Erler's view on 'True Epicurean Politics'

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4. Aristotle

Now it is striking that this transformation of elements of traditional political concepts and their integration into the philosophical discourse as ‘true politics’ is not just something that was proposed by Plato and then died with him. Rather, Socratic ‘true politics’ created a tradition, which began with Aristotle: For in the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that there are two kinds of politics: first, traditional politics, which is motivated by personal ambition, and, secondly, what he calls ‘true politics’ and a ‘true politician’, who strives to make his fellow citizens ‘good or better’ concerning their soul. This is, of course, exactly what Plato’s Socrates stands for. “Also, the true statesman seems to be one” – or so Aristotle says – “who has made a special study of goodness, since his aim is to make the citizens good and law-abiding men”.

It is obvious that Aristotle’s differentiation between traditional and true politics, which is intended to educate and improve the souls of the citizens, picks up what Socrates has to say about ‘true politician and true politics’ in the Gorgias, where Socrates also argued that the educational intention of ‘true politics’ only can be turned into practice within a small circle of students and in case one avoids traditional politics.

5. Philodemus

As the example of Aristotle shows, Socrates’ transformation of politics into philosophical ‘true politics’ actually was the starting point of a tradition and as such reads like a blueprint for what we heard about the Epicurean ‘true politics’, the intention of which is to provide ‘true security’ within man. This becomes clear if we have a look at the treatise On frank criticism written by the Epicurean Philodemus in the 1st century BC; it is an epitome (a condensed account) of lectures given in Athens by his teacher Zeno, which Philodemus attended.

This treatise illustrates well how Epicurean ‘true politics’ works as an educational programme in a small circle of applicants instead of large crowds in the polis. For instance, it discusses how the political concept of parrhesia, or ‘freedom of speech’, was used in the Epicurean school as a means to disseminate Epicurean doctrines. For that reason, Philodemus demands edification, admonition and correction of the disciples, advocates openness and rejects concealment, strives for trust and wishes to
avoid distrust.

For according to Philodemus, the aim of Epicurean education, of which parrhesia forms a basic element, is to reform the character of the disciple by emotional change and theoretical inquiry. Philodemus offers rules for a philosophical discourse which will prove useful and therapeutic for his follower’s soul. Just as Socrates does in the dialogue Phaedrus (and as is

practised in all other dialogues), the Epicurean Philodemus teaches us that
the application of educational elements, like encouragement or criticism, should be adjusted to the disposition of the addressee.

It seems obvious to me that the political concepts of parrhesia, elenchus or rhetoric, which were transformed by Socrates into elements of his philosophical ‘true politics’, were used by the Epicureans in the context of their own ‘true politics’ in order to create ‘true security’, which – according to the Epicureans and Socrates – traditional politics cannot provide. From that I conclude that the Epicurean dichotomy between traditional and ‘true’ politics goes back to Plato’s Socrates and may have been conveyed to Epicurus by Aristotle or by reading the Gorgias himself.

6. Diogenes of Oenoanda: An Epicurean Politician

Epicurus as a Socratic politician and benefactor to the community: this is the model that was emulated by Diogenes who lived in the second century AD in Oenoanda, a small town in Lycia near the river Xanthus, not very far from today’s Antalya in Turkey. Diogenes had a monumental Epicurean inscription erected in a public place, the Stoa. This inscription is of great interest for our discussion on what Epicurean true politics means. For Diogenes informs us that he published the inscription as a manifestation of his beneficence (euergesia) and as an example of what could be called ‘true politics’ in his local hometown. The inscription also tells us something about the role of true politics in an ideal society and its relation to its laws, which comes close to what we learn from Plato’s Republic.

It proves that, like Plato, the Epicureans were by no means legalists in the sense that philosophical enemies like Plutarch and modern interpreters want to portray them. According to the inscription, the Epicureans rather proposed a kind of political utopia, which – as they claim – would function in many ways without laws and would be based on the practice of true politics – very much like Plato’s ideal state, Kallipolis. So let us hear the reasons why Diogenes decided to have this inscription written on a wall in Oenoanda:

Having already reached the sunset of my life [and] being almost on the verge of departure [from] the world on account of old age … I decided, … to help now those who are well-constituted. Now, if only one person or two or three or four or five or six … were in a bad predicament, I should address them individually and do all in my power to give them the best advice. But since … the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, … and, [moreover], since it is right to help [also] generations to come … and since, besides, love of humanity prompts us to aid also the foreigners who come here – now, since the remedies in written form reach a larger number of people,I decided to use this stoa to advertise publicly the [medicines] that bring salvation, medicines, which we ourselves have put [fully] to the test.

These sentences make it clear: Diogenes thinks that most people are afflicted with the pestilence of false opinion about the true nature of things, i. e. by fear of the gods, of death, and generally fear of all that is foreign to them. By putting up the inscription, Diogenes wishes

to be a benefactor to his fellow citizens, but also to mankind as a whole: Education through enlightenment in order to offer a medicine for the plague of ignorance: that is what the inscription promises to its reader. Since 1883, 299 fragments of this inscription have been discovered and deciphered, and more is to come. By now, we can infer that the inscription was over 80 metres long, that the overall height of the sections of the text was 3.5 metres, and that only 30% of it has been found so far.

