

# Porphyry - Letter to Marcella - "Vain Is the Word of the Philosopher..."

Post by "Cassius" of June 12, 2023 at 11:34 AM

I was talking to @EricR this morning and trying to remember the source of this quote. In tracking it down it seems to come from Porphyry's letter to Marcella -- but do we really know this is attributable to Epicurus? Usener seems to think so, but why? Anyone recall?

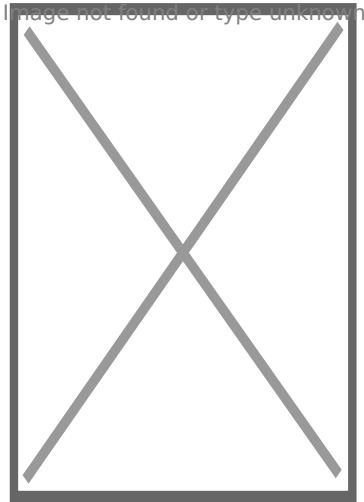
U221

**Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 31, [p. 209, 23 Nauck]:** Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.

[Porphyry, Letter to his wife Marcella. London: Priory Press \(1910\)](#)

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Post by "Don" of June 12, 2023 at 12:24 PM



[Epicurus The Extant Remains Bailey Oxford 1926 Optimized For Greek On Left : Cyril Bailey : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Epicurus - The Extant Remains - Cyril Bailey - Optimized for Greek on Left Side for On-Line Viewing

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See p.397 in Bailey link.

He references the similarity to VS54:

54. Do not pretend to love and practice wisdom, but love and practice wisdom in reality; for we need not the appearance of health but true health.

οὐ προσποιεῖσθαι δεῖ φιλοσοφεῖν, ἀλλ' ὄντως φιλοσοφεῖν· οὐ γὰρ προσδεόμεθα τοῦ δοκεῖν ὑγιαίνειν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ κατ' ἀλήθειαν ὑγιαίνειν.

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**Post by “Don” of June 12, 2023 at 10:32 PM**

Ζήνων τὰς τῶν διαλεκτικῶν τέχνας εἰκαζε τοῖς εἰ-  
καίοις μέτροις οὐ πυρὸν οὐδ' ἄλλο τι τῶν σπουδαίων  
μετροῦσιν, ἀλλ' ἄχυρα καὶ κόπρια.

6 Πυθαγόρου (Porphy. ad Marc. c. 31).

5 Κενὸς ἐκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὑφ' οὗ μηδὲν  
ἀνθρώπου πάθος θεραπεύεται. ὥσπερ γὰρ ἰατρικῆς  
οὐκ ὄφελος μὴ τὰς νόσους ἐκβαλλούσης ἀπὸ τῶν σω-  
μάτων· οὕτως οὐδὲ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μὴ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς  
κακὸν ἐκβάλλοι.

Here's the entry in Stobaeus' Florilegium, 82.6 (lxxxii, 6; ΠΒ'.6) that clearly attributes the saying to Pythagoras (Πυθαγόρου) and cites Porphyry's letter to Marcella.

[Ioannis Stobaei Florilegium, recognovit Augustus Meineke ... v.0003.](#)

Well, this is all a bit disturbing 😞 It appears Usener was \*assuming\* that Porphyry's unattributed quote was Epicurus and not Pythagoras?? On the basis that it "sounded" something Epicurus would have said??

PS: Honestly, this makes me skeptical of any Usener fragment not specifically citing Epicurus, the Epicureans, Philodemus, or a similar reference within the ancient text. For example,

This is fine:

[ U380 ]

Aetius, Doxography, I.29.6 [p. 326 Diels] (Plutarch, I.29.2; Stobaeus Anthology, Physics 7.9): Epicurus says that chance is a cause which is uncertain with respect to persons, times, and places.

But this now??

[ U533 ]

Uncertain Epicurean Author, Vol. Herc. 2, VII.21 col. XXVIII: The chief of all goods, even if there weren't any other, is that by which he who possesses it advances toward virtue.

