

Cyreniacism Gone Wrong - "Hegesias the Death Persuader"

Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2023 at 7:48 AM

I don't have time for a full post but I want to get this out there before I forget about it. Credit to Emily Austin for bring this to our attention, which we touched on briefly in a short zoom discussion on 5/17/23.:

"Some contemporaries and predecessors of Epicurus did run around telling people that life is bleak, and that death is a welcome reprieve from human suffering, but Epicurus thinks that's nonsense. The Cyrenaics were a competing hedonistic philosophical school and numbered among them was a man dubbed "Hegesias the Death Persuader" for the power of his argument that life is more painful than pleasant. Hegesias was reportedly run out of town for his effects on the young. That life is unpleasant is an odd view for a hedonist, and Epicurus felt at pains to deny it."

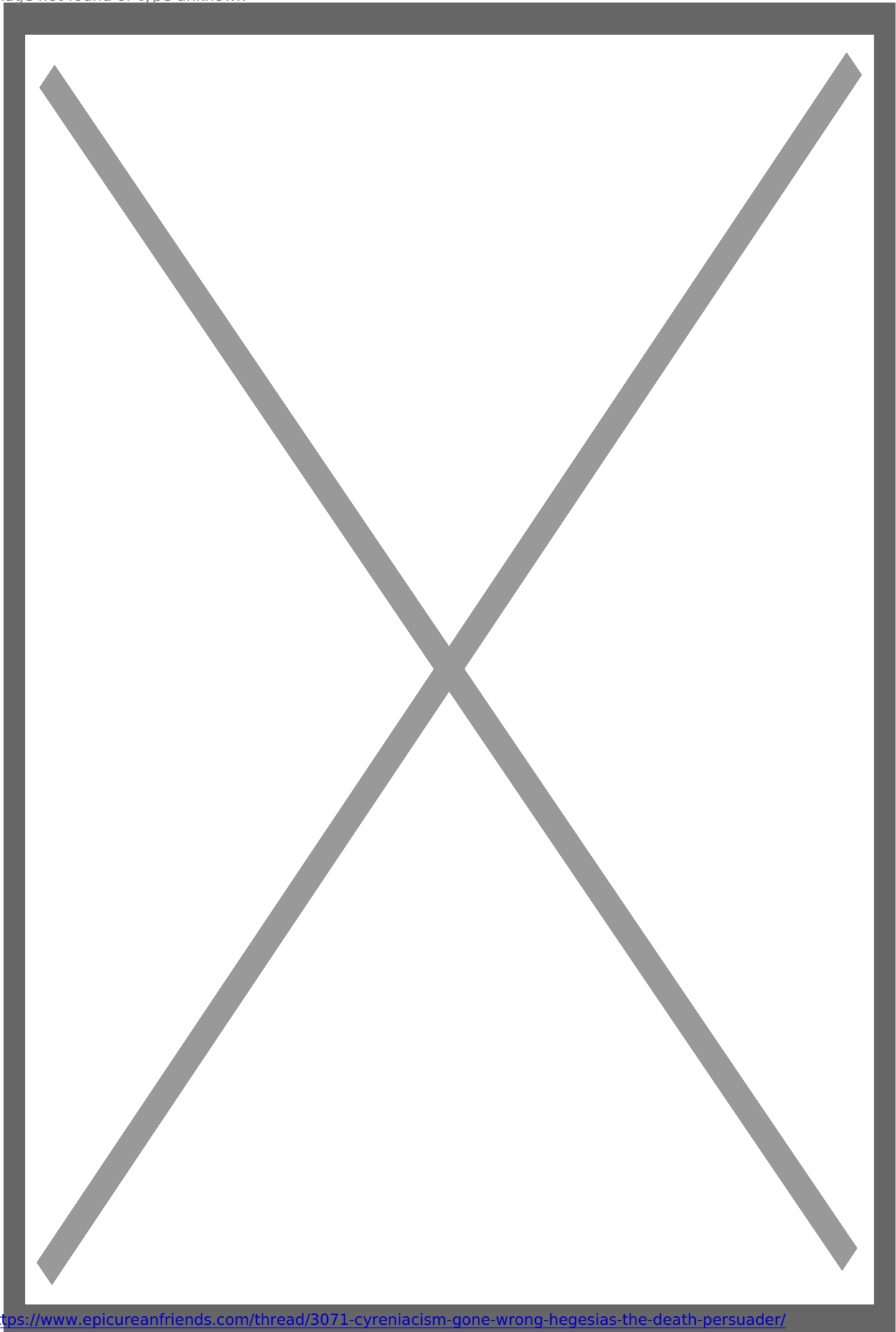
Seems to me that there is a lot to be learned from looking into this to see if we can figure out what weaknesses in Cyreniac philosophy held the door open for this kind of craziness and how Epicurean philosophy deals with it and prevents it. It's not clear to me how the dates relate and whether Epicurus was aware of Hegesias, and whether the reference in the letter to Menoeceus about those who wish never to have been born applies to him, but I think we could gain some good points of comparison by following the trail. -- especially as to the danger of inarticulately holding "freedom from pain" to be the goal of life without a lot of background explanation of how that perspective can make sense if you understand that freedom from pain is just a measurement of living completely engaged in pleasures without any component of pain of body or mind.

