Erler's view on 'True Epicurean Politics'

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 22, 2024 at 2:01 PM

The following text comes from Michael Erler's book Epicurus: An introduction to this practical ethics and politics. Erler is professor of classical philology at the University of Würzburg. His book contains six lectures that he delivered in Beijing. This is the third lecture and concerns the topic of Epicurus' politics. He argues convincingly against the traditional misunderstading of ancient and modern interpreters that the Epicureans were strict legalists. I agree with Erler's view.

1. Epicurus and Socratic ‘Politics’

In this chapter, I wish to pose the question whether, and if so, how an Epicurean would accept to live in a community like the Greek polis. At first sight, the answer to this question might seem clear. It is common knowledge, or so it seems, that Epicurus refused to get involved in politics at all. Epicurus advised his followers to disengage from the public and to “abstain from politics”, as we read in a fragment of Epicurus’ important, though lost ethical work On Lives (De vitis). We also learn from Plutarch that, according to Epicurus, Epicureans should withdraw from the ‘many’ and ‘live
unnoticed’ – and indeed, the expression lathe biosas has become a kind of hallmark of Epicureanism, but also a target of many attacks by Epicurus’ adversaries. So the right answer to the question whether or not Epicureans wished to get involved in public affairs and the community seems to be negative.

In what follows, I would like to try to question what appears to be the common understanding of the Epicurean position. I shall argue that Epicureans – although trying to keep out of the everyday affairs of politics in the traditional sense of the word, nevertheless were well prepared to be involved in society and to practise politics in a different sense of the word. For by ‘practising politics’ the Epicureans did not mean dealing with the political institutions of the community. Rather, Epicurean politics aimed at improving the mental disposition of their fellow citizens in order to help them live a happy life.

I shall argue that Epicureans regarded their philosophy as a political activity in itself, and I shall suggest to call this kind of activity ‘Socratic politics’, since it very much reminds us of the kind of philosophical activity which Socrates practises in Plato’s dialogues and calls ‘true’ politics in the Gorgias, in contrast to traditional politics, and indicating that he is talking about his own philosophical pragma, i. e. his epimeleia tes psyches or ‘caring for the souls’ of his partners and of his fellow citizens in order to provide them with the security they had declared to be the main goal of doing politics. Thus it will be argued that the Epicureans distinguished between two different ways of practising politics and had in mind two different concepts of security – the

traditional social security provided by the polis and a security provided by ‘true – i. e. Epicurean – politics’, which does not require traditional institutions or protection by city walls. I shall try to show that in this respect Epicurus’ understanding follows the Socratic tradition.

In the second part of this lecture, I shall introduce to you a monumental inscription, which the Epicurean Diogenes put up in Oenoanda, a small town in Asia minor, in the second century AD. The inscription propagates the basic tenets of Epicurus’ teachings, and, as I shall argue, is a manifestation of Epicurean–Socratic ‘true politics’, as far as its intention is concerned.

In addition, I shall try to show that a recently discovered fragment of this inscription confirms the observation that the Epicureans indeed favoured the concept of an ideal community, which resembles Plato’s ideal city Kallipolis as presented in the Republic, in so far as both communities are managed by ‘Socratic’ true politics rather than traditional politics and that in both poleis traditional political institutions and written laws are of minor relevance. This is a new and important aspect for the Epicurean tradition, which often is thought of as legalist by modern interpreters as far as their conception of justice is concerned. I shall argue that this is not true in an absolute sense, just as it is not true for Platonism.

2. Epicurean Politics and its Aim: True Security

2.1 Social Security

So let us first reconsider the Epicurean view on the meaning of politics. In order to understand why Epicurus recommends to live unnoticed and to keep out of politics, we should ask ourselves what is meant by ‘politics’ when Epicureans warns us not to get involved. In order to do so, one has to keep in mind that the underlying motivation for Epicurus’ political thinking and his major criterion for judging politics is the question whether a certain kind of politics is able to provide security, tranquillity, and confidence for its people: This trias is the core of the Epicurean motivation for any political consideration.

