

'Their God Is The Belly' / "The Root of All Good Is The Pleasure Of The Stomach" And Similar Attributions

Post by "Cassius" of November 24, 2025 at 9:55 AM

This weekend in our Sunday zoom which was devoted substantially to food issues we tangentially discussed the statements that I gather are traditionally attributed to Metrodorus to the effect that the stomach or belly is of particular significance.

I thought I'd paste the following here as what appears to be the major source of this, and repeat my belief that general statements of this type should be viewed with caution. These sources (particularly Plutarch) are substantially hostile, and I am not aware of there being a direct and reliable statement of this position in a friendly source (Diogenes Laertius, Lucretius, Diogenes of Oinoanda).

At the very least I would personally put this in the category of "the size of the sun is as it appears to be" or "[all sensations are true](#)" or "the good is easy to get" or "what's terrible is easy to avoid" which require explanation by reference to other positions before the true meaning becomes clear. Without such context and explanation I personally would not cite statements to the effect that "the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach" as an authentic statement of correct Epicurean doctrine.

I'd put all this in the context of what Torquatus says when he explains that everything is related to the body, but that the pleasures and pains of the mind can greatly surpass those of the body:

Quote from On Ends Book 1

[55] XVII. I will concisely explain what are the corollaries of these sure and well grounded opinions. People make no mistake about the standards of good and evil themselves, that is about pleasure or pain, but err in these matters through ignorance of the means by which these results are to be brought about. Now we admit that mental pleasures and pains spring from bodily pleasures and pains; so I allow what you alleged just now, that any of our school who differ from this opinion are out of court; and indeed I see there are many such, but unskilled thinkers. I grant that although mental pleasure brings us joy and mental pain brings us trouble, yet each feeling takes its rise in the body and is dependent on the body, though it does not follow that the pleasures and pains of the mind do not greatly surpass those of the body. With the

body indeed we can perceive only what is present to us at the moment, but with the mind the past and future also. For granting that we feel just as great pain when our body is in pain, still mental pain may be very greatly intensified if we imagine some everlasting and unbounded evil to be menacing us. And we may apply the same argument to pleasure, so that it is increased by the absence of such fears.

If someone has other cites or arguments that should be considered in this context please post.

U409

Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, XII p. 506F: And Epicurus says, "The principle and the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to this."

Ibid., VII p. 280A: The master of these men, indeed, was Epicurus, who loudly proclaimed... ["The principle," etc., cited above].

Metrodorus, *Letter to His Brother Timocrates*, fr. 43 (p. 51 Diels.), by way of Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 16, p. 1090D: [We are not called to save the nation as get crossed by it for wisdom; what is called for, my dear Timocrates, is to eat and to drink wine, gratifying the belly without harrasing it.] ... It made me both happy and confident to have learned from Epicurus how to gratify the belly properly. ... [The belly, Timocrates, my man of wisdom, is the region that contains the highest end.]

Cl. Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 38, p. 1125A: For it is the men who look with contempt on all these things as old wives' tales, and think that our good is to be found in the belly and the other passages by which pleasure makes her entry...

Ibid., 2, p. 1100C: ...by those who keep alleging that the good is to be found in the belly...

Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 17, p. 1090D: Indeed these people, you might say, describing a circle with the belly as center and radius, circumscribe within it the whole area of pleasure...

Cicero, *Against Lucius Calpurnius Piso*, 27.66: It is his habit in all his discussions to attach higher value to the pleasures of the belly than to the delights of the eye and the ear.

Cl. Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 2, p. 1087B: "Oho!" I said laughing, "It looks as if you are going to hop on their belly and make them run for their flesh when you take pleasure away..."

Cl. Hierocles, by way of Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, VII p. 278D (Com. IV p. 481)

U410

Post by "Don" of November 25, 2025 at 10:34 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I personally would not cite statements to the effect that "the root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach" as an authentic statement of correct Epicurean doctrine.

Well, according to the cites for U409, it seems rather well attested, including a quote from a letter by Metrodorus himself (via [Plutarch](#))

Quote

And are not Metrodorus's words something like to these when he writes to his brother thus: *It is none of our business to preserve the Greeks, or to get them to bestow garlands upon us for our wit, but to eat well and drink good wine, Timocrates, so as not*

to offend but pleasure our stomachs. And he saith again, in some other place in the same epistles: How gay and how assured was I, when I had once learned of Epicurus the true way of gratifying my stomach; for, believe me, philosopher Timocrates, our prime good lies at the stomach.

