

# Discussion of Article: "Political Division In The Promotion of Epicurean Philosophy: A Prescription For Disaster"

**Post by "Cassius" of September 28, 2019 at 8:54 AM**

This is the thread for discussion of the article: [Political Division In The Promotion of Epicurean Philosophy: A Prescription For Disaster](#)

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**Post by "Cassius" of September 28, 2019 at 10:32 AM**

[ Post by Elayne]:

Although I'm fairly active on various specific political issues that affect my life, I do not belong to a political party, because all of them contain heavy elements of idealism.

A party or political system I would regard as Epicurean would be recognizable by the \_process\_ members went through to reach their individual positions, from which they would negotiate with others-- not by their specific positions on the issues.

I decide my positions on issues according to my assessment of effects on my pleasure, which includes the pleasure of those I care about. But when I discuss politics with non-Epicureans, this is not how they are going about it-- they are approaching it as a team sport, rather than negotiating within their team and explaining to each other how they are conducting their hedonic calculus.

For a specific perspective on issue X, we could say maybe there are perspectives A, B, and C. Different Epicureans could take the perspectives A, B, or C because their pleasures differ, because the issue affects their pleasures differently, or because they are predicting the outcomes of action differently. For the first two possibilities, they may be able to negotiate based on give and take on a range of additional issues, commonly called horse-trading. For the 3rd, it could be very useful for them to compare how they are making their predictions of net effects of action, because they may learn from each other and change their minds based on scientific analysis. This last type of discussion is only possible if participants are willing to put their own pleasure ahead of idealism.

In a group of Epicureans engaged in politics, at least we would have the process of decision-making in common, and discussions would make more sense. But the excerpts from Wilson's book show that she is not using an Epicurean process at all-- she is not talking about what would give her pleasure. She is a social utilitarian.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 28, 2019 at 10:33 AM**

I agree with your comments Elayne. There is a lot of thinking to be done on these issues, including an aspect you raise here: "I do not belong to a political party, because all of them contain heavy elements of idealism." I think that may be a completely appropriate decision for a particular Epicurean to reach - I personally do not associate with political parties either.

But I do not think we would go so far as to say that it would be un-Epicurean to associate with a political party in every context. Often it is necessary to engage in group activity in order to offset the activities of other groups, with an obvious example being that when Greece is being invaded by Persia, the Athenians and the Spartans had better put aside their differences and form a "group" in order to fight off the attack. There's probably a boundless sliding scale of when and what type of group political activities are appropriate.

So a part of reality and living in the world is that some things can be handled individually, while some things require group coordination. As you say the "process of decision-making," presumably based on agreements as discussed in the last ten PD's, are probably going to be a distinguishing feature of normal Epicurean activities. But even saying that, there are likely to be emergencies that don't allow for extended debate and universal consent.

The bottom line is that Cicero's "one size fits all" formulation of law and justice is exactly the opposite of what an Epicurean view of the universe would support. I am attaching a clip of the Yonge translation of this passage, which indicates that this text is really from Lactantius and Augustine, which taints it even further:

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## ON THE COMMONWEALTH.

universal, unchangeable, eternal, whose commands urge us to duty, and whose prohibitions restrain us from evil. Whether it enjoins or forbids, the good respect its injunctions, and the wicked treat them with indifference. This law cannot be contradicted by any other law, and is not liable either to derogation or abrogation. Neither the senate nor the people can give us any dispensation for not obeying this universal law of justice. It needs no other expositor and interpreter than our own conscience. It is not one thing at Rome, and another at Athens; one thing to-day, and another to-morrow; but in all times and nations this universal law must forever reign, eternal and imperishable. It is the sovereign master and emperor of all beings. God himself is its author, its promulgator, its enforcer. And he who does not obey it flies from himself, and does violence to the very nature of man. And by so doing he will endure the severest penalties even if he avoid the other evils which are usually accounted punishments.

