

More Thoughts On Politics - Epicurean Philosophy Doesn' Lead To A Single Political Position

Post by "Cassius" of July 28, 2018 at 8:24 PM

From a Facebook thread:

[Jubert Cabrezos](#) wrote: "I really like Epicurean philosophy as a whole, but I'm having a hard time accepting their refusal to participate in politics."

Jubert, do you think that human nature allows men to live happily without working to engage successfully with others? Or have you listened to so many Stoic and other philosophers that you have forgotten that you are a man? Despite what you are led to believe, Epicurus knew what human nature requires of men, and that being a man requires living in reality rather than holding endless arguments about fanciful ideals. Here is what Cosma Raimondi said about Epicurean vs Stoic views of life in 1429:

"I find it surprising that these clever Stoics did not remember when investigating the subject that they themselves were men. Their conclusions came not from what human nature demanded but from what they could contrive in argument. Some of them, in my view, placed so much reliance on their ingenuity and facility in debate that they did not concern themselves with what was actually relevant to the enquiry. They were carried away instead by their enthusiasm for intellectual display, and tended to write what was merely novel and surprising — things we might aspire to but not ones we should spend any effort in attaining. Then there were some rather cantankerous individuals who thought that we should only aim for what they themselves could imitate or lay claim to. Nature had produced some boorish and inhuman philosophers whose senses had been dulled or cut off altogether, ones who took no pleasure in anything; and these people laid down that the rest of mankind should avoid what their own natural severity and austerity shrank from. Others subsequently entered the debate, men of great and various intellectual abilities, who all delivered a view on what constituted the supreme good according to their own individual disposition. But in the middle of all this error and confusion, Epicurus finally appeared to correct and amend the mistakes of the older philosophers and put forward his own true and certain teaching on happiness."

...

"If we were indeed composed solely of a mind, I should be inclined to call Regulus 'happy' and entertain the Stoic view that we should find happiness in virtue alone. But since we are composed of a mind and a body, why do they leave out of this account of human happiness something that is part of mankind and properly pertains to it? Why do they consider only the mind and neglect the body, when the body houses the mind and is the other half of what man is? If you are seeking the totality something made up of various parts, and yet some part is

missing, I cannot think it perfect and complete. We use the term 'human', I take it, to refer to a being with both a mind and a body. And in the same way that the body is not to be thought healthy when some part of it is sick, so man himself cannot be thought happy if he is suffering in some part of himself. As for their assigning happiness to the mind alone on the grounds that it is in some sense the master and ruler of man's body, it is quite absurd to disregard the body when the mind itself often depends on the state and condition the body and indeed can do nothing without it. Should we not deride someone we saw sitting on a throne and calling himself a king when he had no courtiers or servants? Should we think someone a fine prince whose servants were slovenly and misshapen? Yet those who would separate the mind from the body in defining human happiness and think that someone whose body is being savaged and tortured may still be happy are just as ludicrous."

Also on this topic: I bet some people think that the fact that we discourage discussion of modern political issues in this group is a reflection of the idea that we think Epicurus discouraged participation in all "politics." At least for me, and I think probably many of the other regular participants in the group too, that's not true at all. I think our primary reason for steering clear of divisive issues is that we have a core goal of promoting the "eternal" ideas of Epicurean philosophy, and we won't succeed in doing that if we are constantly tearing ourselves apart over day-to-day "localized" issues that come and go with the times.

But here's my own view of an important second reason: Epicurean philosophy observes that all living things are programmed by nature to pursue pleasure, avoid pain, and thereby seek to live "happily." But because there is no divine order, no realm of ideas and forms to which all men are led to the same specific conclusions about what is pleasurable and painful to them, and what it therefore means to live "happily," people are going to reach dramatically different conclusions about what "happiness" means to them personally, and that is going to translate into the "political" positions that they decide to hold. An Italian is going to reach different specific conclusions about how to run his/her life than a German, or an Englishman, or a Canadian, or a Mexican, and it seems clear to me that those decisions will lead to different forms of government, and different "politics."

One example of this that applies directly is that it seems clear that there were committed, well-educated Epicureans on both sides of the Roman Civil War. We know for sure that Cassius Longinus was a committed Epicurean among the Senatorial forces, and he vouched for another Senatorial general as an Epicurean (Panza). Although I don't know the details the commentators seem convinced that Caesar's forces had a significant number of Epicureans, and we know that Caesar's father-in-law was an Epicurean, and that Caesar himself was alleged by Cicero not to believe in an afterlife. The point here is if committed Epicureans with access to much more authentic Epicurean material than we have could come to blows on opposite sides of a civil war, then that ought to tell us that Epicurean reasoning can be used to justify many different sides of political issues, according to the interests of the specific people involved.

Does this mean that Epicurean philosophy is of no use in politics, or tells us to refrain from all politics? I think absolutely not. But it tells us that Epicurean philosophy applies to *everybody*,

and that we shouldn't be surprised to find Epicureans of many different political stripes. We can probably exclude religion-based politics from the scope of what an Epicurean would follow, and if we think hard about it we should also probably exclude "idealism-based" politics (those which would argue that there is a single ideal way or life or form of government for all people at all times and all places to follow). But even if you exclude those two major types of thinking, it seems to me there is still a huge variety of options from which to choose. People in Seattle or San Francisco may think that it is a good idea to ban drinking straws, while people in Dallas or Atlanta may find that idea ludicrous. But depending on the people and circumstances involved, I can see Epicurus telling people in any of those cities to pursue their happiness as best they see fit to do, even if they come to totally opposite conclusions about how.

[These are just my personal views, but I think it's an important subtext to the "What did Epicurus say about politics?" issue. And I don't want it inferred that because we don't discuss political issues here that none of us are willing to defend Epicurus against the charge that he preached seclusion from society. Epicurean philosophy is **not** limited to good food and good music and sunsets on the beach.]