

Recent Article on Why Stoicism Remains So Popular (Vis-à-Vis Ancient Rivals)

Post by “Pacatus” of January 17, 2025 at 2:44 PM

An interesting recent article on Stoicism in *El Pais*:

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[Why Stoicism will always be in vogue](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4228-recent-article-on-why-stoicism-remains-so-popular-vis-%C3%A0-vis-ancient-rivals/>

The popularity of books on Stoicism reflects a widespread search for values in a world where we often feel powerless. However, its philosophical ideas have...

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The author has some positive commentary on Epicureanism, and questions why Stoicism has had a better survival:

“Stoicism is not the only school of thought that offers practical wisdom for navigating a changing world. Yet, it has proven to be the most popular, even more so than Epicureanism, despite the influence it also had. The French philosopher Michel Onfray wrote in EL PAÍS that “without Epicurus, there would have been no Renaissance, no Montaigne, no libertine thought of the 17th century, no philosophy of the Enlightenment, no French Revolution, no atheism, no philosophies of social liberation.”

“However, during the early centuries of Christianity, followers of Epicureanism were often misrepresented as people who organized banquets and orgies. This was not true. In reality, the Epicureans advocated for a life centered around friendship and the thoughtful consideration of the consequences of everyday choices. They favored present moderation — such as having just one glass of wine — to avoid greater misfortunes in the future, like a hangover. But they proposed a life far removed from politics, which harmed the school’s influence, as Méndez Lloret points out.”

And: “Sellars points out another key factor contributing to Stoicism’s success: the texts of its leading thinkers are well-preserved and easy to read. Works like The Enchiridion of Epictetus, the letters and treatises of Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations are both accessible and engaging. In contrast, Diogenes left no written records, only fragments of Epicurus remain, and On the Nature of Things by the Epicurean Lucretius is more of a scientific treatise than an ethical or political one.”

[The comment about “*far removed* from politics” might be a bit overly strong – especially considering the adaptations of Roman Epicureans; viz. the essay “Caesar the Epicurean? A Matter of Life and Death” by Katharina Volk, recently shared by Cassius.]

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 17, 2025 at 3:38 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[The comment about “*far removed* from politics” might be a bit overly strong – especially considering the adaptations of Roman Epicureans; viz. the essay “Caesar the

Epicurean? A Matter of Life and Death” by Katharina Volk, recently shared by Cassius.]

It's tough to distinguish what **is** political versus what is **not** political.

I could see Lysimakhos (King of Thrace) suggesting that Epikouros was being **very** political when he offered his finance minister, Mithres asylum from a sentence. When you additionally consider that the Epicureans paid Mithres' bail, housed him in the Garden, and then helped him escape ... a few things come to mind. Perhaps the *Underground Railroad*? Perhaps *Edward Snowden* (not approving or disapproving one way or another)? Perhaps *North Korean refugees*, or any of the millions of *refugees from the conflict in Rwanda*? Seeking asylum in a foreign country to escape punishment is a supremely political maneuver. Epikouros, himself, seemed not to have fit into the culture of Mytilene, so political awareness was important for him to navigate his social context and find the right group of friends.

Then again, Epikouros never held political office, and advised others against doing so.

But he certainly knew how to play the game. He understand inheritance laws, and financial loopholes, and was able to play the system to ensure that non-Athenian residents maintained *de facto* ownership of the Garden. The residency laws of Athens were written to prevent the very thing Epikouros forced, which was ensuring that the estate was managed by a citizen of Mytilene (Hemarkhos). As far as modern lawyers and inheritance laws go ... that was **very** political.

Of course, he never engaged in theory, and never promoted a "best form of government".

Though, in the last 10 Key Doctrines, he seems to indicate (*to me, at least*) that we can pass a moral evaluation on temporary laws, such that they can be categorized as being either "just" or "unjust". Passing that moral evaluation on legislation seems categorically political to my eyes. In fact, that evaluation is often the spark that leads to an impassioned, political debate. Or, to suggest that a wise person will not necessarily follow every law in every context might be interpreted as a suggestion to violate unjust laws, if not doing so leads to greater pain and anguish.

