

An August 2018 Example of the Ascetic View of Epicurus

Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of January 26, 2019 at 5:24 PM

Even Stoic philosophers like Seneca warn against asceticism:

Seneca: *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium V*

Quote

*[I] Illud autem te admoneo, ne eorum more qui non proficere sed conspici cupiunt facias aliqua quae in habitu tuo aut genere vitae notabilia sint; [II] asperum cultum et intonsum caput et neglegentiolem barbam et **indictum argento odium** et cubile humi positum et quidquid aliud ambitionem perversa via sequitur evita. Satis ipsum nomen philosophiae, etiam si modeste tractetur, invidiosum est: quid si nos hominum consuetudini coeperimus excerpere? Intus omnia dissimilia sint, frons populo nostra conveniat. [III] Non splendeat toga, ne sordeat quidem; non habeamus argentum in quod solidi auri caelatura descenderit, **sed non putemus frugalitatis indicium auro argentoque caruisse**. Id agamus ut meliorem vitam sequamur quam vulgus, non ut contrariam....*

"[1].... I warn you, however, not to act after the fashion of those who desire to be conspicuous rather than to improve, by doing things which will rouse comment as regards your dress or general way of living. [2] Repellent attire, unkempt hair, slovenly beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth, and any other perverted forms of self-display, are to be avoided. The mere name of philosophy, however quietly pursued, is an object of sufficient scorn; and what would happen if we should begin to separate ourselves from the customs of our fellow-men? Inwardly, we ought to be different in all respects, but our exterior should conform to society. [3] Do not wear too fine, nor yet too frowzy, a toga. One needs no silver plate, encrusted and embossed in solid gold; but we should not believe the lack of silver and gold to be proof of the simple life. Let us try to maintain a higher standard of life than that of the multitude, but not a contrary standard...."

I am surprised that there are so many proponents of asceticism among Epicureans. The stereotype is that Epicureans were unrestrained hedonists and Stoics ascetics. Neither is probably true, instead their lifestyle seemed to have been similar. The actual hedonists were the Cyrenaics and the ascetics were the Cynics.

What Epicurus taught was ... well... common sense.

The luxury that we can afford depends on our resources. And in their use we have to set priorities. At the same time we have to take care that an excess of pleasure does not endanger our wellbeing (health, reputation, friendships). "ΜΗΔΕΝ ΑΓΑΝ" (nothing in excess) - a Delphic motto and the golden mean, which is also central to Aristotle's ethics.

Yes, the concept of pleasure goes beyond money. And the difficulty is often to find out what exactly it is that gives the most pleasure. Many go wrong here, so they set the wrong priorities in life. I am not even sure, if I have found it for myself.