

Epicureanism as the spiritual essence or 'religion' of an entire community

Post by “Peter Konstans” of October 6, 2023 at 4:01 PM

Here are some thoughts about how a theory regarding politics that is compatible with Epicureanism could look like.

Because justice is relative in Epicureanism it follows that the desire to pursue politics is not ultimately rooted in the pursuit of justice. Politics is rooted in two things: the individual desire for power and recognition on one hand and on the other the collective desire to work together in solidarity for common insurance against the forces of nature as well as against depredations by other human groups.

From an Epicurean viewpoint, the first desire is natural but not necessary. So for reasons rooted in Epicurean ethics, keeping political ambitions and passions to a bare minimum is always advisable. A culture of modesty in politicians such as that enforced by the ancient Roman censors would be beneficial.

The second desire is as natural as eating and hydrating and yet fulfilling it is actually painful since it involves individual duties and costs. So justice comes in as a necessary weapon for ensuring that everyone in a political entity contributes his fair share to our common insurance. The urge for someone to conform with justice as defined above is rooted in two things: 1) personal affinity and benevolence towards the group 2) subtle or violent coercion. The less affinity people have for the group the more coercion is required to have them behave justly and as more coercion is used to that end, overt violence rears its head until a vicious cycle finally tears the group asunder in flames. So for reasons rooted in Epicurean ethics, any action and attitude that could conceivably diminish the benevolent disposition of individuals towards the group (for example extreme wealth inequality or jailing people for trivial matters like drug possession for personal use or treating poor foreigners equally or better than the poorest natives) must be seen as unjust because it invites the violent forces of destruction.

So a hypothetical Epicurean society would be incompatible with the political culture of ancient Greco-Roman society because the desire for individual glory was too strong. And it would be incompatible with contemporary Western political culture because it encourages habits and attitudes that result in weak affinity towards the group.