

An Observation On Using Opposing Philosophers To Argue Epicurean Positions

Post by “Cassius” of May 23, 2026 at 10:51 AM

Here's something that just occurred to me. I may be forgetting obvious examples so that's why I am posting - to see if there are counterexamples:

When I think about writers in the ancient world, I see non-Epicureans - Seneca is maybe the best example, as well as potentially Marcus Aurelius and certain Christian church fathers - regularly citing aspects of Epicurus approvingly and working to enlist Epicurus to support their own ideas.

In contrast, among the authentic Epicurean advocates of the ancient world, I can think of very few - and at the moment no - examples of the Epicureans approvingly citing their own philosophical opponents. Now perhaps in physics citations to Democritus could be argued as a counter-example, but even there the Epicureans appear to have been very clear that Democritus was praiseworthy to a limited extent on his atomism, but not worthy of citation or emulation on much else. And I don't recall the Epicureans citing Socrates or Plato in an approving way. It would be more logical to look for approving citations to Aristotle, but even those seem to be few if any in the works that survive.

To the extent this observation holds up I would say there is probably more to this than just accident, and it's something to consider learning from. In the modern world, we have the Stoics regularly working to enlist Epicurus in support of their ideas of detachment and ascetic / minimalist living. Even worse, we have people who categorize their writing as Epicurean but who arguably spend as much or more time citing and promoting arguments from other intellectual traditions that are at root hostile to Epicurus.

I do think the ancient texts clearly show that the Epicureans regularly cited arguments from other schools *to oppose them*. But I don't see much to support the view that the Epicurean leaders thought it to be a good idea to "name-drop" opposing philosophers in support of their own Epicurean arguments, especially in ethics.

In fact I know that as Joshua has pointed out many times in the podcast, it was specifically a point of contention between Torquatus and Cicero that the Stoics and Platonists seemed to love nothing more than citing the words and deeds of "great men of the past" to establish their ethical preferences.

So while the opponents of Epicurus - both in the past and today - seemingly love to enlist Epicurean arguments in support of their own ethical views, is it accurate to observe that the

authentic Epicureans seem to have thought that citing opponents, especially in ethics, was not generally a good idea?

Post by “Joshua” of May 23, 2026 at 12:03 PM

What we tend to see is Epicureans adapting the ideas of others, but refashioning them so that they slot in to the broader framework of Epicureanism.

The Empedoclean view of the principles of Love and Strife as ethical forces of nature was not found suitable, but the Lucretian refashioning of this idea into the metaphorical Venus and Mars of atomic physics was useful to him as a didactic poet, so he used it.

His borrowing of the account of the plague in Athens from Thucydides might have followed a similar course, except that the poem ends abruptly.

And DeWitt points out somewhere that Epicurus was capable of enlisting Homer in his defense if it came to it.

Post by “Godfrey” of May 23, 2026 at 12:29 PM

In line with [Joshua](#)'s point, I've often thought of the categories of desire as an improvement on Eastern philosophies that treat desire as something to be suppressed. This may be historically controversial but I feel like it's a high probability FWIW. There was plenty of cultural exchange in the ancient world and it only makes sense that a radical thinker like Epicurus would make use of all of the information available to him.

Post by “Todd” of May 23, 2026 at 12:36 PM

I'm not aware of any counter-examples, but it wouldn't surprise me if there were at least *some*.

It makes a lot of sense that what you say would be the case, though. When you have a philosophy that is not only attractive to the average person, but whose principles are self-

evident, or logically derived from what is self-evident, you would have nothing to gain, and much to lose by any kind of appeal to authority.

(And I'm not really sure how much the Greek philosophers were really considered authorities outside their own students. I have the impression they were frequently thought of more like clowns, or potential trouble-makers.)

For the later Stoics and the Christians, the situation was different. At that time, there were lots of Epicureans, they were known as being difficult to convert, and they definitely wanted to convert them. So it makes sense that the Stoics and Christians would try to portray their ideas as compatible with Epicurus' teachings as much as they could.

Edit:

...then once they had accomplished that, that they would try to erase the memory of Epicurus. Interestingly, the Jews, who were not trying to make converts, just straightforwardly called him a heretic.

Post by “Bryan” of May 23, 2026 at 12:57 PM

Great point. As a bit of "an exception that proves the rule," we do have:

"[Epicurus] especially approved of Anaxagoras among the ancients, Diocles says → even though in some respects [Epicurus] had opposed [Anaxagoras] – and also [Epicurus approved of] Archelaus, the teacher of Socrates."

μάλιστα δ' ἀπεδέχετο, φησὶ Διοκλῆς, τῶν ἀρχαίων Ἀναξαγόραν → καίτοι ἔν τισιν ἀντειρηκῶς αὐτῷ – καὶ Ἀρχέλαον, τὸν Σωκράτους διδάσκαλον Diogenes Laertius (fl.c. 220 CE), 10.12 fin.

Post by “wbernys” of May 23, 2026 at 11:16 PM

To add onto [Joshua](#) point, along with homer, they also may have cited Hercules, to prove pain to be an evil. In Diogenes Laertius they pointed to Hercules lamenting at the pain of being torn by his poisoned Tunic but it's hard to tell if he's quoting a Epicurean example or his own.

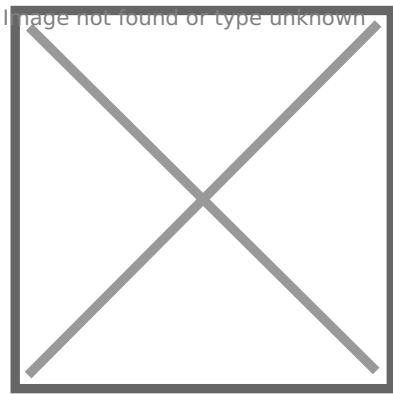
Quote

Left to our own feelings, then, we shun pain; as when even Heracles, devoured by the poisoned robe, cries aloud,

"And bites and yells, and rock to rock resounds,
Headlands of Locris and Euboean cliffs."

For today we may imagine someone making the point of pain being an evil by Jesus prayer in Gethsemane to avoid crucifixion to God, and wailing on the Cross "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" in the Gospel of Mark and Matthew.

Post by "Don" of May 23, 2026 at 11:45 PM



[Phaeacian Dido: Lost Pleasures of an Epicurean Intertext](#)

Commentators since antiquity have seen connections between Virgil's Dido and the philosophy of the Garden, and several recent studies have drawn attention...

www.academia.edu

6 Heraclitus reveals that the supposed connection is in fact more precise: there was an established tradition of reading Odysseus' professed appreciation of Phaeacian pleasures (Od. 9.5-11) as an Epicurean manifesto. Odysseus delivers his famous declaration, of course, at the Phaeacian banquet soon after his rescue by the princess Nausikaa.

(PS. I realize Homer isn't a philosopher, but this seemed appropriate in light of the direction of this thread)

Post by "Cassius" of May 24, 2026 at 7:46 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5102-an-observation-on-using-opposing-philosophers-to-argue-epicurean-positions/>

[Quote from Don](#)

(PS. I realize Homer isn't a philosopher, but this seemed appropriate in light of the direction of this thread)

Yes that's an important distinction.