Seems to me also that there is a discussion here about the danger of letting "the perfect be the enemy of the good" if these clips are correct. What kind of logic is it that would say that because "perfect" happiness cannot be achieved we should consider the pleasure we can experience in life to be of indifference to us?

I wonder also if the title of this thread might better be: "Hedonism Gone Wrong....." which gets me back to why I personally do not in general conversation describe Epicureanism as "hedonism" or "pleasurism" (which would be the English term for hedonism if we were willing to be straightforward in English). Warning against the disasters that come from pursuing a feeling - even pleasure - without prudence is maybe the main subject of Epicurean ethics.

Here are references:

Image not found or type unknown



[Hegesias of Cyrene - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Hegesias followed [Aristippus](#) in considering pleasure as the goal of life; but, the view which he took of human life was more pessimistic. Because [eudaimonia](#) was unattainable, the [sage's](#) goal should be to become free from pain and sorrow. Since, too, every person is self-sufficient, all external goods were rejected as not being true sources of pleasure:

Quote

Complete happiness cannot possibly exist; for that the body is full of many sensations, and that the mind sympathizes with the body, and is troubled when that is troubled, and also that fortune prevents many things which we cherished in anticipation; so that for all these reasons, perfect happiness eludes our grasp. Moreover, that both life and death are desirable. They also say that there is nothing naturally pleasant or unpleasant, but that owing to want, or rarity, or satiety, some people are pleased and some vexed; and that wealth and poverty have no influence at all on pleasure, for that rich people are not affected by pleasure in a different manner from poor people. In the same way they say that slavery and freedom are things indifferent, if measured by the standard of pleasure, and nobility and baseness of birth, and glory and infamy. They add that, for the foolish person it is expedient to live, but to the wise person it is a matter of indifference; and that the wise person will do everything for his own sake; for that he will not consider any one else of equal importance with himself; and he will see that if he were to obtain ever such great advantages from any one else, they would not be equal to what he could himself bestow.[3]

Hence the sage ought to regard nothing but himself; action is quite indifferent; and if action, so also is life, which, therefore, is in no way more desirable than death:

Quote

The wise person would not be so much absorbed in the pursuit of what is good, as in the attempt to avoid what is bad, considering the chief good to be living free from all trouble and pain: and that this end was attained best by those who looked upon the efficient causes of pleasure as indifferent.[3]

None of this, however, is as strong as the testimony of [Cicero](#),[4] who claims that Hegesias wrote a book called *Death by Starvation* ([Greek](#): ἀποκατερῶν), in which a man who has resolved to starve himself is introduced as representing to his friends that death is actually more to be desired than life, and that the gloomy descriptions of human misery which this work contained were so overpowering that they inspired many people to kill themselves, in consequence of which the author received the surname of *Death-persuader* (Peisithanatos). The book was said to have been published at [Alexandria](#), where he was, in consequence, forbidden to teach by king [Ptolemy II Philadelphus](#) (285–246 BC).

