

Characteristics of the Wise Man, 1-9 Rough Draft of Outline

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2020 at 1:26 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

NOTE: What does this mean? How does this connect with the evangelical nature of the philosophy? We know women were a part of the Garden and wrote treatises, so the "state of body" can't exclude women. And Epicurean communities were in "barbarian" lands. How to interpret this? Is this where DeWitt is getting that Epicurus said non-Greeks couldn't achieve wisdom? I can certainly see that if someone is incapable of studying and applying the philosophy due to mental illness, brain injury, or other condition. I can also see some "nations" not being conducive to allowing or encouraging study and application because of repression, culture, exposure to the philosophy, etc. I would be reluctant to say (for modern applications) anything akin to "women can't be sages" or "Russians can't be sages."

On this one, which I also agree is important, I don't think there is a conflict between (1) we are evangelical toward those who either are or could be our friends, but also (2) we acknowledge that some people just aren't and aren't going to be our friends. I agree with you that mental illness and brain injury are two categories, but there are probably lots of other circumstantial categories, at least at particular times, like age, health, culture etc. That's why I would definitely agree with you that Epicurus would not say "women can't be sages" (though he might generalize more than we would prefer, in the same way he might say that "children" or "the very aged" or someone else who due to personal circumstance would be facing an emergency or some obstacle that infringed on their freedom of action or thought).

But again, what is a "sage"? Do we limit "sagehood" to "teachers" or "leaders of schools"? If we did that, then it would probably be possible to say that there are a wider variety of obstacles toward being such a leader, such as personality issues.

But I still tend to think that "sage" in this context means more like "any human acting wisely under their circumstances" so I personally would draw a much tighter circle on who is "incapable" of it. I would say today that "incapable" would mean mostly just some mental or physical handicap that we'd agree would have to be significant. However if we used "incapable" more broadly to mean "incapable under their current circumstances" then the net would be much wider and contain all sorts of people who due to personal circumstances have been hindered or brought to a point where they just can't see their way past the problems of the moment to a wider perspective.

In fact that approach is probably the key to what I would propose as the answer. Given enough time and education and resources virtually everyone has great potential. But if you focus on the immediate present, which is probably a very valid way to look at it since we're trying to stay away from idealism, then you have to be more practical about the question of who is capable of "being a sage" now, or next week, or next month, or next year.

So maybe I am thinking that we are sensitive about this analysis because we are looking to avoid overgeneralizing, but maybe Epicurus was just looking at the relative near term and judging more practically based on experience, and that he was in fact totally talking without reference to categories or overgeneralizing. Every time I think about Epicurus' approach to "categories" I think (Hey, that sounds like Aristotle and Plato, there are no "natural categories" in an atomist natural universe) -- and I tend to then think that Epicurus is saying "don't get caught up in categories, just look at the facts of the present and the foreseeable future."