For sure, the Epicureans recognise the fact that one needs to try to create social security for human beings. This is what Epicurus expects from traditional politics and this is why Epicureans were well prepared to get involved in politics – but only if necessary, as we read in Seneca’s treatise De otio and realise in the final crisis of the Roman republic. For at that time, Roman Epicureans indeed decided not to “stay out of politics”, if I may remind you, for instance, of Cassius, who in about 48 BC converted to Epicureanism and despite or, perhaps, just because of this fact, joined the Academic Brutus in fomenting the conspiracy against Caesar in 44 BC.

So he and many others who we know of did not wish to disengage from political affairs at all costs – or at least, if they thought it to be unavoidable. We learn from a passage by the Epicurean Colotes and quoted by Plutarch in his treatise Adversus Colotem that „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”. From

this it seems to become clear that Colotes praises lawgivers and law-governed communities because of the protection they provide against any threats to life and because of the social security they offer. It is because of statements like these that Epicureans often are regarded as legalists by ancient as well as by modern interpreters. But, as we shall see shortly, this judgement is at least one-sided.

2.2 From the Inside

According to the Epicureans, it is not enough to provide social security, that is against external danger. For sure, traditional politics might be helpful in order to protect us against enemies and to secure physical integrity, in so far as it provides us with social security and therefore might mitigate the fear of external enemies. But traditional politics is regarded as a dangerous business and based on a wrong view of how security is to be attained. In Kyria Doxa 7, we read:

Some men have sought to become famous and renowned, thinking that thus they would make themselves secure against their fellow-men. If, then, the life of such persons really was secure, they attained natural good; if, however, it was insecure, they have not attained the end which by nature's own promptings they originally sought.

The Epicureans were convinced of the fact that there exists a form of uneasiness or insecurity which stems from inside of man and cannot be fought by building walls or by creating laws or a good government. For even if walls and castles and laws protect our bodies from the fear of death, the fear of the gods and irritations, which result from misunderstanding how the world works and from wrong judgement of traditional values like wealth or power, remain inside. And these misunderstandings cause irritation and insecurity, which often result in misbehaviour and aggressiveness towards others. That is to say, insecurity and uneasiness within man are caused by a lack of knowledge and wrong understanding of what death means, what the gods do, or how natural phenomena are to be understood. According to the Epicureans, it therefore is of greater importance to achieve security in the sense of tranquillity of mind. For according to them, this kind of security alone guarantees true happiness.

Thus, for the Epicureans there are two kinds of insecurity and two methods of providing security: First, external insecurity, which can be fought by traditional politics, and secondly, insecurity stemming from within, and which must be erased by complete clarification of the real causes of phenomena. For it is impossible to remedy fear of the phenomena, the gods, or death, if one does not understand how the world functions, as Epicurus states: "It would be impossible to banish fear on matters of the highest importance if a person did not know the nature of the whole universe, but lived in dread of what the legends tell us (mythos). Hence without the study of nature there was no enjoyment of unmixed pleasures".

From this follows, to quote Epicurus again:

There would be no advantage in providing security against our fellow humans, 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.

Only then, a tranquil state of mind, the ataraxia, can be guaranteed – namely by explaining why death is nothing to us, that the gods do not care about us and therefore are not to be feared, and that phenomena should not irritate us because everything can be explained without any teleological intention.

That is to say, since there are two causes for feeling insecure: one from outside of men, one from inside, there also have to be two kinds of politics: one that tries to provide social security with respect to men by dealing with social affairs, institutions and government, which is called traditional politics; and another kind of politics, which is able to explain how the world functions, why death is nothing to us, why the gods are not to be feared and that all goods that are necessary for a good life are readily available – in short: what is needed is the Epicurean physiologia. Lack of knowledge and fear often are the causes for breaking the rules and for other forms of misbehaviour, as the Epicurean poet Lucretius writes in his poem De rerum natura:

that for fear of death men are seized by hatred of life and of seeing the light, so that with sorrowing heart they device their own death, forgetting that this fear is the fountain of their cares: it induces one man to violate honour, another to break the bonds of friendship, and in a word to overthrow all natural feeling.