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2023 at 8:23 AM

This deserves a post of its own, and ought to be in full caps:

It has been thought by some that Hegesias was influenced by [Buddhist](#) teachings.[2]

That such a statement is even reasonable to entertain is an indictment of Buddhism.

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2023 at 8:30 AM

Although Hieronymus of Rhodes was not a Cyreniac, it's useful to contrast HIS views too in this conversation. Hieronymus held that not pleasure, but absence of pain, was the goal of life:

that for the sake of learning rather than of finding fault with either you or Epicurus. I too, said he, should be more desirous to learn of you, if you can impart anything worth learning, than to find fault with you.

Well, then, said I, you are aware of what Hieronymus¹ of Rhodes says is the chief good, to which he thinks that everything ought to be referred? I know, said he, that he thinks that the great end is freedom from pain. Well, what are his sentiments respecting pleasure? He affirms, he replied, that it is not to be sought for its own sake; for he thinks that rejoicing is one thing, and being free from pain another. And indeed, continued he, he is in this point greatly mistaken, for, as I proved a little while ago, the end of increasing pleasure is the removal of all pain. I will examine, said I, presently, what the meaning of the expression, freedom from pain, is; but unless you are very obstinate, you must admit that pleasure is a perfectly distinct thing from mere freedom from pain. You will, however, said he, find that I am obstinate in this; for nothing can be more real than the identity between the two. Is there, now, said I, any pleasure felt by a thirsty man in drinking? Who can deny it? said he. Is it, asked I, the same pleasure that he feels after his thirst is extinguished? It is, replied he, another kind of pleasure; for the state of extinguished thirst has in it a certain stability of pleasure, but the pleasure of extinguishing it is pleasure in motion. Why, then, said I, do you call things so unlike one another by the same name? Do not

These seem to me to be the kinds of errors that people run into when they fail to appreciate how Epicurean physics and Epicurean canonics steers you to a reasonable conclusion about how to deal with guides and goals of life. Cicero is doing us a favor by showing us how contrasting these different views helps to sort them out.

Post

[RE: Are You Epicurean Or Hieronymian?](#)

Thanks for the detailed post Titus. Here are my thoughts:

[...]

I very much agree with that. It seems to me that most of the people whose interpretations I find reason to criticize focus almost exclusively on one aspect (most frequently, the letter to Meoneceus) and act as if the epistemology and physics are irrelevant. In a nearby (in time) thread I think we see an example of that in an American philosopher (Pierce) who embraces

one aspect of Epicurus to support his own views, but rejects the...



Cassius

February 28, 2021 at 6:58 AM

Post by “Don” of May 18, 2023 at 8:33 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That such a statement is even reasonable to entertain is an indictment of Buddhism.

I can't believe I'm doing this, but...

Yes, Buddhism states life is dukkha (suffering, unsatisfactory, etc.) but at least it offers a way out of the suffering that doesn't involve committing suicide. Hegesias seems to have stopped listening at the [Second Noble Truth](#).

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2023 at 8:53 AM

Seems to me too that at a very basic level we can pin a lot of the problem of Buddhism and Stoicism to their "physics" views that there is essentially a soul that survives death to experience new things in some type of future existence. That's at bottom of what they use to justify renouncing pleasure while it is available in this life, and even to consider that it might have been better not to have been born. In the absence of some reward for ascetic behavior somewhere down the road, why would any sane person ever choose it? (And for the present conversation we can just refer to the "sane" rather than worrying about the insane.)

With Epicurean physics and Epicurean canonicus you can't even entertain such a suggestion as reasonable to consider, so you steer clear of ideas that what will happen after death justifies counter-intuitive decisions in this life.

At the same time, Epicurus does recognize that for at least most of us today is not the last day of life, so we do in fact make short-term decisions to choose pain for the sake of pleasure that comes afterwards.

But when you know that the playing field is exclusively *this* life, you keep that calculation in check, and come to reasonable conclusions in balancing the present and the future.