I think we're doing good as long as we stay away from partisanship and campaign ads.

Post by “Pacatus” of January 17, 2025 at 3:47 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4228-recent-article-on-why-stoicism-remains-so-popular-vis-%C3%A0-vis-ancient-rivals/>

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😊👍 Well, I *am* partisan on some **issues** -- but I am also a pragmatist (I hope).

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 17, 2025 at 4:11 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I think we're doing good as long as we stay away from partisanship and campaign ads.

😊👍 Well, I *am* partisan on some **issues** -- but I am also a pragmatist (I hope).

I think that's a really good way to put it, as a function of *practicality*.

Post by “Bryan” of January 18, 2025 at 1:01 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

The residency laws of Athens were written to prevent the very thing Epikouros forced, which was ensuring that the estate was managed by a citizen of Mytilene (Hermakhos)

Great Point!!

I know Míthrēs was the minister of Lysimachos, and that Epikouros helped Míthrēs with a letter campaign of sorts regarding Metrodorus assisting him to get out of prison. Do we know more?

If Míthrēs was imprisoned in the Peiraeus it was probably under the orders of the Antigonid regime. It seems probable Míthrēs was just a messenger in-between the disagreement between Demetrios in Athens and Lysimachos in the east.

There is a bit of circumstantial evidence that Epikouros was favorable to the Antigonid regime, to the extent possible. We know, at least, that Epikouros stayed in the east when Cassander and Ptolemy controlled Athens, but moved there within a year of the Antigonids taking control.

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2025 at 9:07 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I could see Lysimakhos (King of Thrace) suggesting that Epikouros was being very political when he offered his finance minister, Mithres asylum from a sentence. When you additionally consider that the Epicureans paid Mithres' bail, housed him in the Garden, and then helped him escape ... a few things come to mind.

I see Bryan posed essentially the same question, but if there is more documentation to support this please link it as I'd definitely like to be sure we have that here. Is that coming from an academic article or an ancient text?

thanks!

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2025 at 9:13 AM

Quote

"However, during the early centuries of Christianity, followers of Epicureanism were often misrepresented as people who organized banquets and orgies. This was a not true. In reality, the Epicureans advocated for a life centered around friendship and the thoughtful consideration of the consequences of everyday choices. They favored present moderation — such as having just one glass of wine — to avoid greater misfortunes in the future, like a hangover. But they proposed a life far removed from politics, which harmed the school's influence, as Méndez Lloret points out."

I need to read the full article, but out of context I am not gonna lie-- most of this is damning with faint praise and I would repudiate it as helpful to the Epicurean cause. It totally ignores the revolutionary philosophical and moral side of Epicurus' teachings which distinguish him from the passive ascetics for whom "moderation" and "a life far from politics" is something to be

sought instead of prudence and pleasure and engagement with what the world has to offer.

Again I will read the full article to see if there is more context, but once again we have a so-called defense of Epicureans without once mentioning "pleasure" - except to distance them from it (banquets and orgies).

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2025 at 9:25 AM

Ok read it. No need to soften my comments. But I will add more:

Quote

But Stoicism’s history extends far beyond its recent resurgence. When Zeno founded his school, he did so at a time when other philosophical currents were trying to address similar issues. He was a disciple of the Cynics, and during this period, Epicurus founded Epicureanism, while Pyrrho developed Scepticism — philosophical schools that also offered practical responses to the societal challenges of their time.

I almost want to come to the defense of traditional Stoicism after reading that article, as I think the ancient Stoics would themselves if they could read it. The article is the kind of breezy dismissal of the deeper significance of Stoicism that they would have detested. They weren't just "offering practical responses to the societal challenges of their time." The Stoics - and the Epicureans - were taking philosophy seriously and attacking issues of eternal and enduring significance- worth living and dying for -- and not just acting as social commentators offering the latest self-help advice.

Next, on a slightly different issue:

Quote

The French philosopher Michel Onfray wrote in EL PAÍS that “without Epicurus, there would have been no Renaissance, no Montaigne, no libertine thought of the 17th century, no philosophy of the Enlightenment, no French Revolution, no atheism, no philosophies of social liberation.”

