

Bryan Caplan defends Epicurus

Post by “Cleveland Okie” of May 21, 2023 at 11:08 AM

I got interested in Epicureanism a few years ago after I ran across a comment from Bryan Caplan, a prolific blogger (and economics professor), recommending the *Letter to Menoecus* as the best few pages of philosophy anywhere.

I liked Caplan’s posts on advice for living so well that (with his permission) I [did a blog](#) of some of my favorite pieces of his. Some of these have a distinctly Epicurean flavor, e.g. [“Ten Principles for Making Friends.”](#) and [“How To Be Happy: A 10 Point Plan.”](#)

I came across Caplan discussing Epicureanism again when he did a podcast with Richard Hanania, a Substack writer.

I often enjoy Hanania, but I found his recent article, [“The Case Against \(Most\) Books”](#) was in my opinion one of his weakest pieces and included the opinion that many classic books are overrated. After arguing that a philosopher among a primitive tribe living in the Amazon jungle would have little to tell the rest of the world, because he lacked basic knowledge, Hanania wrote, “ If you reject the possibility that the Amazon philosopher has great insights into the modern world, on what basis would you trust Ancient Greece?

“It’s not simply that the ancients had less information and access to empirical data, but ways of thinking have improved over time. Bertrand Russell once quipped that Aristotle believed that men had more teeth than women, but it never occurred to him to open his wife’s mouth and start counting.”

Obviously, while there have been huge advances in knowledge since Ancient Greece and perhaps also in thinking about thinking, I believe Epicurus has a lot to teach us. And when I listened to [a podcast interview of Hanania interviewing Caplan](#), I was pleased to hear Caplan making the same point.

At about 1:05 at the link Hanania repeats his point, arguing that it’s “odd” to be influenced by philosophers from long ago, and Caplan, while conceding that much of Hanania says is correct, notes that there “are a few old thinkers” where “this guy figured this out.”

“Sometimes there’s argument that is non obvious until you hear it and then you can’t unthink it, is it so well crafted. You can just read the ten page Letter to Menoeceus of Epicurus. There’s a bunch of arguments in there, where people are still arguing about these questions. This ancient Greek with no internet or anything, he has just solved a bunch of problems.”

Hanania: “You can be amazed at the accomplishment.”

Caplan: “Especially if you’re young and you don’t yet know the answer. And then you read some guy from 2,500 years ago, yup, in a paragraph he solved the problem, moving on. There’s a sense of disbelief, it can’t really be that easy.” But you read more and you realize, “the problem is solved and people can move on with their lives.”

There’s more at the link, but I’ve tried to summarize Caplan’s main points.