

Good General Reference Post Contrasting Buddhism with Epicurus

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 29, 2022 at 11:37 AM

Learning about ancient Indian philosophy helped me understand the context of Christian politics better. It also helped me, ultimately, understand and accept Epicurus' theism without getting stuck on contemporary vocabulary.

It fascinated me that the vocabulary of Sanskrit recognizes two general classes of religious expression: the insiders, those who use the national historical texts as the basis of intellectual engagement, and the outsiders, those who do not. The first category includes atheists, non-theists, agnostics, polytheists, and theists as well as monists, dualists, and pluralists, as well as deontologists, logicians, ethicists, mystics, physicians ... you name it, "Hinduism" hosts it.

Of the second category, or the *cultural outsiders*, we find an equal range of diversity, atheists, non-theists, agnostics, polytheists, and theists as well as monists, dualists, and pluralists. Categorical divisions are determined according to a sense of national unity versus decentralization, not doctrines or positions along the philosophical spectrum.

Imagine, conversely, living in ancient India, and only having vocabulary at-hand to express "the amalgamation of Academics, Skeptics, Peripatetics, Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics members of the 'Hellenic' religion" (versus how we put "the amalgamation of Vaisheshika, Vedanta, Yoga, (etc.) as members of the 'Hindu' religion").

Anyway, breaking down these individual propositions made it easier to see how Epicurus could be a critic of common religious beliefs, bemoan the popular superstition, reject all forms of supernaturalism, ground all phenomena in a scientific framework, *and yet still* work with the concepts of *God* and *the Soul*.

It is a useful historical point of study to supplement Epicureanism, particularly (in the same way we use Democritean atomism as a point of comparison) as a contrast to the deterministic forms of atheistic Indian atomism, as well as the non-atomistic form of Indian hedonism, as well as the religious form of theistic atomism.

It also helps illuminate the thought-patterns of Gassendi and other neo-Epicureans of the Renaissance.

It also further shows how the basic propositions to which Siddhartha Gautama was responding were the same propositions that were being considered in ancient Greece: Is the nature of reality a unity, a duality, or something else? Is the experience of the world more real than the world itself? The propositions the Buddha taught are very much so the same propositions that

Epicurus rejected, as represented by ancient Greek Skepticism.

Surely, there are multiple points of agreement between Siddhartha and Epicurus. They agreed on withdrawing from popular society. They agreed that suffering is undesirable and we should strive to overcome it. They agreed that conventional superstitions are insubstantial and intellectually bankrupt. They were suspicious of social means by which to acquire wealth. They saw empty speculation as a source of suffering. They entertained a *form* of atomism. At the same time, these attitudes were also shared by Siddhartha's non-"Hindu", Indian contemporaries, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Pakudha Kaccāyana, Ajita Kesakambalī, Makkhali Gośāla, Pūraṇa Kassapa.

The important comparison to draw here is not necessarily Epicurus and Buddhism as much as it is Epicurus versus Heterodox Indian Traditions (Buddhism being one of several). They share a common suspicion of the predominant philosophical context in which they arise, and offer reforms to what they see as formal misunderstandings. I think most comparisons that can be found between Epicureanism and Buddhism are largely superficial, and can, to some degree or another, be found in nearly every ancient Hellenistic and Indian school of thought.

Beyond being "outsiders", the doctrines vary so greatly, the contrast is stark.

Buddhism shares enough in common with Pyrrhonism that we might not say Epicureanism is the *Black* to Buddhism's *White*, but we might say that Epicureanism is the *Black* to Buddhism's *Very Light Grey*.