

Erler's view on 'True Epicurean Politics'

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7. Plutarch

Let us therefore turn to Plutarch for a moment. At the end of his *Adversus Colotem*, Plutarch criticises Colotes for praising those who established law in societies because they provided human life with security and tranquillity of mind:

The men who appointed laws and usages and established the government of cities by kings and magistrates brought human life into a state of great security and peace and delivered it from turmoil. But if anyone takes all this away we shall live a life of brutes.

Plutarch argues, however, that a happy life that is guaranteed only by obedience to laws as a guide to a good and just life is unworthy of a true philosopher. According to him, the Epicureans would live like beasts if there were no laws to deter them from this way of life, because they always pursue pleasure and wish to gratify every desire.

For if someone takes away the laws, but leaves us with the teachings of Parmenides, Socrates, Heraclitus and Plato, we shall be very far from devouring one another and living a life of wild beasts.

Plutarch, on the other hand, is convinced that true philosophers like Parmenides, Socrates, Heraclitus or Plato have no need of laws to deter people from being unjust or living like beasts. Plato's followers will live a just life because they live according to Platonic philosophy. Plutarch of course agrees that Plato wrote important books on the philosophy of laws. The philosophy itself, however, that he implanted in his pupils, was much more important and admirable.

Now, when reading Plato's *Republic*, one cannot but agree with Plutarch. In the *Republic*, Plato aims at showing that justice is an intrinsic good. Therefore, Plato argues, nobody will do wrong, even if he or she is able to do wrong without being detected, because doing wrong would do harm to one's own soul. Plato is convinced that it is possible to live according to his teachings and that this will make people feel secure and happy. This is why written laws and traditional political institutions are of less importance in Plato's ideal city Kallipolis.

Of course, Plato admits, this ideal community based on philosophy is a utopian place, but a utopia that could conceivably come about as an object of prayer (*euche*). Since Plato is well aware of the fact, though, that the majority is not strong enough to justly live according to his philosophy, he offers the concept of a community – *Magnesia* – that is based on rules and laws which have to be accepted by all members of the community.

Now, let us come back to what Plutarch has to say about Colotes' argument, according to which laws are necessary to prevent people from devouring each other like beasts, and have a look at it in the light of Diogenes' statement about the Epicurean wise man. At first sight, Colotes' statement seems to defend a strong legalist position. Modern commentators even feel reminded of what Glaucon says in Plato's Republic, for there he argues, playing the devil's advocate, that it is good to commit injustice, if one is strong enough to do so. Since human nature always wants more (pleonexia), it is natural to live out one's aggression and simply commit injustice whenever it seems helpful –especially if one has a great chance of not being detected.

This is the reason why laws are necessary to protect us against suffering injustice from people who are stronger than we are. However, laws should not prevent us from doing injustice if we are able to. Now, despite some similarities, there is an important difference between Diogenes' statement and that of Glaucon in the Republic, which should not be overlooked. According to Epicurus, human beings are not aggressive by nature and do not strive for power and pleonexia, as Glaucon claims, but they long for security and happiness.

Otherwise, the cradle argument, which – as we have seen in an earlier chapter – tries to prove that the argument according to which all humans by nature strive for hedone, i. e. pleasure, would not be valid. Of course, Epicureans recognise the necessity of laws. But as Diogenes' statement shows, for Epicureans they are the second-best solution when one wishes to create a society of people who feel "secure" and happy.

As we read in Diogenes and in other Epicurean texts, laws are necessary when speaking about common people's motivation and how to deter them from injustice. This is the option Colotes obviously is addressing, but, as we learn from Diogenes, there is an even better option or possibility: namely that of people acting according to Epicurean philosophy, guided by their phronesis alone. This is what Diogenes says and this is what is already hinted at in Kyria Doxa 13:

There would be no advantage in providing security against our fellow-men, so long as we were alarmed by occurrences over our heads or beneath the earth or in general by whatever happens in the boundless universe.

