

Contemplative Isolation and Constructive Sociability in the Epicurean Tradition

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This is such a rare occurrence to run into this sentiment below in an academic paper that I'm pulling out this long quote to highlight it. See the paper itself for the references in the footnotes:

"One should wholeheartedly agree with Elizabeth Asmis that “the picture that has been painted of Epicureans as living in alternative communities, separate from the rest of society, needs to be corrected”, as Epicureanism “keeps a person integrated in the daily routine of ordinary life while shifting his or her aims away from those of the rest of society”.²⁷ A committed Epicurean was typically asked to absorb, and meditate on, Epicurus’ teachings in order to reorient his thoughts, emotions, and preferences in the everyday flow of moral experience. In order to reach this goal, a coherent set of psychagogic methods and stochastic techniques was developed by Epicurus and later Epicurean instructors.²⁸ Recent scholarship has demonstrated that even the Epicurean injunction to “live unnoticed” (λάθε βιώσας) and “not to engage in politics” (μὴ πολιτεύεσθαι) – two expressions that are never attested in Epicurus’ Key Doctrines, but only in later sources – does not amount to anything like a general a priori rule.²⁹ Building on the earlier surveys of David Sedley,³⁰ Miriam Griffin,³¹ and Elizabeth Asmis,³² among many others, Geert Roskam and Jeffrey Fish have pointed out that Epicurus’ caveat against the dangers of political life was not dogmatic. Rather, Epicurus’ followers were expected to make their choices on the basis of a situation-based hedonic calculus, taking into account their natural disposition (φύσις or διάθεσις) as well as the exact time (καιρός) and circumstances (περίστασις) of their acts.³³ Most of the times, the hedonic calculus will suggest avoiding the turmoil of politics. But there will be moments when the sage will be called to step into the public arena, for his own good or for that of others – as happened to Epicurus himself, who praised Metrodorus for ransoming Mithres, Lysimachus’ minister, from the hands of a Macedonian general.³⁴ The history of modern scholarship on Epicureanism is replete with discussions of possible “exceptions” to the Epicurean rule of political isolation. Efforts have been made to excuse – or to blame as unorthodox – the behavior of avowed Epicureans such as Idomeneus and Mithres (who held public offices in the early Hellenistic period),³⁵ Antiochus IV Epiphanes (who was converted to Epicureanism by Philonides of Laodicea-on-Sea),³⁶ Colotes (who dedicated his work on good kingship to Ptolemy II Philadelphus),³⁷ Cassius (who planned Caesar’s assassination),³⁸ and Calpurnius Piso (who supported Philodemus’ contubernium while serving as magistrate in Rome).³⁹ Yet there is no need to quibble about exceptions, betrayals, and philosophical heresies if one recognizes that Epicureanism was a non-dogmatic and non-isolationist doctrine that approached moral issues such as marriage, political involvement, and the use of poetry from a supremely rational and pragmatic perspective.⁴⁰"