ἢ γὰρ οὐ τούτοις ἔοικε τὰ Μητροδώρου πρὸς τὸν ἀδελφὸν γράφοντος; οὐδὲν δεῖ σῶζειν τοὺς; Ἑλληνας οὐδ' ἐπὶ σοφίᾳ στεφάνων παρ' αὐτῶν τυγχάνειν, ἀλλ' ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν οἶνον, ὧς Τιμόκρατες, ἀβλαβῶς τῇ γαστρὶ καὶ κεχαρισμένως.' καὶ πάλιν πού φησιν ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς γράμμασιν ὡς 'καὶ ἐχάρην καὶ ἐθρασυάμην, ὅτι ἔμαθον παρ' Ἐπικούρου ὀρθῶς γαστρὶ χαρίζεσθαι.' καὶ 'περὶ γαστέρα γάρ, ὧς φυσιολόγε Τιμόκρατες, τὰγαθόν.'

If we accept "direct" quotes from Cicero, should we not probably accept "direct" quotes from Plutarch?

The word used for "belly" is indeed [γαστρί](#). From whence we get words like gastric, gastroenterology, etc. Cicero writes "when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of those distresses brings pleasure as a result. So as a rule, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place." There's also VS33: The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for happiness. (NOTE: "body" σαρκὸς is used here instead of "belly" but the idea is the same as Metrodorus' letter) There's also U200 (emphasis added):

[U200]

Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, 30, [p. 209, 7 Nauck]: Do not think it unnatural that when the flesh cries out for anything, the soul should cry out too. The cry of the flesh is, "*Let me not hunger, or thirst, or shiver,*" and it's hard for the soul to restrain these desires. And while it is difficult for the soul to prevent these things, it is dangerous to neglect nature which daily proclaims self-sufficiency to the soul via the flesh which is intimately bonded to it.

Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 4.10: Let me share with you a saying which pleased me today. It, too, is culled from another man's Garden: "Poverty, brought into conformity with the law of nature, is great wealth." Do you know what limits that law of nature ordains for us? *Merely to avert hunger, thirst, and cold.*

Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, II 21, p. 178.41: Epicurus, who held that *happiness consists in not being hungry, nor thirsty, nor cold...*

Cf. Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, V.35.102: Time would fail me should I wish to carry on about the cause of poverty; for the matter is evident and nature herself teaches us daily how few and how small her needs are, and how cheaply satisfied.

So, the idea of "pleasure of the belly" seems to me to be fairly well-attested within the philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of November 25, 2025 at 11:04 AM

I'm totally good with the pleasures of the stomach, but the thrust of many of these quotes makes the belly appear to be more important than any other part of the body, and I don't see that in any authentic core letter of Epicurus or Lucretius or Diogenes of Oinoanda, do you?

It rings to me more of a reduction to the absurd the other statements that are more challenging or confrontational seem to me to be much better attested and appear in similar versions in the core documents.

Post by "Cassius" of November 25, 2025 at 11:12 AM

I see that that specific phrase "Their god is the belly" is from Philippians and not directly tied to Epicureans, though it wouldn't be surprising if they were the intended target

Philippians 3:19

[King James Bible](#)

Whose end *is* destruction, whose God *is* their belly, and whose glory *is* in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

Post by "Cassius" of November 25, 2025 at 11:29 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

If we accept "direct" quotes from Cicero, should we not probably accept "direct" quotes from Plutarch?

This is an interesting topic in itself, but depending on the context I would definitely trust Cicero before I trusted Plutarch, depending on two factors that stand out to me:

- If Cicero is letting an Epicurean speaker go on at length, I'd give it more deference. Plutarch seems to rarely if ever do that. Plutarch's always on the attack and does not profess any degree of neutrality.

- We know Cicero was living at a time when he was talking to strong and dedicated Epicureans and he was in fact depending on Cassius Longinus for all his political hopes, so he had strong motivations to stay in line. I'm not aware that there's any reason to think Plutarch had any motivation to be fair to Epicureans at all.