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**Post by "Cassius" of September 29, 2019 at 9:33 AM**

New poster E:

***I'm a newbie here. How would an Epicurean choose between pleasures in the political arena? Does one try to assess what will yield the greatest good for the greatest number? Or some other process?***

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**Post by "Cassius" of September 29, 2019 at 9:34 AM**

Elayne to New Poster E:

New Poster E, the decision process is the same in all cases. We consider the likely effects of different actions on our personal pleasure and choose to maximize it.

All new members were asked to say they have read the file document "Not Neo-Epicurean but Epicurean" before joining, and that document explains that we do not take the social utilitarian perspective of "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Epicureans treat our beloved friends differently from those who try to harm us. Our own pleasure is closely bound up in the pleasure of our friends-- and this is not a "should" situation, just an observation. It's natural for us to want our friends to be happy, and that can extend (depending on the person) to include the happiness of strangers. For instance, yesterday I spent a couple of hours volunteering on trail maintenance in my local land trust, and I got pleasure out of knowing this would be helpful to other hikers in my city. I didn't tell myself I should have pleasure from it-- it was spontaneous. Epicureans regard pleasure and pain as primary sources of information about our environment, which means we don't idealize them anymore than we would tell people they ought to start seeing a yellow sky instead of a blue one.

But we aren't indiscriminate. We don't abstract humans into numbers and treat them all the same-- that's the type of thing you hear in an idealist, rule-based philosophy.

That's why the process is the same for politics as for choosing what to eat for dinner. For each proposed law, I consider how it would affect my pleasure. I weigh also the consequences of spending time on political involvement for specific issues, vs using that time on something else. Sometimes I have found political activity itself to be fun-- depends on who I would be working with and other factors. I have enjoyed knowing I contributed to a handful of changes in my state laws, by meeting with legislators and giving them information.

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**Post by "Cassius" of September 29, 2019 at 9:35 AM**

I completely agree with what Elayne wrote and wish to stress this: " Our own pleasure is closely bound up in the pleasure of our friends -- and this is not a "should" situation, just an observation."

The point I am emphasizing is that Epicurean philosophy has no "should" rules other than what we perceive ourselves through pleasure and pain. Elayne has used the example of volunteering in trail maintenance, and how she experienced direct pleasure in her own actions, as well as mental pleasure from knowing that her actions would be of benefit to other hikers like herself.

This is an example of how Epicurus considered the effect of *\*all\** types of pleasure, both physical and mental, in his philosophy. He stated that mental pleasures *\*can be\** (but are not necessarily) stronger than physical pleasures. But he gave no ideal formula by which every person must (or should) add up those pleasures in his or her own experience. That is up to us to do, and it cannot be done by an outsider who does not have our own bundle of likes and dislikes and genetic and cultural and educational history. We can *\*force\** such calculations on others, which is what is done by "the greatest good of the greatest number" but we can never really know that our forced calculation is what each individual would choose for him or herself. In fact, what we know is the opposite - that generalization will never fit the reality of the individuals.

These observations are very unsettling for many people. They presume due to their training in religion or in secular humanism that everyone is or should be basically alike, and that they see things the same way we do. Not to endorse or to criticize it, but such a viewpoint is rolled up into politicians who, for example, wish to "export democracy" or "make the world safe for democracy" and to compel everyone to share their own view of government, whether it be Marxist or capitalist or socialist or libertarian or whatever.

Such "universalist" or "utilitarian" or "one size fits all" viewpoints go far enough to realize that pleasure comes in many forms, both mental and physical, and that abstractions can be very pleasurable to contemplate. But those viewpoints dismiss the truth that different people calculate their abstractions in different ways, and that there is no "higher" justification that any abstraction "should" carry any greater weight than any other. There is only what "is" in the lives of real people. We can wipe out our political enemies in the millions with firebombs and nuclear weapons, and then bask in the glory that everyone who is left shares our views, but after such as war there is not a bit more "justification" for our having taken those actions than we had before the war started. There is no God or ideal perfect standard by which we can say that our actions were justified by a higher good. Those actions may or may not lead to our greater pleasure or pain than if we had not taken them, but that standard (pleasure and pain) is the only standard given by Nature for such decisions.