Therefore, freeing one's mind from these kinds of fear by means of physiologia is of much greater importance than achieving security. From this follows that the Epicurean ban on politics only concerns traditional politics, but not true or rather philosophical politics, i. e. the Epicurean philosophia medicans, which, in fact or at least according to the Epicureans, does a better service to the souls of people and in doing so, to communities and poleis. It is not by chance that Epicurus was called the saviour of mankind and the city, because he tries to save the souls of the city, not its institutions. Epicurus is the true politician and Epicurean physiologia or philosophy is true politics: this might seem strange to us – or at least a utopian programme; but it is interesting to see that Epicurus was neither alone nor the first to recommend this kind of approach. In fact, as I shall suggest, he picks up what Plato's Socrates recommends in Plato's dialogue Gorgias. And in the Apology, Socrates even calls himself the saviour of the city.

3. Socrates, the True Politician: Gorgias

So let us turn to Plato's dialogue Gorgias for a moment and see what Socrates tells us there about politics and what he calls 'true politicians'. Although Socrates discusses different topics with different partners in the Gorgias, he focuses on the question how to live a happy life. In the dispute with Callicles, the question concerning the correct mode of life comes to a head over whether one should choose to become a 'politician or philosopher'.

Callicles defends the political life while Socrates represents the philosophical side. Traditional 'political life' stands for a lifestyle, which, according to Callicles, is oriented around common

sense. It deals with the institution of the polis and orients itself towards the enforcement of one's own interests. Socrates confronts this understanding of politics with what he calls "true politics", the aim of which, in contrast to traditional politics, is to help others to become better and to be happy. To improve other people's souls is the goal of Socrates' question-and-answer game, which leads people to perplexity (aporia), but also to awareness of the fact that they are dependent upon mere illusions.

For Socrates, it turns out, the topic of the discussion of whether to do 'philosophy or politics' does not involve mutually exclusive alternatives. For Socrates, to do politics means to do philosophy because politics as he understands it should be concerned with creating order in the soul of the citizens and in society as the source of justice and therefore of individual and civic happiness. The goal of true politics, which does not regard philosophy and politics as incompatible, is the conversion of men and the restoration of order in their soul. The leading representative of this lifestyle is Socrates as he says himself:

I think I am one of few, not to say the only one, in Athens who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state.

A true politician, such as Socrates – it seems – is not concerned with power and with institutions, but rather with creating the conditions in individuals that will allow them to interact with the powerful, that is institutions and other people, in a correct manner. For real power consists in what is actually good for one's own soul and having the capacity to implement this knowledge.

People like Pericles, Cimon, or other well-known celebrities do not represent the politicians who serve Athens well, but it is Socrates, the philosopher, who claims to serve the Athenians best. For Socrates is not interested in dealing with political institutions. Instead, he cares for the souls of his fellow citizens (epimeleia tês psychês), an approach which therefore could be called philosophia medicans since it tries to free people from misconceptions by refuting them.

Socrates is the true politician because he cares for the souls of his fellow citizens: This might seem bizarre to some modern interpreters. However, one should not forget that to the ancients the word polis does not necessarily entail the aspect of territory or institution as the modern concept of state does. Polis rather means community of people as individuals.

This is why Socrates calls his philosophical pragma 'true politics' and this is why in Plato's Republic, where Plato talks about true politics and develops his ideal polis, Kallipolis, laws play only a minor role. In the Republic, Socrates has much to say concerning the human soul, but much less concerning laws and next to nothing about political institutions.

Although laws exist in Kallipolis, these laws often stand for unwritten rules only, which should be supervised by the philosopher-ruler. In the Republic Socrates regards them as helpful, but inflexible and therefore as a second-best solution. A life without rules is described in the Politicus in the context of a myth. It is only in Magnesia, the second-best option of a state

described in the Laws, that institutions and laws really matter.

This notion of polis forms the background
to Socrates' discussions on traditional elements of political concepts just as
much as rhetorical or ethical concepts like shame, benevolence, or punishment. From Socrates' perspective of therapeutic – i. e. philosophical – 'politics' these traditional political concepts need to be transformed and integrated into Plato's understanding of philosophy: Traditional rhetoric as an
art of defence changes into an art of therapeutic accusation which is meant
to cure the souls of others from error, which is illustrated by Socrates in the Apology; punishment also becomes part of Socratic therapy, insofar as it aims at the improvement of his dialogue partners.