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2023 at 10:30 AM

I guess we need a specific thread on "perfect as the enemy of the good" so here it is, starting with Wikipedia citing Voltaire:

["Perfect As the Enemy of the Good"](#)

Post by “Onenski” of May 18, 2023 at 11:14 AM

Here's a Spanish version of the text cited by Ciceron (and supposedly found in Herculanium), the *APOKARTERŌN*:

[APOKARTERON. El diálogo perdido de Hegesias de Cirene \(con un artículo de Piercarlo Necchi\)](#)
APOKARTERŌN[1] TRADUCCIÓN DE MANUEL PÉREZ CORNEJO, Viator En 2017, una nueva serie de textos fue recuperada de Herculano. Con mucho, el más importante...
www.mainlanderespana.com

Post by “Titus” of May 19, 2023 at 11:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

None of this, however, is as strong as the testimony of Cicero,[4] who claims that Hegesias wrote a book called Death by Starvation (Greek: ἀποκαρτερῶν), in which a man who has resolved to starve himself is introduced as representing to his friends that death is actually more to be desired than life, and that the gloomy descriptions of human misery which this work contained were so overpowering that they inspired many people to kill themselves, in consequence of which the author received the surname of Death-persuader (Peisithanatos). The book was said to have been published

at Alexandria, where he was, in consequence, forbidden to teach by king Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BC).

Interesting, how the same questions and views appear throughout history again and again.

Have you ever heard of the Werther effect or Copycat suicide? Or the letters of/to Ana (Anorexia nervosa)? The novel by Goethe was also forbidden to be sold in several countries, as websites promoting ATTE (Ana till the end) are banned today.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2023 at 6:59 PM

Here's the excerpt from Cicero talking about Hegesias that is linked above from Wikipedia:

XXXIV. I am not without hopes myself that such may be our fate. But admit what they assert—that the soul does not continue to exist after death.

A. Should it be so, I see that we are then deprived of the hopes of a happier life.

45M. But what is there of evil in that opinion? For let the soul perish as the body: is there any pain, or indeed any feeling at all, in the body after death? No one, indeed asserts that; though Epicurus charges Democritus with saying so; but the disciples of Democritus deny it. No sense, therefore, remains in the soul; for the soul is nowhere. Where, then, is the evil? for there is nothing but these two things. Is it because the mere separation of the soul and body cannot be effected without pain? But even should that be granted, how small a pain must that be! Yet I think that it is false, and that it is very often unaccompanied by any sensation at all, and sometimes even attended with pleasure; but certainly the whole must be very trifling, whatever it is, for it is instantaneous. What makes us uneasy, or rather gives us pain, is the leaving all the good things of life. But just consider if I might not more properly say, leaving the evils of life; only there is no reason for my now occupying myself in bewailing the life of man, and yet I might, with very good reason. But what occasion is there, when what I am laboring to prove is that no one is miserable after death, to make life more miserable by lamenting over it? I have done that in the book which I wrote, in order to comfort myself as well as I could. If, then, our inquiry is after truth, death withdraws us from evil, not from good. This subject is indeed so copiously handled by Hegesias, the Cyrenaic philosopher, that he is said to have been forbidden by Ptolemy from delivering his lectures in the schools, because some who heard him made away with themselves. There is, too, an epigram of Callimachus²⁰ on Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who, without any misfortune having befallen him, as he says, threw himself from a wall into the sea, after he had read a book of Plato's. The book I mentioned of that Hegesias is called Ἀποκαρτετερωῶν, or “A Man who 46starves himself,” in which a man is represented as

killing himself by starvation, till he is prevented by his friends, in reply to whom he reckons up all the miseries of human life. I might do the same, though not so fully as he, who thinks it not worth any man's while to live. I pass over others. Was it even worth my while to live, for, had I died before I was deprived of the comforts of my own family, and of the honors which I received for my public services, would not death have taken me from the evils of life rather than from its blessings?