If you read the last ten of the doctrines of Epicurus, which focus on the fact that there is no such thing as "absolute justice," you will see that Epicurus was fearless in following the observations of his physics and epistemology to their logical ethical conclusions.

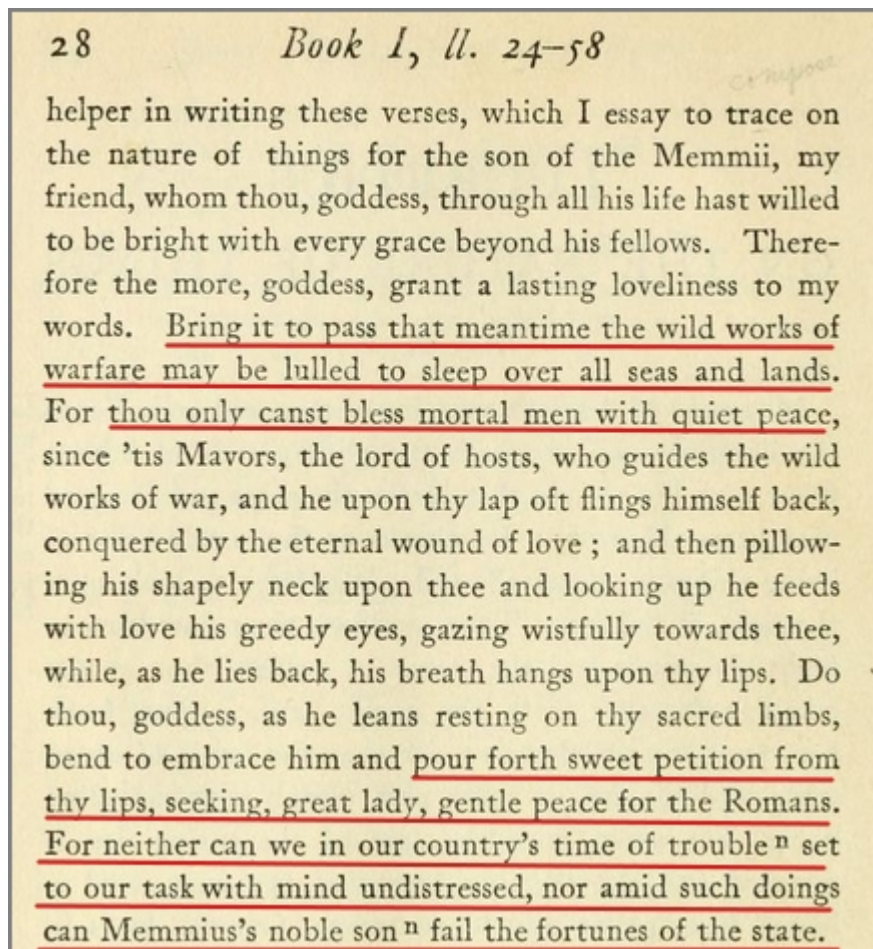
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## Post by “Cassius” of September 29, 2019 at 7:42 PM

I just remembered another text that bears on this topic, from the famous opening of Lucretius' Book One.

Note that Lucretius is calling on Venus, the goddess of Pleasure, for aid in restoring peace to his country during troubled times, and that he is ALSO, at the same time, saying that Memmius, his intended target to convert to Epicurean philosophy, will NOT DESERT THE STATE in its time of trouble.

Lucretius joins his call to the philosophy of pleasure with a call to **\*\*action\*\***, but he does not presume to tell Memmius *\*how\** to come to the aid of the state.



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