Post by "Peter Konstans" of March 22, 2024 at 2:02 PM

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.

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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, Heracleitus 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 Epicur-
eans 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 knowl-
edge 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’.

Post by “Cassius” of March 22, 2024 at 2:52 PM

Thank you Peter. I have never heard of this writer or the book. Looks very interesting and i am sure I'll have some comments after reading rather than skimming it.

Post by “Bryan” of March 22, 2024 at 9:51 PM

I agree that Epicurus would not have thought laws necessary for interactions between Epicureans and that he wished to have very many people become Epicureans.

It is clear, however, that he had a realistic sense of the dangers posed by other people and supported the existence of laws.

These comments by Hermarchus (by way of Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Eating Animals 1.7-12)* are good to keep in mind:

The Arguments of the Epicureans, from Hermarchus **7.** ...The ancient legislators, looking to the association of life, and the mutual actions of men, proclaimed that manslaughter was unholy, and punished it with no casual disgrace. Perhaps, indeed, a certain natural alliance which exists in men towards each other, though the similitude of form and soul, is the reason why they do not so readily destroy an animal of this kind, as some of the other animals which are conceded to our use. Nevertheless, the greatest cause why manslaughter was considered as a thing grievous to be borne, and impious, was the opinion that it did not contribute to the whole nature and condition of human life. For, from a principle of this kind, those who are capable of perceiving the advantage arising from this decree, require no other cause of being restrained from a deed so dire. But those who are not able to have a sufficient perception of this, being terrified by the magnitude of the punishment, will abstain from readily destroying each other. For those, indeed, who survey the utility of the before-mentioned ordinance, will promptly

observe it; but those who are not able to perceive the benefit with which it is attended, will obey the mandate, in consequence of fearing the threatenings of the laws; which threatenings certain persons ordained for the sake of those who could not, by a reasoning process, infer the beneficial tendency of the decree, at the same time that most would admit this to be evident. For none of those legal institutes which were established from the first, whether written or unwritten, and which still remain, and are adapted to be transmitted, [from one generation to another] became lawful through violence, but through the consent of those that used them. For those who introduced things of this kind to the multitude, excelled in wisdom, and not in strength of body, and the power which subjugates the rabble. Hence, through this, some were led to a rational consideration of utility, of which they had only an irrational sensation, and which they had frequently forgotten; but others were terrified by the magnitude of the punishments. **For it was not possible to use any other remedy for the ignorance of what is beneficial than the dread of the punishment ordained by law. For this alone even now keeps the vulgar in awe, and prevents them from doing any thing, either publicly or privately, which is not beneficial [to the community]**. But if all men were similarly capable of surveying and recollecting what is advantageous, there would be no need of laws, but men would spontaneously avoid such things as are prohibited, and perform such as they were ordered to do. For a survey of what is useful and detrimental, is a sufficient incentive to the avoidance of the one and the choice of the other. But **the infliction of punishment has a reference to those who do not foresee what is beneficial. For impendent punishment forcibly compels such as these to subdue those impulses which lead them to useless actions, and to do that which is right.**

9. Hence also, legislators ordained, that even involuntary manslaughter should not be entirely void of punishment; in order that they might not only afford no pretext for the voluntary imitation of those deeds which were involuntarily performed, but also that they might prevent many things of this kind from taking place, which happen, in reality, involuntarily. For neither is this advantageous through the same causes, by which men were forbidden voluntarily to destroy each other. Since, therefore, of involuntary deeds, some proceed from a cause which is unstable, and which cannot be guarded against by human nature; but others are produced by our negligence and inattention to different circumstances; hence **legislators, wishing to restrain that indolence which is injurious to our neighbours, did not even leave an involuntary noxious deed without punishment, but, through the fear of penalties, prevented the commission of numerous offences of this kind. I also am of opinion, that the slaughters which are allowed by law, and which receive their accustomed expiations through certain purifications, were introduced by those ancient legislators, who first very properly instituted these things for no other reason than that they wished to prevent men as much as possible from voluntary slaughter. For the vulgar everywhere require something which may impede them from promptly performing what is not advantageous [to the community].** Hence those who first perceived this to be the case, not only ordained the punishment of fines, but also excited a certain other irrational dread, though proclaiming those not to be pure who in any way

whatever had slain a man, unless they used purifications after the commission of the deed. For that part of the soul which is void of intellect, being variously disciplined, acquired a becoming mildness, certain taming arts having been from the first invented for the purpose of subduing the irrational impulses of desire, by those who governed the people. And one of the precepts promulgated on this occasion was, that men should not destroy each other without discrimination.