So who knows who wrote U533 and yet it's included in his *Epicurea*!

By Zeus! I don't know what to believe now!

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### Post by “Godfrey” of June 13, 2023 at 12:47 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

[ U533 ]

Uncertain Epicurean Author, Vol. Herc. 2, VII.21 col. XXVIII: The chief of all goods, even if there weren't any other, is that by which he who possesses it advances toward virtue.

Yikes!

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### Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 6:18 AM

Well I did not intend to start another text deep dive, and we can give credit to EricR for this. But this does indeed call for caution as to Usener. I've never really known anything about Usener himself or his opinions about Epicurus, so maybe we need to look into his own views as an indicator of his reliability as well.

I seem to remember that there are other issues in that letter to Marcella as well that have

caused me to be cautious, so maybe this thread will be productive to review both Usener and the letter.

Edit; A quick scan back over the link in my first post leads me toward the view that Porphyry was a strict Neo-Platonist (as the title of the article indicates). I can't recall now what we've said about this letter in the past but I could see coming to the conclusion that any resemblance to Epicurus is coincidental at best.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 6:34 AM**

[Elli](#) this question may need your attention too, when you get time!

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### **Post by “Don” of June 13, 2023 at 7:54 AM**

Here's another from the letter to Marcella:

[ U203 ]

Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, 29, p. 209, 1: But insofar as you are in want, it is through forgetfulness of your nature that you feel the want. For thereby you cause to yourself vain fears and desires.

There seem to be quite a few.

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### **Post by “EricR” of June 13, 2023 at 8:09 AM**

Perhaps some context for this might help.

It came from question that came up when Cassius and I were talking yesterday. I've posed the question here: [Does the philosophy change you?](#)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 9:02 AM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

There seem to be quite a few.

This is reminding me of something else. I can't believe even the staunchest ancient Epicurean really thought that **everything** Epicurus said was blindingly unique. We all know much of what Epicurus taught he learned from starts others had made, such as Democritus. So it's only natural that smart people do regularly hit on similar thoughts. The uniqueness of Epicurus comes through in certain particular ways, and it's probably most helpful for us to think about those particular ways and the reasons for them. That's the obvious way to sniff out when someone who's talking - for example - about "virtue" is speaking as an Epicurean or Stoic or whatever. Surely Usener had a lot of experience and ought to have been good at it, but we (or at least I) don't know Usener's own views. This is where we regularly think that DeWitt goes too far in identifying parallels to Christianity, but starting out looking for parallels to Stoicism or Plato is going to create the same issue.

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### **Post by “Don” of June 13, 2023 at 12:19 PM**

Checking our copy of Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, entry 25C, is Usener 221. Their note reads:

#### Quote

Context: culmination of a long string of ethical quotations from Epicurus. For the Epicurean medical metaphor, cf. Gigante [271], Nussbaum [270].

So, we should look at the preceding "string" to see if we agree with that context in the letter. The anonymous nature of the quotes just gives me pause.

Gigante is in Italian in Cronache Ercolanesi, 1975, 53-61

Nussbaum is her chapter in Schofield & Striker, *The norms of nature: studies in Hellenistic ethics* (1986)

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### **Post by “Don” of June 13, 2023 at 12:24 PM**

Oh, this looks promising?

[http://www.epicuros.gr/pages/en/Tempelis\\_Epicurus\\_Porphry.pdf](http://www.epicuros.gr/pages/en/Tempelis_Epicurus_Porphry.pdf)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of June 13, 2023 at 12:50 PM**

The passage immediately before:

Quote

Every disturbance and unprofitable desire is removed by the love of true philosophy. Vain is the word of that philosopher who can ease no mortal trouble. As there is no profit in the physician's art unless it cure the diseases of the body, so there is none in philosophy, unless it expel the 50 troubles of the soul. These and other like commands are laid on us by the law of our nature.

Would Epicurus go so far as to say that?