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XXXV. Mention, therefore, some one, who never knew distress; who never received any blow from fortune. The great Metellus had four distinguished sons; but Priam had fifty, seventeen of whom were born to him by his lawful wife. Fortune had the same power over both, though she exercised it but on one; for Metellus was laid on his funeral pile by a great company of sons and daughters, grandsons, and granddaughters; but Priam fell by the hand of an enemy, after having fled to the altar, and having seen himself deprived of all his numerous progeny. Had he died before the death of his sons and the ruin of his kingdom,

With all his mighty wealth elate,

Under rich canopies of state;

would he then have been taken from good or from evil? It would indeed, at that time, have appeared that he was being taken away from good; yet surely it would have turned out advantageous for him; nor should we have had these mournful verses,

Lo! these all perish'd in one flaming pile;

The foe old Priam did of life beguile,

And with his blood, thy altar, Jove, defile.

As if anything better could have happened to him at that time than to lose his life in that manner; but yet, if it had befallen him sooner, it would have prevented all those consequences; but even as it was, it released him from any further sense of them. The case of our friend Pompey²¹ 47 was something better: once, when he had been very ill at Naples, the Neapolitans, on his recovery, put crowns on their heads, as did those of Puteoli; the people flocked from the country to congratulate him—it is a Grecian custom, and a foolish one; still it is a sign of good fortune. But the question is, had he died, would he have been taken from good, or from evil? Certainly from evil. He would not have been engaged in a war with his father-in-law;²² he would not have taken up arms before he was prepared; he would not have left his own house, nor fled from Italy; he would not, after the loss of his army, have fallen unarmed into the hands of slaves, and been put to death by them; his children would not have been destroyed; nor would his whole fortune have come into the possession of the conquerors. Did not he, then, who, if he had died at that time, would have died in all his glory, owe all the great and terrible misfortunes

into which he subsequently fell to the prolongation of his life at that time?

XXXVI. These calamities are avoided by death, for even though they should never happen, there is a possibility that they may; but it never occurs to a man that such a disaster may befall him himself. Every one hopes to be as happy as Metellus: as if the number of the happy exceeded that of the miserable; or as if there were any certainty in human affairs; or, again, as if there were more rational foundation for hope than fear. But should we grant them even this, that men are by death deprived of good things; would it follow that the dead are therefore in need of the good things of life, and are miserable on that account? Certainly they must necessarily say so. Can he who does not exist be in need of anything? To be in need of has a melancholy sound, because it in effect amounts to this—he had, but he has not; he regrets, he looks back upon, he wants. Such are, I suppose, the distresses of one who is in need of. Is he deprived of eyes? to be blind is misery. Is he destitute of children? not to have them is misery. These considerations apply to the living, but the dead are neither in need of the blessings of life, nor of life itself. But when I am speaking of the dead, I am speaking of those who have no existence. But would any one say of us, who do exist, that we want horns or wings? Certainly not. Should it be asked, why not? the answer would be, that not to have what neither custom nor nature has fitted you for would not imply a want of them, even though you were sensible that you had them not. This argument should be pressed over and over again, after that point has once been established, which, if souls are mortal, there can be no dispute about—I mean, that the destruction of them by death is so entire as to remove even the least suspicion of any sense remaining. When, therefore, this point is once well grounded and established, we must correctly define what the term to want means; that there may be no mistake in the word. To want, then, signifies this: to be without that which you would be glad to have; for inclination for a thing is implied in the word want, excepting when we use the word in an entirely different sense, as we do when we say that a fever is wanting to any one. For it admits of a different interpretation, when you are without a certain thing, and are sensible that you are without it, but yet can easily dispense with having it. “To want,” then, is an expression which you cannot apply to the dead; nor is the mere fact of wanting something necessarily lamentable. The proper expression ought to be, “that they want a good,” and that is an evil.

But a living man does not want a good, unless he is distressed without it; and yet, we can easily understand how any man alive can be without a kingdom. But this cannot be predicated of you with any accuracy: it might have been asserted of Tarquin, when he was driven from his kingdom. But when such an expression is used respecting the dead, it is absolutely unintelligible. For to want implies to be sensible; but the dead are insensible: therefore, the dead can be in no want.

Post by “Titus” of May 21, 2023 at 4:57 AM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

Here's a Spanish version of the text cited by Ciceron (and supposedly found in Herculanium), the *APOKARTERŌN*:

<https://www.mainlanderespana.com/single-post/ap...esias-de-cirene>

I was able to find the English original, to which the Spanish version refers.

