joy of Jehovah,” Epicurus called life a “bitter gift.” (Nehemiah 8:10)"

And then other sites quote the letter to Menoikeus about the pleasures of the profligate. But nowhere does Epicurus call life a *bitter gift*... Nowhere! It's frustrating that it appears so widespread online!!