

Was Epicurus really arrogant?

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 7:20 AM

After reading the fifth chapter of the book, I'm left with a sour taste in my mouth. Epicurus is here portrayed as a somehow self-centered philosopher. Posing for portraits, claiming the right to be claimed „wise man“, as opposed to „philosopher“, only for himself, and letting his disciples celebrate the birthday of his mother and father don't seem for me to be adequate traditions for such a school of philosophy. Thus, I get the impression that Epicurus was really interested in self-promotion as the „wise man“... which doesn't make sense, regarding his claim that everyone can be happy. If everyone can truly be happy, why then claim the title to be the only wise man, as opposed to the philosopher title, for himself? What does this title even mean in a philosophy of happiness- why is it necessary to introduce wisdom there?

Many questions, few answers 😞

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 8, 2022 at 11:39 AM

Quote

“One wise man is not wiser than another.” (Epicurus, Wise Man Saying 29)

Post by “Don” of January 8, 2022 at 11:43 AM

Again, if you're getting that impression from DeWitt... I have issues with DeWitt's fabricating "historical fiction" on the barest (if not non-existent) evidence or citations.

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 1:09 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

If everyone can truly be happy, why then claim the title to be the only wise man, as opposed to the philosopher title, for himself?

If you have a page and line number I'd like to see that, rather than just post general comments that in general I think DeWitt is the best available commentator. I don't accept that this was Epicurus' position (that he was the only wise man).

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 8, 2022 at 3:13 PM

Quote

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I thought of that myself, I was simply lazy 😊

Well then. The portrait quote- page 101:

Quote

He gave sittings for his own portrait, which he must have known would be copied. Naturally, the custom was not peculiar to Epicureans, because statuettes of Socrates are extant and Origen mentions portable images of Aristotle and Democritus.⁶⁰ What was peculiar to the Epicureans was the integration of the custom with their doctrine. The Pauline doctrine of "all members in one body" was anticipated by them.

The "wise man" and "philosopher" part:

Quote

Epicurus declared himself to be "self-taught" and he arrogated to himself the title of Sage or Wise Man, a concept familiar to the Greeks. He could not claim inspiration, because he denied all participation of the gods in human affairs. He was capable, however, of claiming perfection of knowledge, because he had approximated to the life of the gods. Thus to him his wisdom was not a revelation, though it was such to

his disciples.

Still seems like a weak excuse for me.

And:

Quote

Parallel to the distinction between the head as "leader" and the three next in rank as "associate leaders" was the difference between sophos, the sapiens, "wise man," and the philosophos, "philosopher."²⁸ The former title was reserved by Epicurus for himself alone, a seeming arrogance which elicited the sneers of his detractors.²⁹ The three below him were merely "philosophers," which marks the title as being on the same footing as "associate leaders.

and on the celebration of his mother and father birthdays:

Quote

He scrupulously observed the performance of the customary rites in honor of his father, mother, and brothers and also of members of his circle who predeceased him.⁷¹ In addition to this he instituted the custom of composing and publishing pious memoirs of the deceased associates.

Post by "Cassius" of January 8, 2022 at 4:36 PM

Quote

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The former title was reserved by Epicurus for himself alone, a seeming arrogance which elicited the sneers of his detractors.

I admit I have not checked the footnotes, but the first "arrogated to himself" I would not read as meaning "he was the only one in the world" and as to the second sentence I would expect that if there was accuracy in that, it might have been relevant only within "his" school, among the people with whom he interacted. Both of those would be reasonable. (and in connection with the "philosopher" name, you've probably read the controversy about Epicurus' attitude toward

Leucippus, and that it is alleged that Epicurus held that he did not even exist. DeWitt argues (if I recall) that the meaning of that controversy was that Epicurus did not consider Leucippus worthy of the title of philosopher, given Epicurus' view of Leucippus' errors. So it may be that part of what we're talking about here was sort of a colloquial "worth of the title of philosopher."

I readily admit that I am speculating about all this, but I would strongly suspect that everything anyone has to go on is speculation: inference built upon inference upon inference, and that not everyone in the chain of inference was attempting to be charitable. So great caution is to be advised on all sides.

These are the kinds of questions that aren't really resolvable, but in my mind I refer them all to "what would be the most consistent with the philosophy as a whole," and the kind of unflattering "cultism" that people tag him with is hardly the only possibility and not the one most consistent with the philosophy.

I would never assert that Epicurus was perfect and without inconsistency, but since what we have are the broad outlines complemented by some significant detail that points to an overall level-headed man and level-headed bunch of people, I think it's always a poor idea, and unfair, and even illogical, to jump to an unflattering conclusion as the strongest possibility.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 9, 2022 at 5:40 AM

Quote

I would never assert that Epicurus was perfect and without inconsistency, but since what we have are the broad outlines complemented by some significant detail that points to an overall level-headed man and level-headed bunch of people, I think it's always a poor idea, and unfair, and even illogical, to jump to an unflattering conclusion as the strongest possibility.

Yes, that's a good point. I think that I've to think about it a bit more, because- as you stated-, we've only excerpts of his life, and most of the descriptions are from rival philosophers; yet I wouldn't say that Epicureanism doesn't have a hang to cultism either, simply from my own experiences. It's probably somewhere in the middle.

Post by "Cassius" of January 9, 2022 at 6:09 AM

Reasonable. But I would suggest that if this continues to be a concern for you after you read further that you bring it up again later so we can be sure to discuss the subtleties of what you still consider later on to be "cultism." I think those concerns are likely to go away on their own but if they don't by all means let's discuss them further.