[The Apokarteron](#)

Post by “Don” of May 21, 2023 at 7:30 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

[Quote from Onenski](#)

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[The Apokarteron](#)

Thanks for this. The only caveat is that this is "a speculative reconstruction." It appears that it's not the actual text of Apokarteron but an attempt to construct what it could have been using other ancient texts and filling in a dialogue format. For example, Hegesias is not listed in the available authors at Papyri.info, and there appears to be no P.herc.1913 & 1914 as mentioned in the 2nd footnote. Papyri.info only lists up to P.herc. 1824. So the citation is meant to provide verisimilitude to the fictional reconstruction, like Tolkien saying The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit were translated from Bilbo's and Frodo's Red Book of Westmarch (with later additions by Sam Gamgee).

Not saying the article isn't interesting, but it shouldn't be taken as an ancient text.

See also

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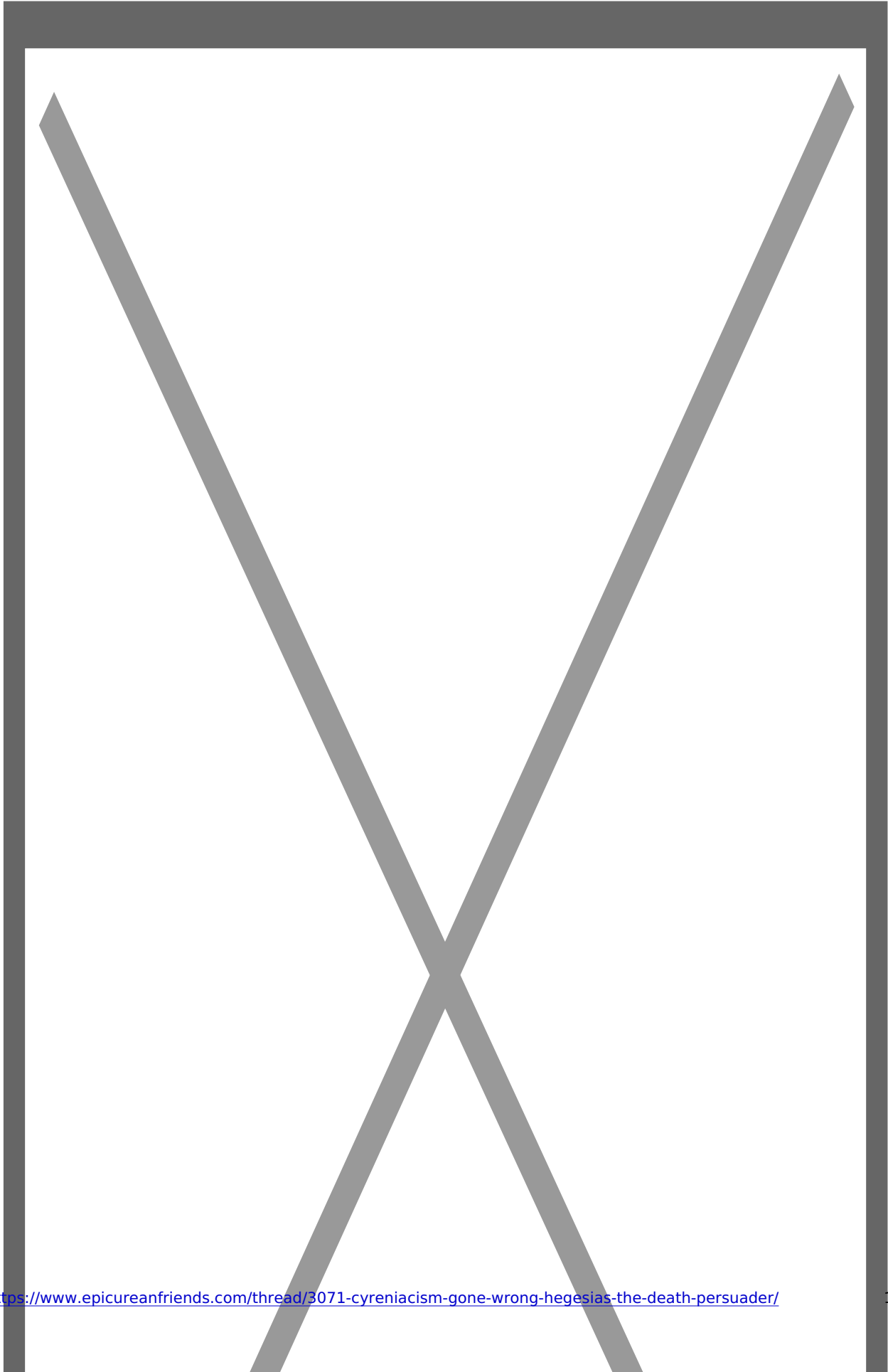
[THV - Würzburger Zentrum für Epikureismusforschung](#)

