

Natural Wealth and Natural Goods in Epicureanism

Post by "Kalosyni" of July 22, 2022 at 11:22 AM

I like Don's translation: " Nature's treasure has boundaries and is easy to procure; the riches based on empty beliefs are infinite and always out of reach."

The above article ("Retrospectives: What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by "Oikonomia?") linked at the top of this thread, is very good at shedding some light on the meaning of this. Here are some excerpts:

Quote

A summary of Stoic and "Peripatetic" (meaning "Aristotelian") economic thought by Arius Didymus was saved, as well as treatises dedicated to economics by members of the Pythagorean (Callicratidas), Stoic (Hierocles), and Epicurean (Philodemus) schools.

By and large, these texts were addressing male citizens who headed well-to-do households and adhered to the values of the landed gentry. This meant that, on top of uncritical acceptance of enslavement and the subjection of women already mentioned, a valorization of self-sufficiency of the household (autarky) and a degree of scorn about market trading infused these works.

In the writings of the ancient Greeks, the life of the head of the household--the oikodespotes who was the addressee of these texts--was conducted in three dimensions: the spiritual realm of philosophy, the heroic realm of politics, and the economic realm. The role of the economic dimension was to secure the means necessary for existence and to generate a surplus that sustained the two other dimensions that were deemed worthy of man. This could be done in two ways: either by increasing production or by moderating consumption.

Economic theory distinguished between four different possible ethical dispositions (corresponding to philosophical life, political life, luxurious life, and economic life). It discussed the surplus generated by the economy and the means suited to achieve what was deemed the best ethical disposition.

Modern economists hold that means are scarce. However, the ancient Greeks saw nature as potentially capable of satisfying all of man's needs if economized rationally (for example from Aristotle, see Polanyi 1968, pp. 98-9, in Epicurean and Cynic economics, see Tsouna 2007, pp. 178-80). Moreover, nature was assumed to provide for much more than man's needs, and thus a limit had to be placed on engagement in wealth generation that might otherwise lead men to lose sight of the good life. The need to set a limit to indulgence in wealth generation on the one hand, and the threat of submerging oneself in a luxurious life on the other, meant that nature was seen not just as the means to sustain humanity abundantly, but also excessively.

Display More

Epicurus would have studied and known the other existing philosophies, and it would be interesting so be clear about how his views were either similar or different than Aristotelian views -- especially regarding natural, necessary, and unnatural.

In the article jumping to the section on "Abundance, Surplus, and Economic Rationality" which starts on page 230, brings up Aristotle views about these terms.

Will post more on this later.