Clearly, before the passages right in the section starting at 29, there is a LOT of Platonist / religionist inspiration that is incompatible with Epicurus, so you have to wonder even where the lines are closest to Epicurus whether there are other influences on the wording chosen.

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### **Post by “Don” of June 13, 2023 at 1:17 PM**

Cassius: Take a look at that pdf I linked to. Some good thoughts there.

And I personally don't have a problem with that line:

Every disturbance and unprofitable desire is removed by the love of true philosophy.

Usener calls that U457. disturbing there is *ταραχώδης* *tarakhōdēs* which is related to *ataraxia*.

It looks like sections 27-31 of the letter are supposed to be from an Epicurean text. Again, check out that pdf.

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## Post by "Elli" of June 15, 2023 at 9:29 AM

**28. "Consequently, even the gods have prescribed remaining pure by abstinence from food and sex".**

And then, he continues his letter with his cunnings: He unites the pure abstinence from food and sex with some sayings by Epicurus (without mentioning him) and in the basis of self-sufficiency and the like, he speaks about a law of Nature without mentioning anywhere what the heck is that law; and **what is real goal by Nature!!!** For him, the word "**pleasure**" is nowhere inside that letter. His letter suffers from the illness of "moralism". 😊

imo, only an old paralyzed stoic man reaching the end of his life would write these things, and in such a way to his wife.

Poor Marcella, I empathize you, since you were widow with seven children, and maybe desperate for marrying such an old man reaching the end of his life!

For this reason and to unclear the whole situation with the platonists and stoics Epicurus said loudly this: <<**I don't know how I could conceive of the good without the pleasures of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms**>>.

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## Post by "Kalosyni" of September 1, 2023 at 2:11 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I can't believe even the staunchest ancient Epicurean really thought that **\*\*everything\*\*** Epicurus said was blindingly unique. We all know much of what Epicurus taught he learned from starts others had made, such as Democritus. So it's only natural that smart people do regularly hit on similar thoughts. The uniqueness of Epicurus comes through in certain particular ways, and it's probably most helpful for us to think about those particular ways and the reasons for them. That's the obvious way to sniff out when someone who's talking - for example - about "virtue" is speaking as an Epicurean or Stoic or whatever.

It does seem that having a basic knowledge of all the ancient philosophies could be helpful.

Perhaps...the uniqueness of Epicurus is deconstructing and replacing the "perfect" and the "ideal" and properly placing pleasure (together with the removal of pain) as the best guide to a good life. If you think about it, it is only the wealthy who can try to buy perfection (or vain opinions) in the lifestyle that they pursue. (And then sometimes others who erroneously envy the wealthy). But the necessary pleasures required by nature are easy to procure.

#### [Quote from Don](#)

He references the similarity to VS54:

54. Do not pretend to love and practice wisdom, but love and practice wisdom in reality; for we need not the appearance of health but true health.


There is also the reference to health in the Letter to Menoecus, in the opening:

"Let no one put off the love and practice of wisdom when young, nor grow tired of it when old. For it is never too early or too late for the health of the soul."

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## Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2024 at 8:58 AM

Over at facebook today someone asked about this same quote, and Holly expressed questions. [Elli gave an answer](#) worth recording here:

**Holly** hello and joy! In the above fragment, I smell the bad smell of platonism and stoicism.  Image not found or ty

The above fragment 221 in greek language is: "κενὸς ἐκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὑφ' οὗ μηδὲν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται· ὥσπερ γὰρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδὲν ὄφελος μὴ τὰς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως οὐδὲ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μὴ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος".

First of all, and as Epicurus suggests in his LTH, is to grasp quickly the meaning of the words. Here in our situation we grasp the meaning of the greek word "πάθος" [pathos].


In my opinion this above fragment 221 comes from Porphyrs' platonic mind, and not from the mouth of Epicurus. Why I say that? Because...


Please look how controversial is with the following saying by Epicurus "on the wise man" by Diogenis Laertius. Since, when Epicurus uses the greek word "πάθος" [pathos] or in plural "πάθη" [pathi] he means the feeling (s) and not any "suffering".