- But the main issue would be whether the alleged statement has analogs in the core texts, and I just don't see that in this case. In fact, when Epicurus speaks so strongly of a simple diet and also the pleasures of philosophy and study of nature as to his primary sources of happiness, it appears to me that those contradict any assertion that the physical pleasures of the stomach outweigh all others. If he had been going down the road of looking to essentials, you're going to die a lot sooner if you miss water or air than missing "food" (which seems more at issue in referring to the "stomach," though I can see water being included in the stomach).

Post by “Bryan” of November 25, 2025 at 12:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

has analogs in the core texts

I think Epicurus' famous "barley-cake and water give out the highest pleasure" in his letter to Menoecus (131a) comes rather close.

If we had to choose between food and our libraries, we must pick the food in every case -- or die like those Buddhist monks that starve themselves to death while reading scriptures.

Post by “Eikadistes” of November 25, 2025 at 1:17 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I'm totally good with the pleasures of the stomach, but the thrust of many of these quotes makes the belly appear to be more important than any other part of the body

Well, it might be.

I was just thinking about this the other day. I was asking myself, "If I had to take a basic math test, would I score better with a stomach virus? Or with heartbreak?" I'm not sure if the answer would be the same for everyone, but I decided that I could manage with heartbreak (or turmoil better). With a stomach virus, I'd feel incapable of mustering the focus to apply critical thought. With heartbreak, through extreme focus, I can make the numbers make sense. I was thinking back to when I took the SATs, and I do well on those kind of tests, and I was a psychiatric mess when I took it. But when, back in the day, I'd suffer a hangover, I could barely focus on my name, let alone algebra.

I'm also thinking in terms of the value of digestive processes versus intellectual faculties for growing organisms. Depressive thoughts can mislead you, but a stomach ache is as honest as your eyes. It will never give you severe pain without a concerning, physical cause. Sometimes the mind hypes itself up. At that, we have the Epicurean Doctrine about the infinite desires of the mind, because, without a sharp intellect, the mind doesn't self-regulate. But the stomach won't let you trick yourself. You can't just shove something down that makes you sick the way you can repress bad memories ... well, maybe to a degree, but I think you see what I mean, in general.

Post by “Don” of November 25, 2025 at 2:14 PM

I'm in agreement with [Bryan](#) and [Eikadistes](#) in their posts above. Additionally...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

whether the alleged statement has analogs in the core texts

We have SO few extant core texts from card-carrying Epicureans that we have to rely on what's reported fragmentarily in other ancient authors. I want to take a look at the lineage of those fragments in U409:

- [Metrodorus - quoted letter by Plutarch - 330-278 BCE]
- Cicero - 106-43 BCE
- Plutarch - c.40-120s CE

- [Hegesippus](#) - 110-180 CE
- Athenaeus of Naucratis (Deipnosophistae) - c.170s-210s CE

The Hegesippus quote appears to be:

Quote

And Hegesippus, in his Philetairi, says—

That wisest Epicurus, when a man
 Once ask'd him what was the most perfect good
 Which men should constantly be seeking for,
 Said pleasure is that good. Wisest and best
 Of mortal men, full truly didst thou speak:
 For there is nothing better than a dinner,
 And every good consists in every pleasure.

Display More

The "For there is nothing better than a dinner," is τοῦ γὰρ μασᾶσθαι κρεῖττον οὐκ ἔστ' οὐδὲ ἐν ἀγαθόν: where the translation "dinner" corresponds to μασᾶσθαι which has the connotation "knead, press into a mould, esp. of barley-cakes which were subsequently moistened and eaten without baking." There's our barley-cakes again.

I will grant you every which way that we're dealing with hostile witnesses (and one's going for humor in the case of Atheneaus), but if they say they're actually quoting something we're almost obligated to believe they're at least quoting or paraphrasing something.