Post by “kochiekoch” of May 21, 2023 at 9:05 AM

Hi all! 😊

In tune with last night's discussion of Hegesias the 'Death Persuader' and Cyreniacism in general, I brought up the idea that Hegesias might have been dealing with the 'hedonic treadmill'. The tendency of a person to become accustomed to stimuli, and no longer experience pleasure from formally pleasurable experiences. This is a well known phenomenon:

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[Defining the Hedonic Treadmill](#)

Hedonic adaptation or “the hedonic treadmill” are terms that define how people generally return to the same level of happiness despite their circumstances.

www.verywellmind.com

Poor guy must have been so pleased out that he couldn't experience pleasure anymore, and decided that the only thing left was to end his life. But, he was a philosopher, and so had to preach that to other people. 😄 With unfortunately disastrous results. 😞 The hedonic treadmill problem might be why Cyreniacism died out as a philosophical school, but Epicureanism survived. At least until the Christian era. Hegesias might represent what Cyreniacism evolved into and represent the school's late stage.

The Epicurean view of pleasure helps to avoid the hedonic treadmill which people might find themselves on, and on which he addresses in PD 10:

[Principal Doctrine 10 - Epicurus Wiki](#)

Post by “Titus” of May 21, 2023 at 5:03 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Thanks for this. The only caveat is that this is "a speculative reconstruction." It appears that it's not the actual text of Apokarteron but an attempt to construct what it could have been using other ancient texts and filling in a dialogue format. For example, Hegesias is not listed in the available authors at Papyri.info, and there appears to be no P.herc.1913 & 1914 as mentioned in the 2nd footnote. Papyri.info only lists up to P.herc. 1824. So the citation is meant to provide verisimilitude to the fictional reconstruction, like Tolkien saying The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit were translated from Bilbo's and Frodo's Red Book of Westmarch (with later additions by Sam Gamgee).

Not saying the article isn't interesting, but it shouldn't be taken as an ancient text.

I see, this issue needs more research. The introduction to the text is in my opinion too concrete in its argumentation than to be just a fictional work. But I agree in your point, the subhead speaks of a "speculative reconstruction", which contrasts the introduction. I will write to the Würzburg Center and ask for more information. Perhaps, their website isn't up-to-date. It also seems they have slowed down their activities. I know the founder seems to have retired and with him PhD students doing research and work. Hopefully, they can give us an answer (email

has already been send).

It seems, there may be also an issue with footnote 2 in the text, referring to an article that do not exist in the quoted volume.

Post by "Titus" of May 22, 2023 at 2:07 AM

I've already got an answer!

Dear Mr. ,

many thanks for your enquiry. I don't recall hearing anything about such a discovery.

Best regards,

Holger Essler.

> Dear Mr. Essler,

>

> I take part in an online study group on Epicureanism. Currently, we discussed the Cyrenaic philosopher Hegesias of Cyrene. In an online article (https://www.academia.edu/39345959/THE_APOKARTERON?sm=b) it is claimed, essential parts of his work "The Apokarteron" were discovered in Herculaneum in 2018. Unfortunately, we are not able to find any other reference to "The Apokarteron" in any archives available. We would like to know, to what degree the posted version of "The Apokarteron" ist fictional. Do you know something about a 2018 find?

>

> Many thanks in advance. Kind regards,