I don't know that I think that Epicurus himself would agree with that. Gosh knows I have a high opinion of Epicurus, but the arguments that had Epicurus not lived there would never have been an enlightenment or French Revolution or atheism or philosophies of social liberation" seems to me to go way too far. In the end, Epicurus didn't invent something from nothing - he

simply did the best job so far of putting all the pieces together into a coherent whole. Others would eventually have done something similar, and we would know their names instead of Epicurus'. So I don't think Epicurus himself would have agreed with a view that he was an indispensable genius.

As Lucretius himself said, nature never makes only a single thing of a kind.

In fact, I sense there's something Stoic even in looking at Epicurus that way - as if everything good in life comes because a god has handed it down from heaven. I think if Epicurus heard that kind of argument he would have said not to worry about looking to Epicurus, look to NATURE and you'll eventually --even if after a much longer journey making do without his help -- get there on your own.

Post by “Pacatus” of January 23, 2025 at 5:28 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Ok read it. No need to soften my comments.

The scathing “vox” of this critique – of a casual newspaper information piece, essentially for not being a thoroughgoing treatise that checks all the “appropriate” boxes – smacks of philosophical puritanism. The notion that any reader of this article might somehow be put off from ever exploring Epicurean philosophy (e.g., because the article did not mention “pleasure”) – and that, therefore the article does some grave disservice – is, frankly, ludicrous.

Obviously, my view does not fit with some version of Epicurean “orthodoxy.” (And that has been clear for some time.) Be well all.

Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2025 at 7:24 PM

I will address this on several levels, first for Pacatus himself, who has been unfailingly friendly and positive in his participation here, who will always be welcome, and who has a good understanding of the issues involved. Secondly I want to address this for lurkers who might not be sure exactly what is being discussed or the reasons for the disagreement.

Pacatus is aware from his lengthy participation here that I welcome postings like this thread, which bring to our attention articles that may or may not be positive about Epicurus. In the spirit of frank speech which Epicurus advised, and with the knowledge that we are speaking here at the forum with others who fully understand that we are here for the study and promotion of Epicurean philosophy, we regularly share frank criticisms of outside materials and perspectives.

One of the perspectives that is inconsistent with Epicurean views in most instances is eclecticism, which blurs distinctions about or misrepresents what Epicurus really taught. Epicurus himself complained about misunderstanding and misrepresentation of his work in the letter to Menoecus.

I have made the observation many times that it is a characteristic pattern to see some people want to Stoicize or otherwise water down Epicurean philosophy. Such people follow a repeated pattern: Most often, they praise peripheral aspects of Epicurean ethics with which they agree (prudent and self-sufficient living), but totally omit aspects with which they do not agree. Almost unfailingly, such an approach involves the omission of the keystone of the ethics, the focus on "Pleasure" as the highest good. Such watering down efforts also characteristically totally omit reference to Epicurean physics (the rejection of supernatural forces) and Epicurean canonic (the affirmation that knowledge is possible based on the senses). These latter omissions aren't quite as important as the omission of the "Pleasure," focus, but in many cases the omission of physics and canonic probably explains why such writers fail to see the error in what they are doing.

The article referenced in this thread exhibits all those characteristics, and thus I consider it unhelpful to a good understanding of Epicurus. That's the lens through which it's most important and appropriate to analyze the article here at the forum. Articles can contain good information in part, but still be articles which would not be good to recommend to people who don't already have a good understanding of Epicurus. In this case, the article is a pro-Stoic article written for Stoic sympathizers mildly acquainted with modern Stoicism. As such, it is what it is, and provides a good example for us to talk about. So to repeat -- posting it here is helpful, because it affords the opportunity for exchanges like this, which open the eyes of many people to the real issues.

Another thing to repeat is that the writer of the article didn't ask for my opinion, and I am not offering it to him by providing it here, or offering my comments to the world at large. The writer is obviously sympathetic to Stoicism and probably semi-Stoic himself, which is certainly his prerogative. Our discussion is for consumption here, by those who are interested in understanding and promoting Epicurean philosophy. From that point of view, it's helpful to observe how much he omits, both from an Epicurean and a Stoic perspective. As I said in my comments, I suspect the ancient Stoics, and modern fundamentalist Stoics, probably share my criticism of the omission of commentary about the fundamentals on which Stoicism is based. For all I know, the writer's failure to understand the role of Pleasure arises from him never being

exposed to writers like Norman Dewitt or Emily Austin. Very many good people hold their opinions because all they have been exposed to is orthodox academic commentary.