When Athenaeus writes that: *And Epicurus says—“The origin and root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; and all excessive efforts of wisdom have reference to the stomach.”* ἄρχῆ καὶ ῥίζα παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ ἢ τῆς γαστρὸς ἡδονῆ; καὶ τὰ σοφὰ <καὶ> τὰ περισσὰ ἐπὶ ταύτην ἔχει τὴν ἀναφοράν.' That sounds like Epicurus, especially with his use of ἀρχῆ καὶ ῥίζα echoing pleasure being the ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος. The pleasure of the stomach (ἢ τῆς γαστρὸς ἡδονῆ) is being called the ἀρχῆ καὶ ῥίζα "foundation/origin and root" just as pleasure writ large is the foundation/origin and end-goal.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the physical pleasures of the stomach outweigh all others

I don't see Epicurus (siphoned through those later authors) saying that. It seems to me he's saying "You can rely on your stomach. Listen to your stomach. When you're hungry eat, not to excess but to relieve your REAL feelings of hunger." and so on like Bryan and Eikadistes wrote. Satisfying your stomach/hunger is listening to nature. I could also see this taken metaphorically. If your stomach is upset, if you're nervous and you have butterflies, listen to

your stomach. This is the same idea as the mind per Diogenes Laertius being located in the thorax/chest (not necessary "the heart" like some write): the rational part resides in the chest (τὸ δὲ λογικὸν ἐν τῷ θώρακι): θώρακι = [θώραξ = the abdominal cavity, chest, thorax](#); “κεφαλῆς καὶ θώρακος καὶ τῆς κάτω κοιλίας” taken as extending below the midriff.

Post by “Don” of November 25, 2025 at 2:18 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I just don't see that in this case. In fact, when Epicurus speaks so strongly of a simple diet and also the pleasures of philosophy and study of nature as to his primary sources of happiness, it appears to me that those contradict any assertion that the physical pleasures of the stomach outweigh all others.

Additionally on this, you seem to be inferring that "the pleasures of the stomach" have to do with something more fancy than "a simple diet." That's not necessarily the case. It's about satisfying that natural feeling of hunger, listening to your body, tuning into your body's needs: hunger, thirst, cold. If you can satisfy those, THAT is the foundation and root of The Good. Yes, take advantage of all pleasures. All pleasures are part of The Good; but you must satisfy the root and foundation before you can experience all the other pleasures life has to offer. That's my take.

Post by “Don” of November 25, 2025 at 2:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I see that that specific phrase "Their god is the belly" is from Philippians and not directly tied to Epicureans, though it wouldn't be surprising if they were the intended target

Philippians 3:19

[King James Bible](#)

Whose end *is* destruction, whose God *is* their belly, and whose glory *is* in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

It's a difference without a distinction, but I found it interesting that Philipians uses [κοιλιά](#) (koilia) instead of γάστρα (gastra):

ὧν τὸ τέλος ἀπώλεια ὧν ὁ θεὸς ἡ κοιλία καὶ ἡ δόξα ἐν τῇ αἰσχύνῃ αὐτῶν οἱ τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες

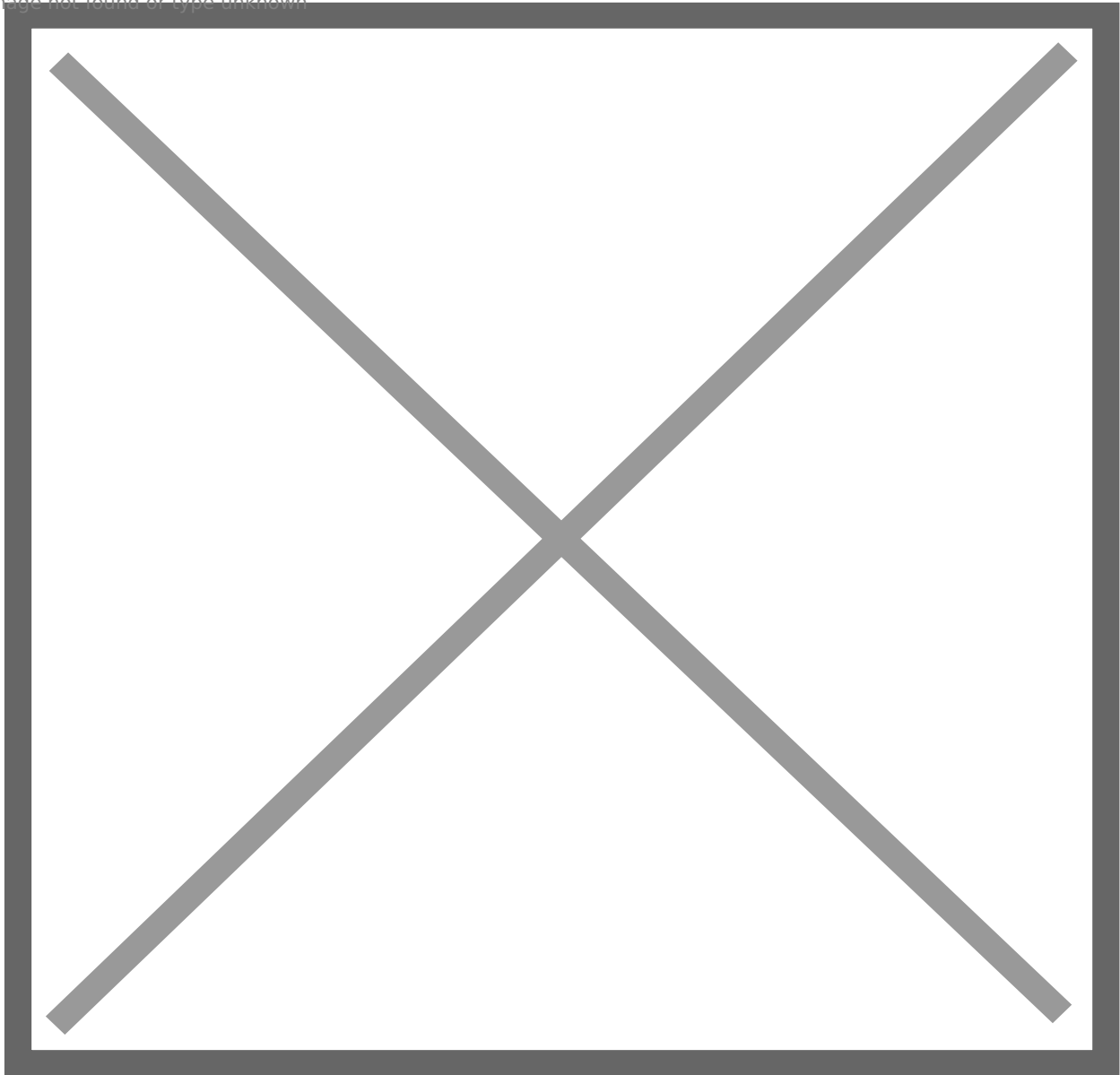
Post by “Pacatus” of December 9, 2025 at 11:42 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The word used for "belly" is indeed γαστρί. From whence we get words like gastric, gastroenterology, etc.

With the idea that γαστήρ actually referred to the whole digestive system, I remembered something about our gut as a “second brain.” Modern biology seems to offer new insights into the importance and multivariate role of our gut - including on such things as mood and feelings, and mental well-being generally.

