

"A Socio-Psychological and Semiotic Analysis of Epicurus' Portrait" by Bernard Frischer

Post by "Onenski" of January 18, 2023 at 2:54 PM

I share some notes I did.

The question behind the paper is: how epicureanism produce new members of the School? There are at least two possible ways: 1) indoctrination of the children of epicurean members; 2) attracting new people from the outside. There's no information of children raised as epicureans, but there's information of the recruitment of external people. The problem is that recruitment of new people is too difficult, and it's not too effective (as some studies with religious recruitment suggest).

Supposing that epicureans actually used the attraction of new people rather than indoctrination, there were two methods (according to Hieronymos the peripathetic): active and passive. In the first, the philosopher gives speeches in public or publishes his books. In the second, the philosopher creates a mysterious or attractive reputation for himself. That's the case, according to Frischer, of Pyrrho.

Frischer argues that passive recruitment is consistent with epicurean philosophy (specifically the "live unnoticed" and the search for security in the Garden). Epicurean philosophy spreaded out through portraits and sculptures, as we can see in *De finibus* or in Diogenes Laertius.

Frischer makes a semiotic analysis to suggest how some features in Epicurus' portrait work to attract people, in function of their symbolic meaning. He concentrates in two: "the sympathetic awareness" expressed in his face, and the throne. The first is present also in the sculpture of Asklepios of Melos, and in all Epicurus' portraits. This implies that those portraits were made to express that "sympathetic awareness" intentionally (because different artists from different places made those portraits), and also implies that Epicurus portraits were not merely representational, but symbolic.

The second feature analyzed by Frischer, the throne, symbolizes the divinization of Epicurus. This could be a satire of the gods, but it's also consistent with epicurean philosophy (think about Vatican Saying 33). The sage can be as happy as a god.

Frischer suggests that the recruitment of external people looked for certain psychological traits in new members. The idea is that some people have a major tendency to believe in epicurean premises (those who have more tendency to trust in their senses, for example) than others. Frischer uses some psychoanalytic framework (from Carl Jung) to make this suggestion (which I think is too speculative, by the way).

Briefly, Epicurus' portrait was intentionally symbolic and not merely representational. It had the function of attracting new people to the School. Additionally (and as a speculation of Frischer) this recruitment worked attracting a specific psychological profile.