Obviously, what Epicurus wants to say here is that laws cannot protect us against the fear from inside, which is caused by ignorance concerning disturbing phenomena like, for instance, death or pain. For the Epicureans were convinced: When one does something wrong, one never will be sure that this criminal act will not be detected. This uncertainty creates a kind of insecurity from inside, which can only be avoided if you realise by rational calculation – phronesis – that it is not good to do something wrong.

Only reason, that is, can protect us from unhappiness. This is also true when one is confronted with adverse phenomena, such as death or pain. In these cases as well, rational thinking is needed. In that case, true security can only be provided by Epicurean physiologia:

It would be impossible to banish fear on matters of the highest importance, if a man did not know the nature of the whole universe but lived in dread of what the legends tells us. Hence, without the study of nature [physiologia] there was no enjoyment of unmixed pleasures.

For even if human life is protected by walls and institutions and laws, humans will be afraid of irritating phenomena, such as death or pain, if they are not able to understand what the phenomena that concern human beings, like pain or death, really mean. At this point, Epicurean physiologia is needed to protect us. As we learn from the Epicurean Hermarchus: If all humans recognised the benefit that results from justice, laws would not be needed. As we have argued in the first part of the lecture, the Epicureans are convinced that it is possible and necessary to live according to their philosophy in order to be secure and happy. A society based on laws, we now learn from Diogenes, is a second-best solution – as far as ordinary people are concerned. This is what Diogenes' statement implies and this is important for three reasons.

First, it is now clear that the Epicureans are not strict legalists. They only accept a legalist position with regard to common people, just as Plato does. For I would like to remind ourselves of the fact that Plato as well propagates an ideal city, Kallipolis, which is governed by Socratic true politics and where laws are not needed precisely because of this true politics, which can provide people with a happy life.

However, Plato, too, is aware that for common people laws are necessary. For them he created Magnesia, where laws are the foundation of social life. We now realise that Epicurus as well is propagating a social utopia, an Epicurean Kallipolis, so to speak, where – as Diogenes puts it in Fr. 56 Smith – “fortifications are not needed and all humans are happy”. That is to say, with regard to their political utopias both Plato and Epicurus are not legalists.

For sure, Epicurus does not believe that justice is something intrinsically good or should be chosen for its own sake, as Plato does. The Epicureans rather accept justice because of its consequences, a position which Plato ridicules in the Republic.

And of course, their respective conceptions of what philosophy is are worlds apart. Yet these differences should not prevent us from realising that both agree on the fact that the kind of philosophy they defend would allow everyone to live a happy and secure life in a community where laws are not needed.

Second, Diogenes teaches us something about Plutarch's argumentative strategy. For obviously the latter's polemic against Colotes only works because he leaves out the Kallipolis option. For only then can he turn Epicureans into legalists and criticise them as such. Diogenes' statement on the Epicurean wise man should warn us not to isolate the quotation of Colotes from its context and turn Epicureans into legalists, as Plutarch does and modern interpreters want them to be.

Rather, Diogenes teaches us once again that, despite grave differences, Epicureans sometimes are more closely related to Plato than Platonic polemics want us to see. Diogenes' fragment not only throws light on an

element of Epicurean political thinking. It indeed helps us to understand better the strategy of argumentation which Plutarch pursues, and which has misled some modern interpreters by suggesting that Epicureans are legalists. In fact, Epicurus – like Plato – is a utopian anti-legalist.

This brings me to my third and last point and back to the beginning of this chapter: Just like the utopian Kallipolis, as it is described in Plato's Republic, the Epicurean lawless utopia is based on the philosophical knowledge of the wise men and a practice of politics which Socrates calls 'true politics'. We have seen that the postulate to practise true politics instead of traditional politics goes back to Plato, was accepted by Aristotle, and forms the background to what Epicurus and the Epicureans have to say about politics. We have also seen that even in imperial times the Epicurean Diogenes not only accepted this tradition, but also illustrated it by putting up his inscription as a document which illustrates what is meant by practising 'true Socratic-Epicurean politics'.