10. Those, however, who first defined what we ought to do, and what we ought not, very properly did not forbid us to kill other animals. For the advantage arising from these is effected by a contrary practice, since it is not possible that men could be preserved, unless they endeavoured to defend those who are nurtured with themselves from the attacks of other animals. At that time, therefore, some of those, of the most elegant manners, recollecting that they abstained from slaughter because it was useful to the public safety, they also reminded the rest of the people in their mutual associations of what was the consequence of this abstinence; in order that, by refraining from the slaughter of their kindred, they might preserve that communion which greatly contributes to the peculiar safety of each individual. But it was not only found to be useful for men not to separate from each other, and not to do any thing injurious to those who were collected together in the same place, for the purpose of repelling the attacks of animals of another species; but also for defense against men whose design was to act nefariously. To a certain extent, therefore, they abstained from the slaughter of men, for these reasons, *viz.* in order that there might be a communion among them in things that are necessary, and that a certain utility might be afforded in each of the above-mentioned incommodities. In the course of time, however, when the offspring of mankind, through their intercourse with each other, became more widely extended, and animals of a different species were expelled, certain persons directed their attention in a rational way to what was useful to men in their mutual nutriment, and did not alone recall this to their memory in an irrational manner.

11. Hence they endeavoured still more firmly to restrain those who readily destroyed each other, and who, through an oblivion of past transactions, prepared a more imbecile defence. But **in attempting to effect this, they introduced those legal institutes which still remain in cities and nations; the multitude spontaneously assenting to them, in consequence of now perceiving, in a greater degree, the advantage arising from an association with each other. For the destruction of every thing noxious, and the preservation of that which is subservient to its extermination, similarly contribute to a fearless life.** And hence it is reasonable to suppose, that one of the above-mentioned particulars was forbidden, but that the other was not prohibited. Nor must it be said, that the law allows us to destroy some animals which are not corruptive of human nature, and which are not in any other way injurious to our life. For as I may say, no animal among those which the law permits us to kill is of this kind; since, if we suffered them to increase excessively, they would become injurious to us. But through the number of them which is now preserved, certain advantages are imparted to human life. For sheep and oxen, and every such like animal, when

the number of them is moderate, are beneficial to our necessary wants; but if they become redundant in the extreme, and far exceed the number which is sufficient, they then become detrimental to our life; the latter by employing their strength, in consequence of participating of this through an innate power of nature, and the former, by consuming the nutriment which springs up from the earth for our benefit alone. Hence, through this cause, the slaughter of animals of this kind is not prohibited, in order that as many of them as are sufficient for our use, and which we may be able easily to subdue, may be left. For it is not with horses, oxen, and sheep, and with all tame animals, as it is with lions and wolves, and, in short, with all such as are called savage animals, that, whether the number of them is small or great, no multitude of them can be assumed, which, if left, would alleviate the necessity of our life. And on this account, indeed, we utterly destroy some of them; but of others, we take away as many as are found to be more than commensurate to our use.

