

# Julie Giovacchini - "The Tetrpharmakos, Authentic Formula Or Simplistic Summary Of Epicurean Ethics?"

**Post by "Don" of August 3, 2023 at 1:35 PM**

*[CASSIUS ADMIN NOTE: Thanks to Don for finding these two articles by Julie Giovacchini. At present I only have the second in google translate form (see post below) but they look to contain a lot of interesting information and deserve a thread of their own - especially the one linked in post 2 below.]*

Gal. (Galen) and the tetrpharmakos

[De elementis, 5, 14-16 : la tetrpharmakos et l'épistémologie galén...](#)

Le passage que nous nous proposons de commenter dans ces quelques pages se place dans la première partie du texte de Galien, si l'on suit les indications de...

[journals.openedition.org](https://journals.openedition.org)

(Suggest using Google Translate for French website)

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**Post by "Don" of August 3, 2023 at 11:47 PM**

In French:

<https://journals.openedition.org/philosant/pdf/3044>

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**Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2023 at 1:10 PM**

For some reason I am just seeing these posts. Thanks for finding this material Don!

I really want to try to get the sense of that French article so I will see what I can do.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3239-julie-giovacchini-the-tetrpharmakos-authentic-formula-or-simplistic-summary-of/>

Also although I really admire Diskin Clay I think I have to side with the Germans and take the position that the PD as we have them was probably not organized and published by Epicurus himself.

*Kyriai Dosai* was written as a forty-point creed to be memorized. Nineteenth-century scholarship (mostly in German) rejected the ancient conception of the nature of the *Kyriai Dosai*.<sup>51</sup> Usener formulated four main arguments against the contention that Epicurus wrote the forty sayings and published them as a distinct collection.<sup>52</sup> First, if Epicurus had wanted to distribute forty "doctrines" he would have included all of his important ideas instead of omitting (as does the collection) references to the Canon and to physical theory. Second, the sayings are not preserved in any logical order, as would be expected if Epicurus had composed them as a series to be memorized.<sup>53</sup> Third, some of the maxims (*Principal Doctrines* 10, 20, and 24) appear to be excerpts from personal letters rather than succinctly formulated philosophical tenets. Fourth, there is repetition and duplication of sayings within the collection.<sup>54</sup>

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## Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2023 at 1:39 PM

I am going to attach here a Google Translate French to english conversion of the Julie Giovacchini document Don linked above. I am just starting to read it so not sure how useful it will be, but on first glance appears reasonable.

[TETRAFRENCH.fr.en2.pdf](#)

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## Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2023 at 2:23 PM

OK I finished reading the google translate of the French article posted above, and it contains a lot of useful information and discussion. If I had to summarize the conclusion, the writer seems to be taking the position that it was an ongoing issue in the ancient world (especially among Epicureans) to debate the relationship and usefulness of summaries vs longer texts. I gather the point is parallel to the question of whether the benefits of philosophy can be gained from what might disparagingly be called the repetition of oversimplified "magic words," or whether the benefits must come through an ongoing enterprise of study over time.

The writer also makes the point that there is a major perspective difference between the kind of material that dedicated thinkers can pursue vs what ordinary people who have no time for philosophy can benefit from. The latter don't have time for long study, but they also deserve to get as much benefit as possible from short presentations of the approximate truth.

I will see if I can quote some important sections but the bottom line view of the article seems to be that the best perspective is to appreciate BOTH approaches, just as Epicurus said that you don't always need the details but that you do need the big picture most of the time. The trouble

that is inherent in using only a few words to describe the big picture is something that we have to deal with by keeping in mind that as a practical matter it is the result that matters. Those who have the time and inclination and ability to dig into the details need to do so, and thereby they will get a deeper understanding of the issues. But those who don't have the time and inclination or ability to do so will still benefit from the summary, even if they end up missing the subtleties. Probably another appropriate time to remember the "perfect is not the enemy of the good" maxim.

Here's good quote which I think summarizes the point of the writer about the tension that is involved, but which is sustainable because we can explain the different perspectives and make use of both:

#### Quote

It must therefore be admitted that, at least in their intention, the successors of Epicurus held a difficult line. Claiming, in line with the introduction of the Letter to Herodotus and the continuity it establishes between the complete doctrine and its summary<sup>44</sup>, a perfect coherence and a complementarity between discursive ethics and the dogmatic and simplified ethics of summaries, they underlined in the same movement the risks linked to the abbreviated form; in this context the tetrapharmacos, taken out of its context, loses its rationality despite its completeness and is emptied of its meaning, since it is in reality not a magic formula but an invitation to reflection

and calculation

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### Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2023 at 2:33 PM

This one is useful too, in analogizing the question under discussion to what Lucretius alludes to with bees flitting from flower to flower:

#### Quote

The image of the bee foraging in the flowers would, according to Barns, be a transparent allusion to the composition of anthologies<sup>49</sup>. If we compare this verse to the famous Lucretian comparison of poetry with honey, used as an adjuvant to make the bitterness and brutality of the epicurean remedy assimilable<sup>50</sup>, we have here an interesting analogy which, in the whole of the *Rerum Natura*, would work at different levels:

- a first level, therapeutic: the pharmacy epicurean, which is already a complex substance coming from different elements, must be mixed with something other than itself (the honey of poetry which dilutes it) to be properly assimilated and treat immediately;

- a second level, which could be called pharmaceutical: the honey itself is the product of foraging or picking from a

collection of philosophical elements, the sentences, maxims and aphorisms attributed to Epicurus, whose intrinsic virtue makes as many pharmacy, available and usable independently of their initial discursive context from the moment they are inserted into a new discourse that presents them effectively, integrating them into a more complete whole.

There is also an interesting comparison of this issue to a passage that Seneca wrote to Lucilius:

#### Quote

You wish me to accompany these letters also, like the preceding ones, with a few sentences from our masters. But they were not preoccupied with flowerets: the whole assemblage <of their thought> is virile. Inequality, you know, is found where remarkable realities dominate. There is nothing admirable in a single tree, if the whole forest rises to the same height. These kinds of sayings, you will find them in poems, in stories. That is why I do not want you to judge that these belong to Epicurus; they come back to everyone, much more, they come back to us. But we notice them more with him, because they arise at rare moments, because we do not expect them, because it is surprising that such strong things should be pronounced by a man who teaches softness. This is indeed how many consider him. To me, Epicurus is a brave fellow, but he wears a lady's shirt. [...]

However, if you insist, I won't be stingy, but I'll have my hands full: immense is the mass of these sentences which lies pell-mell, and which must be amassed and not picked. They do not fall one by one, they flow. They are eternal and mixed together. I have no doubt, they would bring a lot to a still clumsy and ignorant listener. Because it is easier to retain concise and poetically ordered elements. That is why we give children to learn maxims, and what the Greeks call chries, because their childish mind can understand them, and is not able to embrace more. But it is shameful for an accomplished man to gather flowers, to rely on very well-known words and in very few numbers, and to stick to their memory: now that he is resting on himself! Let him speak in his name, instead of quotations.