So I am glad to have the opportunity to revisit my comments in the above thread. I continue to see no reason to revise them, and this gives me the opportunity to expand them. Pacatus properly understands, and his post conveys, that there is a wide gulf between eclecticism and Epicurean philosophy.

There's a big world of generalist philosophical discussion on the internet. On the other hand, there are few if any other places where people who study Epicurus and come to see him as did Lucretius or Lucian of Samosata or Diogenes of Oinoanda or even Diogenes Laertius -- as someone whose philosophy is uniquely valuable and worthy of focus on its own. Providing such a place is the goal of this forum and while disagreements about that goal might be temporarily unpleasant, I am firmly convinced that everyone profits by our firmly standing by that goal.

Quote from Lucian of Samosata, Alexander the Oracle-Monger 61

"I was still more concerned (a preference which you may be far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him."

Post by "Bryan" of January 26, 2025 at 5:54 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

eternal and enduring

Cassius you brought up last Wednesday how Epikouros uses these terms. Here is the distinction as far as I understand it.

<p>αἰώνιος (αἰωνιᾶ, αἰώνιον)</p>	<p>perpetual (moving, multiple)</p>	<p>ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ characterized by being forever</p>
<p>αἰῖδιος (ος, ον)</p>	<p>eternal (static, singular)</p>	<p>Αἰῖδιος characterized by forever [heavenly]</p>

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 27, 2025 at 10:15 AM

There are also a lot of historical trends in our culture (writing this within the borders of America) that reinforce the tone we identify as Stoic . It seems at odds with the tone that was cultivated in the Garden. As Pamela Gordon describes in *The Invention and Gendering of Epicurus*, Europeans slowly began to (negatively) "feminize" Epicurean teachings by associating Epicurus with traits that were not culturally valued (those traits largely being unfair stereotypes of women). Compared with the medieval stereotype of Epicureans, Stoics were seen as *disciplined men of action, cunning, bold, dutiful, and admirably political*. As I have witnessed throughout my life, too many of my male friends believe in *suffering in silence*, and too many women I know fear that their value might only be worth the chores they accomplish at home, and some even view (enviously, I argue ... though I think that is the case with men, too. Despite rejection of feminine men, your average "masculine" American man spends a lot of time watching sculpted male athletes rub against each other on a field, so I honestly question how "masculine" anyone is, really...) but anyway, I think too many women I know view women

without children, who pursue careers (etc.) as "missing something". Even though less than 1% of our population identifies as being trans-women, politicians are **obsessed** with demonizing those people, largely because they do not cling to the harmful stereotype with which the rest of us are faced. Likewise, we (historically) has levied criticism against "masculine" females and "feminine" males. We're obsessed with allowing one's sex to define individual choices we make throughout our lives, and Stoicism (among other philosophies ... the Peripatetics are also very guilty of this) reinforces some of those harmful, culturally-biased perspectives. The notion that American man are *anything* but "stoic" seems to repulse traditional minds, and we often, with prejudice, look at femininity as a weakness, and something that is embarrassing or even shameful.

To popularize Epicureanism, we'd either need to hope that the rest of our culture becomes more thoughtful, more observant of nature, more welcoming toward women, more tolerant of cultural differences, more critical of prevailing beliefs ... or, we'd need to change Epicureanism. As Epicurus wrote, "*Never did I reach to please the masses, for truly what pleases them, I did not understand, but what I understood was far away from their perception*" (U187). I'm just grateful for (here's another shameless plug for *Nature's God* by Matthew Stewart) the Epicureans throughout American history that have acted as bulwarks against traditional assumptions that were reinforced, over thousands of years by the philosophies of Epicurus' opponents, like Christian superstition, Aristotle's misogyny, Plato's ableism, and the Stoic paradigm of emotions being undesirable disturbances.