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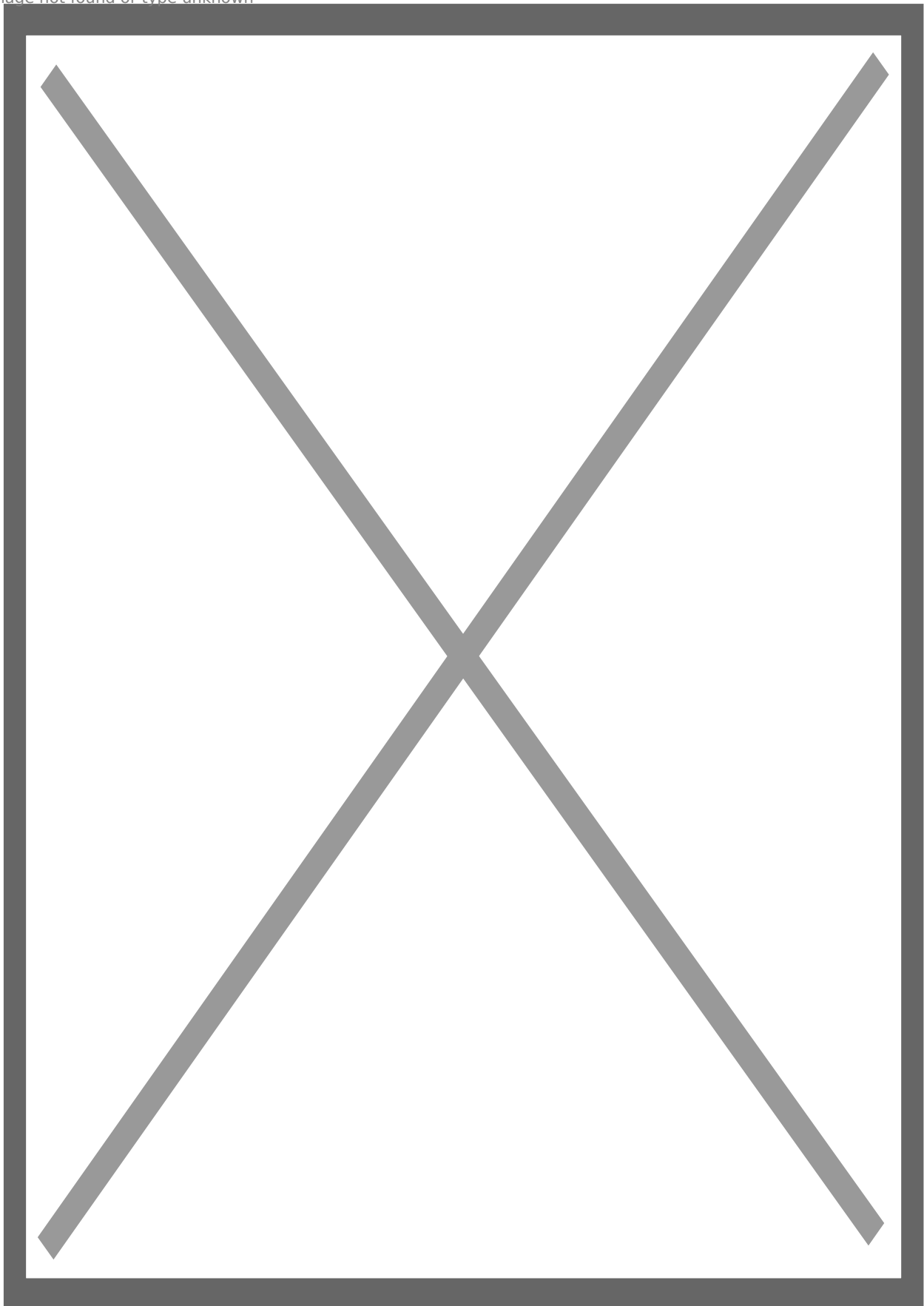


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[Think Twice: How the Gut's "Second Brain" Influences Mood and Well-Being](#)

The emerging and surprising view of how the enteric nervous system in our bellies goes far beyond just processing the food we eat
www.scientificamerican.com

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/the-brain-gut-connection>

Post by “Pacatus” of December 9, 2025 at 12:12 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

who mind earthly things.

Oh the horror! That we should "mind earthly things"!? [/s]



Post by “Don” of December 10, 2025 at 11:29 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

who mind earthly things.

Oh the horror! That we should "mind earthly things"!? [/s]



The KJV "earthly things" makes it sound like a moral slight (earthy, base things.. And I'm sure that's part of it), but the word is literally "things on the earth, things in the world."

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on *earthly things*. (NRSV updated ed.)

ἐπίγαιος "on or of the earth, terrestrial" I'm assuming in contrast to things of heaven.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4821-their-god-is-the-belly-the-root-of-all-good-is-the-pleasure-of-the-stomach-and-s/>

Post by “Joshua” of December 11, 2025 at 12:07 AM

Quote

"earthly things"

I made a passing reference in [episode 284](#) of the podcast (15:43 mark) to the connection between Cicero and Christianity on this point. Here is the passage from Tusculan Disputations, II, XIII:

Quote

For you must either admit that there is no such thing as virtue, or you must despise every kind of pain. Will you allow of such a virtue as prudence, without which no virtue whatever can even be conceived? What then? will that suffer you to labour and take pains to no purpose? Will temperance permit you to do anything to excess? Will it be possible for justice to be maintained by one who through the force of pain discovers secrets, or betrays his confederates, or deserts many duties of life? Will you act in a manner consistently with courage, and its attendants, greatness of soul, resolution, patience, and **contempt for all worldly things** [*rerum humanarum despicientiae*]? Can you hear yourself called a great man, when you lie groveling, dejected, and deploring your condition, with a lamentable voice; no one would call you even a man, while in such a condition: you must therefore either abandon all pretensions to courage, or else pain must be put out of the question.