

Autarkia And Epicurean Living In The Modern World

Post by “Macario” of September 21, 2021 at 6:26 PM

Hello [Don](#)! Thanks for replying! To me, this discussion is not only pleasurable but also really valuable. As I said before, it seems to me that what Epicurus takes as autarkeia is a key requirement to achieve the state of ataraxia. Therefore, I believe it's crucial to understand the applied concept in order to understand better the Epicurean Ethics.

[Quote from Don](#)

My soapbox here on the forum is always go back to the original texts, and don't trust any one translation of any word that was originally in Greek or Latin.

I agree that this a much better approach when it comes to understand some concepts used in ancient texts. Thanks for organizing and listing the original fragments along with the original texts. Also, the links you provided are valuable research resources and I was not aware of them.

[Quote from Don](#)

The final selection from Aristotle definitely has an economic aspect; however, the excerpt from Plato has an aspect of contentment about it. So, it seems to have been a multi-purpose word.

I must agree that is hard, from the fragments of Aristotle and Plato to conclude a precise definition for the word. Regarding Epicurean fragments, from VS45 and Fragment 476 I find it also hard to extract a precise definition.

Now, regarding fragment 202, I must say it still seems to me that has an economic aspect. I am assuming the word 'wealth' (πλοῦτός) is used here meaning the amount of resources one has minus his necessities/desires, therefore, wealth would be the result of this equation.

This seems to be in accordance with the sentences used: "with regard to what is enough by nature, everything he owns is a source of wealth" and "whereas with regard to unlimited desires, even the greatest wealth is poverty." On the first one, if one's desires are limited by what is enough by nature (that being his natural and necessary desires), nature itself can provide what he needs, so everything he owns will increase the result of the equation, thus, being a source of wealth. On the second one, if one's desires/necessities are unlimited, the second term of the equation is infinite, then, no matter how great the first term is, the result (wealth) will always be negative.

On the other hand, in the beginning sentence of the fragment: "He who follows nature and not groundless opinions is completely self-reliant", the use of the word 'opinions' (δόξαις) rather than 'desires' (ἐπιθυμίας) confuses me and points again to the direction of contentment rather than economic self-sufficiency.

In addition, allow me to add to the list, some fragments that also refers to autarkeia and I think it is important to take them in account:

First, [fragment 135a](#):

Quote

We value self-reliance not so that we will live simply and cheaply in all things, but so that we will not be consumed by them.

ἐζηλώσαμεν τὴν αὐτάρκειαν οὐχ ὅπως τοῖς εὐτελέσι καὶ λιτοῖς παντῶς χρώμεθα, ἀλλ' ὅπως θαρρῶμεν πρὸς αὐτά.

Then, on the [note of VS77](#), Saint-Andre says "Self-reliance is discussed in greater depth at [Letter to Menoikos, Section 130](#)." From that section we get:

Quote

We hold that self-reliance is a great good — not so that we will always have only a few things but so that if we do not have much we will rejoice in the few things we have, firmly persuaded that those who need luxury the least enjoy it the most, and that everything natural is easily obtained whereas everything groundless is hard to get.

καὶ τὴν αὐτάρκειαν δὲ ἀγαθὸν μέγα νομίζομεν, οὐχ ἵνα πάντως τοῖς ὀλίγοις χρώμεθα, ἀλλ' ὅπως, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχωμεν τὰ πολλά, τοῖς ὀλίγοις ἀρκώμεθα, πεπεισμένοι γνησίως ὅτι ἥδιστα πολυτελείας ἀπολαύουσιν οἱ ἥκιστα ταύτης δεόμενοι, καὶ ὅτι τὸ μὲν φυσικὸν πᾶν εὐπόριστόν ἐστι, τὸ δὲ κενὸν δυσπόριστον

This last quote seems very important to me. I underlined the words 'natural' (φυσικὸν) and 'groundless' (κενὸν) because are the words that Epicurus uses to refer to "natural and necessary desires" and "not natural and unnecessary desires" respectively. While this, in my opinion, emphasizes the relation with economic self-sufficiency, the sentence "if we do not have much we will rejoice in the few things we have", seems to have a strong contentment connotation.

In the end, it seems to me that the aspects of contentment with what one have and the idea of economic self-sufficiency are both connected to the concept of autarkeia in Epicurus. Maybe not unrelated to one another, but the first one (contentment) making it easier - or may even be a requirement? - to reach the second one (economic self-sufficiency) and then, complete the concept of autarkeia. Although this conclusion is still not very clear to me.