

Episode One Hundred Forty-Seven - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 03 - True Opinions And False Opinions About Epicurus

Post by "Don" of November 7, 2022 at 11:36 AM

First, I apologize for the length of this post!

I wasn't quite sure where to post this, but this episode of the podcast seemed appropriate after hearing your discussion on whether we need to study Plato or if it's helpful to study Plato to understand where Epicurus's perspective came from. I am inclined to agree with [Martin](#) in that we can read secondary sources and don't necessarily have to read every work that Plato and Aristotle et al. wrote to understand the philosophical discussion that was going on during Epicurus's lifetime.

However, once in a while, one runs across a revelation (at least for me) that opens up a whole new line of understanding and possible exploration.

So, what was my revelation? And I freely admit this may only be a revelation to me. I can't remember if DeWitt brings this up...

I'm reading *The Faith of Epicurus* by Benjamin Farrington ([able to be borrowed online an hour at a time from Internet Archive](#); I borrowed mine from the library) and came across a very interesting section that, to me, bears directly on the whole infamous "existing on bread and water" debate concerning Epicurus. Academics and the general public use this to say that Epicurus lived ONLY on bread and water. I've addressed this - from my perspective - misinterpretation in [my translation of the Letter to Menoikeus \(p. 72\)](#). BUT Farrington brought to light for me a related but different thread that I may very well incorporate into a revised edition of my translation at some point in the indeterminate future.

In Chapter 1, Farrington calls attention to the section in Plato's *The Republic* where Socrates is discussing the earlier or simple origins of the way of life in the city and how it has evolved. Socrates appears to be advocating for the simpler way of life. Here is the excerpt - emphasis is mine - from the [Perseus Digital Library](#):

Quote from Plato "The Republic"

Socrates:

First of all, then, let us consider what will be the manner of life of men thus provided. Will they not make bread and wine and garments and shoes? And they will build

themselves houses and carry on their work in summer for the most part unclad and unshod and in winter clothed and [372b] shod sufficiently? And for their nourishment they will provide meal from their barley and flour from their wheat, and kneading and cooking these they will serve noble cakes and loaves on some arrangement of reeds or clean leaves, and, reclined on rustic beds strewn with bryony and myrtle, they will feast with their children, drinking of their wine thereto, garlanded and singing hymns to the gods in pleasant fellowship, not begetting offspring beyond their means [372c] lest they fall into poverty or war?"

Here Glaucon broke in: "No relishes (ὄψον is anything eaten with bread, usually meat or fish) apparently," he said, "for the men you describe as feasting." "True" said I; "I forgot that they will also have relishes—salt, of course, and olives and cheese and onions and greens, the sort of things they boil in the country, they will boil up together. But for dessert we will serve them figs and chickpeas and beans, [372d] and they will toast myrtle-berries and acorns before the fire, washing them down with moderate potations and so, living in peace and health, they will probably die in old age and hand on a like life to their offspring." And he said, "If you were founding a city of *****pigs***** Socrates, what other fodder than this would you provide?" "Why, what would you have, Glaucon?" said I. "What is customary," he replied; "They must recline on couches, I presume, if they are not to be uncomfortable, [372e] and dine from tables and have made dishes and sweetmeats such as are now in use." "Good," said I, "I understand. It is not merely the origin of a city, it seems, that we are considering but the origin of a luxurious city. Perhaps that isn't such a bad suggestion, either. For by observation of such a city it may be we could discern the origin of justice and injustice in states. The true state I believe to be the one we have described—the healthy state, as it were. But if it is your pleasure that we contemplate also a fevered state, there is nothing to hinder.

Plato goes on from here to talk about justice, etc., over the course of the rest of The Republic. "They are the subject-matter of the remaining eight books. They are also the objects of Epicurus's attack. | It can hardly be doubted that Epicurus had noted this passage in the Republic and taken strong exception to it." (Farrington, p. 17)

Farrington notes that Athenaeus in the Deipnosophistae that Epicurus was indebted to Plato for the distinction of "natural" and "superfluous" needs:

Quote from Athenaeus, The Deipnosophistae, Book 12 (511-12)

And in the eighth book of his Republic, the same Plato has previously dilated upon the doctrine so much pressed by the Epicureans, that, of the desires, some are natural but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, writing thus - "Is not the desire to eat enough for health and strength of body, and for bread and meat to that extent, a necessary desire ? - I think it is. - At all events, the desire for food for these

two purposes is necessary, inasmuch as it is salutary, and inasmuch as it is able to remove hunger ? - No doubt. - And the desire for meat, too, is a necessary desire, if it at all contributes to a good habit of body? Most undoubtedly. - What, then, are we to say? Is no desire which goes beyond the appetite for this kind of food, and for other food similar to it, [512] and which, if it is checked in young people, can be entirely stifled, and which is injurious also to the body, and injurious also to the mind, both as far as its intellectual powers are concerned, and also as to its temperance, entitled to be called a necessary one ? - Most certainly not." ([Source](#))

BUT, back to the "bread and water" debate! Farrington makes note of the following excerpt in Lucretius on the Epicurean picnic that echoes *The Republic*!

Quote from Lucretius, Book 2 and 5

Yet still to lounge with friends in the soft grass

Beside a river of water, underneath

A big tree's boughs, and merrily to refresh

Our frames, with no vast outlay- most of all

If the weather is laughing and the times of the year

Besprinkle the green of the grass around with flowers.

These tunes would soothe and glad the minds of mortals

When sated with food,- for songs are welcome then.

And often, lounging with friends in the soft grass

Beside a river of water, underneath

A big tree's branches, merrily they'd refresh

Their frames, with no vast outlay- most of all

If the weather were smiling and the times of the year

Were painting the green of the grass around with flowers.

(Sources: [Book 2](#) and [Book 5](#))

Display More

These two excerpts echo Socrates in the Republic, and, additionally, there is Epicurus's fragment about reclining on couches (Usener 207):

Quote from Epicurus

Porphyry, Letter to Marcella, 29, p. 209, 1: "It is better for you to have confidence {about the future} while lying on a cheap bed than to be disturbed while possessing a golden couch and an extravagant table." ([Source](#))

So, my take on all this? Epicurus is making a point in the "bread and water" sayings about enjoying the simply, everyday things (like the regular midday meal of the ancient Greeks on bread and beverage) as I mentioned in my translation. However, he's also specifically refuting Plato's ideal city-state as laid out in the Republic, what Socrates calls "the luxurious city," and is making a point of contrasting the overgrown city-state that imposes so many unnecessary desires and demands on its citizens, with what nature can provide.

I found that fascinating and worth investigating.