For Epicurus the word for "suffering" is given usually and frequently in his writings with the word "πόνος" - PAIN (for the body) and "λύπη" SAD (for the soul) or "ταραχή" [agitation]. Also


for the word "πόνος" [PAIN] Epicurus uses another synonym greek word that is the "άλγος" [algos]. For "algos", see the drugs that remove the pain, and we call them as analgesics.

The saying "on the wise man", by Epicurus - which is controversial with that fragment 221 by Porphyrs - in greek is : "Ο σοφός <<πάθει>> μάλλον συσχεσθήσεται ουκ αν εμποδίσει προς την σοφίαν".

In english: "The wise man will be more deeply moved by <<feelings>> than others, but this will not prove to be an obstacle to his wisdom". page not found or type unknown

Moreover, Epicurus in his letter to Pythocles, he uses again this word "παθών" [pathon] with the same meaning. The greek text is "ἔτι δὲ κριτηρίων καὶ <<παθῶν>> καὶ οὐ ἕνεκεν ταῦτα ἐκλογιζόμεθα". And means "and also of the criteria of truth and of the <<feelings>>, and of the purpose for which we reason out these things". 

And finally, please, think also and another english word that is the word "empathy" that includes the greek word "πάθος" [pathos-passion] and means something very important that is : the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation. 

Conclusion: The neoplatonists, along with stoicism, the only that they have in mind is to remove, expel, uproot all the feelings [πάθη-pathoi] from the human being. page not found or type unknown

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## Post by “Don” of May 27, 2024 at 1:26 PM

### [Quote from TauPhi](#)

DeWitt wrote his book not as a scholar but more as a fanboy of Epicurus

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

i strongly disagree with this characterization of the DeWitt book...

I'm going to wade into the fray to add that I think you're both correct. To [TauPhi](#) 's assertions, I agree that Dewitt was a "fanboy" of Epicurus, but I don't see that as necessarily a negative. His "Epicurus and his Philosophy" and his "St. Paul and Epicurus" appear (from the publication dates) to be projects he put off completing until after his retirement from academia. He obviously gave them lots of thought, but it seems he didn't feel he could write them as part of his academic career. And we're all familiar with personal projects here at the forum and finding time to do them! Do I think some of Dewitt's ideas fall under "fan fiction"? Yes. Do I think it

detracts from the \*overall\* value of his work. Only the slightest bit.

With [Cassius](#) , I'll concur that Dewitt charted his own path, and even within his career, he was fearless in advocating for the importance of studying Epicurus. It's always gratifying to see him footnted in papers! I also like his academic papers and highly recommend those to the curious student of Epicurus, but they're not for the casual reader and definitely not a starting point! And we have Dewitt to thank for this forum, per [Cassius](#) 's history.

For myself, I admit that I have never read all of "Epicurus and his Philosophy" cover to cover. That said, the podcast episodes that methodically went through the book were very helpful in reminding me of the value of Dewitt's book. It is valuable as an overview of the history, development, and tenets of the philosophy and for providing context. It will never be my go-to recommendation (looking at you, Emily Austin 😊), but I will always include it in any important books to read bibliography.

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### Post by “Bryan” of June 3, 2025 at 11:17 PM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Oh, this looks promising?

[http://www.epicuros.gr/pages/en/Tempe...us\\_Porphiry.pdf](http://www.epicuros.gr/pages/en/Tempe...us_Porphiry.pdf)

This was written by Elias Tempelis (Professor of Philosophy at the Hellenic Naval Academy) to accompany his presentation for the 9th Panhellenic Symposium of Epicurean Philosophy.

His interpretation also excludes the quote Elli rejects, but he argues that most of the letter contains quotes from our school (with Porphyry only parenthetically adding his objectionable content). So Tempelis represents the most "optimistic" interpretation. I am inclined to agree.

Thank you for sharing this, Don. I do not think we discussed it.