

Was Epicurus really arrogant?

Post by "Cassius" of January 8, 2022 at 4:36 PM

Quote

Epicurus declared himself to be "self- taught" and he arrogated to himself the title of Sage or Wise Man, a concept familiar to the Greeks.

The former title was reserved by Epicurus for himself alone, a seeming arrogance which elicited the sneers of his detractors.

I admit I have not checked the footnotes, but the first "arrogated to himself" I would not read as meaning "he was the only one in the world" and as to the second sentence I would expect that if there was accuracy in that, it might have been relevant only within "his" school, among the people with whom he interacted. Both of those would be reasonable. (and in connection with the "philosopher" name, you've probably read the controversy about Epicurus' attitude toward Leucippus, and that it is alleged that Epicurus held that he did not even exist. DeWitt argues (if I recall) that the meaning of that controversy was that Epicurus did not consider Leucippus worthy of the title of philosopher, given Epicurus' view of Leucippus' errors. So it may be that part of what we're talking about here was sort of a colloquial "worth of the title of philosopher."

I readily admit that I am speculating about all this, but I would strongly suspect that everything anyone has to go on is speculation: inference built upon inference upon inference, and that not everyone in the chain of inference was attempting to be charitable. So great caution is to be advised on all sides.

These are the kinds of questions that aren't really resolvable, but in my mind I refer them all to "what would be the most consistent with the philosophy as a whole," and the kind of unflattering "cultism" that people tag him with is hardly the only possibility and not the one most consistent with the philosophy.

I would never assert that Epicurus was perfect and without inconsistency, but since what we have are the broad outlines complemented by some significant detail that points to an overall level-headed man and level-headed bunch of people, I think it's always a poor idea, and unfair, and even illogical, to jump to an unflattering conclusion as the strongest possibility.