Along with the papyri from Herculaneum, the inscription is one of the most important sources for later Epicurean philosophy and enriches the corpus of Epicurean writings with new testimonies, hitherto unknown letters of Epicurus, new aphorisms of the school's founder and, not least, with extensive discussions of Epicurean teachings by Diogenes himself, about whom we only know what is derived from this inscription.

The text consists of seven horizontal rows of script with numerous sections, which are arranged one above the other. At the bottom there is an epitome of Epicurean ethics (Fr. 28–61 Smith) in which Diogenes deals with
the benefits of virtue and pleasure. Above that (II) there is a section on Epicurean physics (Fr. 1–27 Smith) with reflections on atomic theory, epistemology and theology, astronomy, and the origins of civilisation; and above that again, writings by Diogenes and Epicurus (Fr. 97–116 Smith).

Both these latter sections are inscribed with smaller letters than the other sections
and are positioned at the reader's eye level. Below the section on ethics, there is a line in larger letters with maxims from Epicurus' main teachings and other aphorisms. In this way, they form for the reader, not only optically but also in terms of content, a fundament and, as it were, a legitimation of Diogenes' Epicurean treatises. Above the section on physics there is a section (III) consisting of two letters written by Diogenes to his friends Antipater (Fr. 62–67 Smith) and Dionysius (Fr. 68–74 or 75 Smith), and some aphorisms. Above that (IV) follows a section with some texts by Epicurus and Diogenes (Fr. 119–136 Smith). The final section at the top of the inscription consists of three rows, each set above the other (V–VII), with a treatment of the problems of aging (De senectute, Fr. 137–179 Smith), a critical discourse on the so-called drawbacks of old age, such as idleness, illness, loss of enjoyment, and approaching death.

As we have already noticed, Diogenes addresses his inscription to open-
minded novices in Epicurean philosophy. Like Epicurus, Diogenes sees philosophy as a vademecum for his fellow citizens and for passers-by from all over the world, seeing himself as a cosmopolitan. With his inscription, Diogenes seeks to offer his readers an aid and a remedy for living their lives and to help them help themselves. This didactic intention is emphasised by the design of the inscription as that of an open papyrus roll. Each section is written in columns, with strict rules of syllabification. This is a way of offering to the reader, in a public place, something akin to an open book with an exposition of Epicurean doctrines.

Now, the very public display of the text may be seen as conflicting with Epicurus' maxim that Epicureans are to live a reclusive life (lathe biosas). But Diogenes himself, by implication,

clarifies his position in relation to this maxim by describing his observations as a particular kind of politics, which sees itself as a therapy for the souls of his fellow citizens and not as normal politics. For he says:

In this way, [citizens,] even though I am not engaging in public affairs (prattein), I say these things through the inscription just as if I were taking action, and in an endeavour to prove that what benefits our nature, namely freedom from disturbance, is identical for one and all.

Obviously, Diogenes is just doing what we expect an Epicurean to do: to put politics into practice – this is what prattesthai means – but he does not mean traditional politics, but 'true politics', namely educating the reader by teaching them Epicurean physics and ethics – in short, Diogenes is practising the philosophia medicans, which might help the reader to be healed from the disease of ignorance.

In doing so, Diogenes proves that he not only has a profound knowledge of Epicurean teachings, but also is familiar with other philosophers. He explicitly mentions Plato and Socrates several times. Mostly, of course, Diogenes is critical of them. But there is one passage where – as I shall argue – Diogenes' Epicurean teaching comes quite close to what Plato has to say about the role laws should play in an ideal community. The passage belongs to the ensemble of some fragments (NF 167 + NF 126 + NF 127 + Fr. 20 + NF 182), which appropriately have been called a "Theological Physics sequence".

In this passage, Diogenes speaks about those who will be just only because they are able to think correctly, i. e. just because they are Epicurean wise men. This fragment not only helps to understand better a dispute between Epicureans and Platonists about the ideal community and the importance of laws in it, as for instance Plutarch describes it in his treatise Adversus Colotem. I shall argue that Diogenes' statement about the Epicurean wise man should be taken into account when discussing what the Epicureans thought about how men should live together in an ideal community which functions well without laws just because of the fact that Socratic Epicurean 'true politics' is practised there, and that this should be understood as an Epicurean response to Plato's concept of the ideal city, that
is to say as an Epicurean Kallipolis.

Just a short reminder of the passage: The overall argument of the fragment is to show that Epicurean gods do not harm human beings by living a remote life without interfering with humans, punishing the bad or rewarding the good, because – or so Diogenes is convinced – the fear of the gods
does not influence humans towards a just life.

In order to prove this, Diogenes distinguishes three groups of humans: a) Those who are bad and unjust. These people would not care about the gods anyway, and even less would they be afraid of Plato's underworld judges;

b) the ordinary people, who are just only because of their fear of the laws and of the penalties imposed;

and c) those wise people, who do not need gods and laws in order to live a righteous life: for they are able to think correctly in contrast to ordinary people, who are righteous on account of the laws only. But, as for the others, I declare that those of them who grasp arguments based on nature are not righteous on account of the gods, but on account of their having a correct view of the nature of desires and pains (IV) and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures).

The last category is the most interesting for us because Diogenes obviously considers the possibility of man being able to be just because of right, i. e. Epicurean thinking. This – it seems to me – is an important statement since it seems to contradict the opinion often held in modern and ancient times that Epicureans are legalists, a view which is also presupposed by ancient critics like Plutarch in his anti-Epicurean polemics in Adversus Colotem and especially in a passage at the end of the treatise.