12. On this account, from the above-mentioned causes, it is similarly requisite to think, that what pertains to the eating of animals, was ordained by those who from the first established the laws; and that the advantageous and the disadvantageous were the causes why some animals were permitted to be eaten and others not. So that those who assert, that every thing beautiful and just subsists conformably to the peculiar opinions of men respecting those who establish the laws, are full of a certain most profound stupidity. For it is not possible that this thing can take place in any other way than that in which the other utilities of life subsist, such as those that are salubrious, and an innumerable multitude of others. **Erroneous opinions, however, are entertained in many particulars, both of a public and private nature. For certain persons do not perceive those legal institutes, which are similarly adapted to all men; but some, conceiving them to rank among things of an indifferent nature, omit them; while others, who are of a contrary opinion, think that such things as are not universally profitable, are every where advantageous**. Hence, through this cause, they adhere to things which are unappropriate; though in certain particulars they discover what is advantageous to themselves, and what contributes to general utility. And among these are to be enumerated the eating of animals, and the legally ordained destructions which are instituted by most nations on account of the peculiarity of the region. It is not necessary, however, that these institutes should be preserved by us, because we do not dwell in the same place as those did by whom they were made. **If, therefore, it was possible to make a certain compact with other animals in the same manner as with men, that we should not kill them, nor they us, and that they should not be indiscriminately destroyed by us, it would be well to extend justice as far as to this; for this extent of it would be attended with security.** But since it is among things impossible, that animals which are not recipients of reason should participate with us of law, on this account, utility cannot be in a greater degree procured by security from other animals, than from inanimate natures. But we can alone obtain security from the liberty which we now possess of putting them to death.

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 23, 2024 at 1:01 PM

Laws (which basically means exploitation by a ruling class and force or the threat of force to keep the exploited from exploiting one another) are necessary only because modern people are domesticated and have been conditioned to live and behave like domesticated animals. Just like farm animals couldn't be expected to adapt immediately upon being released into the wild the same applies to humans and to them it probably applies to an even greater degree because human intelligence paradoxically allows humans to suppress their nature far more effectively than any other animal.

Large-scale utopian projects in recent centuries have demonstated this point quite well. Without education sufficient to reverse the effects of human domestication, without economic and political autarky and the means to defend it, traditional political ideologies and structures are the only way to live.

Post by “Bryan” of March 23, 2024 at 10:48 PM

I think these quotes are related. Allow me to add them to the mix:

Philodemus On Rhetoric (Περὶ Ῥητορικῆς) translated by Hubbell

“But if philosophers do not enter politics, yet they help their native land by teaching the young to obey the laws; nay more, by teaching them to act justly even if there are no laws, and to shun injustice as they would fire.” (2.154, fr. 13)

“The philosophers are not vexed if people, like foolish sheep or cattle, attend to an inferior, but are satisfied that what they say, particularly about the attitude of the common people, shall please the few; and in action they are most blameless, nor do they, as slaves of all, try to rule everything for themselves. For they do not expect to satisfy their wants at the expense of the public.” (1.237, col.)

“The philosophers of our school agree with οἱ πολλοί on a question of what is just and good, differing from them only in this that they arrive at their conclusions by logic as well as by feeling, and never forget these conclusions, but always compare the chief good with things indifferent. They do differ from οἱ πολλοί about the means to attain happiness, and do not think that offices, power, conquests and the like are proper means to the end.” (1.254, col. 21)

“Some things are just or unjust by nature and never change, others vary according to locality and condition. Laws which are not of this nature, but are established for various reasons ought

to be obeyed, or if the philosophers do not think that they can live well under these laws they ought to leave the country. They can be social to a high degree by observing those principles which make for likeness and not for differences; we can do this without being observed as well as with publicity, with pleasure and not under compulsion, steadily and not in an uncertain fashion." (1.258, col. 24)

"The philosopher does not choose his profession for the same reason that one chooses military or political power. The latter with a slowly acting mind is willing to accept any power, while the former by syllogisms and memory of resemblance and difference, and a consideration of consequences, and especially by the use of his sharpness of intellect, rejects everything that does not tend toward happiness, and shares in them only as he uses the necessary arts for the tasks that arise... The philosopher... in every matter uses his keen mind, with which he is able to see when the ambition or idleness of men goes wrong, and neglects everything which is not useful for happiness." (2.30, col. 20)

"Why is it more disgraceful to be silent and permit Isocrates to speak than to live in a city and allow Manes to dig, or to stay on land and allow the Phoenician trader to be tossed by the waves, or to pass one's life in safety as a private citizen and allow Themistocles to enjoy the perils of a general?" (2.55, col. 40)

Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2024 at 5:34 AM

Bryan those are great quotes but not ones I have a command over finding.

Are these collected in Usener as well?

We've got to find a way to bring together our own source of key quotes like this to make them more accessible.

Nowadays it is not so hard to come up with a jointly-editable wiki or database where each entry can be tagged by author and topic. In the past and still today I presume one of the biggest hurdles is that everyone wants their own database and has different ideas on how to organize it, but it seems to me that we ought to now be at the point where the system could be so simple (and therefore so easily adaptable by anyone that everyone is willing to contribute to the same raw data) with everything GPL public domain, that it ought to be doable.

Surely some one or institution has already made a start toward that. Anyone aware of such a thing? It would be logical to name such an online Usener after Usener himself.

I know we have some threads on this topic already. I will collect some of them and make them more easily findable here:

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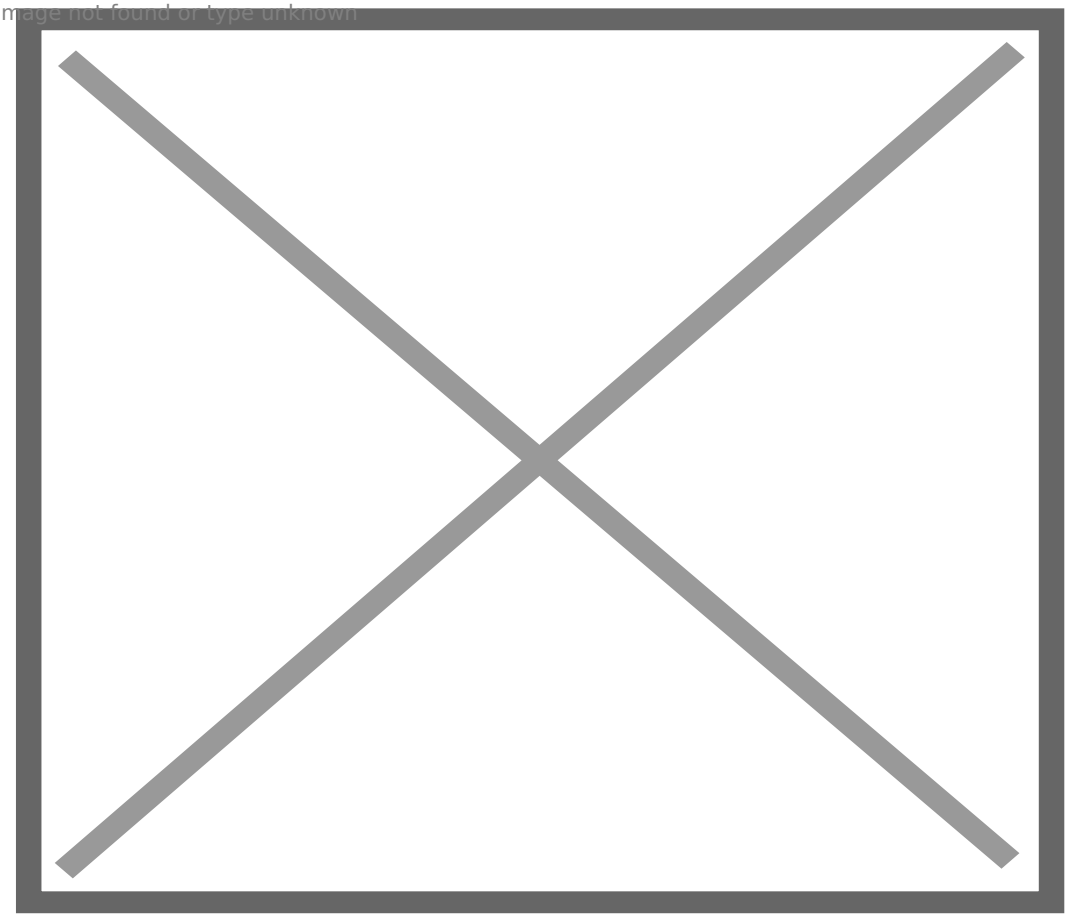

Where Can I Find The Best List of Fragments of Epicurean Texts? - Epicureanfriends.com
www.epicureanfriends.com

If someone wants to discuss this topic, rather than hijacking this thread further, let's post those comments here:

Thread

What is the Best Source of Fragments of Epicurean Texts?

This is the discussion thread for the FAQ entry of the same name. Feel free to add comments here or to add them to the threads linked in the FAQ itself.

Cassius
March 24, 2024 at 5:43 AM