

Epicurean Views On Hierarchy In Social Structures

Post by "Peter Konstans" of March 13, 2024 at 3:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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You see, Epicureanism has an egalitarian ethos and a tendency to want to opt out of mainstream culture (traits that it shares with early Christianity and some egalitarian movements in the modern era) but it also shows little interest in fighting or provoking same mainstream culture.

Perhaps I should be sure we are on the same page as to "egalitarian" -- (Affirming, promoting, or characterized by belief in equal political, economic, social, and civil rights for all people.) I grant you that Epicureanism is interpreted that way today, but I do not take for granted that the early Epicureans interpreted it that way. They were no doubt happy to welcome new friends, but this does not ring of open arms to "all people" regardless of their views and actions: "The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus."

And as for not showing much interest in "fighting" the mainstream culture, I suppose that too depends on the definition of "fight," but i interpret most of Epicurus' views as a very strong rejection of the "mainstream culture" of the time.

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why the Epicureans never experimented with things like common ownership of wealth even though the acquisition of wealth and luxuries runs contrary to a marked preference for minimalism.

Again I think this is the way Epicurus is interpreted but I do not think that a rigorous interpretation of Epicurus truly results in a "marked preference for minimalism." [VS63](#). Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess. And Epicurus' statement that common ownership of property is not a good idea also seems consistent with [PD39](#) that we have a strong preference for friends over wide-open obligations.

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To illustrate how strong the Epicurean tendency for minimalism was consider the cause of Epicurus' death. His kidney disease likely came about as a result of an extremely low-fat diet.

OK aside from that being very speculative, I don't believe that the evidence supports Epicurus eating an extremely low-fat diet. Yes there are statements about bread and water and cheese but those are more likely to be philosophical statements of the importance of self-reliance than his standard diet. Epicurus' will shows him to have been affluent and I would expect his personal diet reflected at least a middle-class lifestyle. I see no reason to think that the Roman Epicureans, who had access to the sources we don't have, interpreted him as calling for an extreme eating pattern.

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Having an egalitarian ethos is not the same thing as being egalitarian in the sense of having an egalitarian political agenda. Epicurus had an egalitarian ethos insofar as he allowed women and slaves to join his school and declared that philosophy is useful for all humans and not just an elite training programme for those males aspiring to excellence and virtue. But he certainly wasn't egalitarian in the sense that he wanted to abolish slavery or institute common ownership of wealth or women. Some radical ideas along those lines did exist in those centuries and the comedian Aristophanes mocks some of them.

Epicurus rejected mainstream culture but saw no need to replace it, counsel it or modify it and in that sense he was apolitical. He would have held that a life of pleasure is possible regardless of one's social conditions or one's social station. Modern egalitarianism rejects that notion. If someone wanted to be involved in politics he was permitted to do so but Epicurus would not have recommended it. If someone wanted to marry he was permitted to do so but Epicurus would not have recommended it. The idea that you should think twice about getting involved in politics (and there was good money to be made by holding even some minor office) and the idea that you should think twice before getting married (and the prospect of a dowry was no small thing back then) can only be interpreted as wilful marginalization from society. Today not getting involved in politics and not getting married sound way more harmless than they would have sounded in 3rd century Athens. Although they do carry some lingering stigma they amount to little more than a trivial 'choice'. Back then they meant marginalization and only that. Whatever Roman Epicureans in later centuries chose to do or how they rationalized their choices, Epicurus and his immediate followers clearly advocated avoiding politics. Wise advice indeed considering how petty political conflicts destroyed the magnificent empire of Alexander and Greece itself. They destroyed the Roman Republic too, slaughtering the majority of its ruling class in the 1st century and (as Hennig Börm makes the case) the chief cause of the collapse of the Roman Empire that followed the Republic was in fact endless civil wars, not invasions from beyond its borders.

About Epicurus' condition I mixed something up. It seems more likely that Epicurus problems were caused by too much fat in his diet, not too little. He probably ate way too many olives, brined sheep/goat cheese and sardines which were simple, widely available foods. My grandparents weren't fat or inactive at all but their daily brined-cheese and olives habit clearly damaged their health.

Here's a few words about his condition from a book on medicine: 'About 10 percent of the population develop gallstones in their gallbladder. Fortunately, very few experience symptoms, but some of those that do can wish for the sweet release of death. Gallstones have become an increasingly major pathology due to the excesses of our modern lives. Overeating and a diet high in fat and cholesterol can increase the chances of them forming. Gallstones, like rock solid caviar, can shift into the gallbladder ducts and ultimately block the flow of bile, causing inflammation and pain that can quickly escalate.'

Alternatively he might have been suffering from the complications of prostate cancer a risk factor of which is infrequent sexual activity. Let's be real: whatever a philosopher or sage or brilliant passionate scientist might say about pleasure or beauty or power or other attractive things such people never get around a lot in real life. Brilliant people like Darwin, Nietzsche and Einstein had notoriously sterile sex lives and I don't believe Epicurus was lying about what he believed when he wrote that happiness is not to be found in the joys of servant lads and that one should count himself lucky if his horniness doesn't harm him. He really meant it much as poor Lucretius (who definitely wasn't getting laid a lot) would have felt disappointed. In his reservations about sexuality Epicurus is more right than many of us (including me) want to admit. When we lived in paradise (as hunter-gatherers) we were promiscuous and polyamorous just like our Chimp and Bonobo relatives. But since our fall from grace horniness has for various reasons lost much of its luster and innocence and carries various risks.

Epicurus showed a preference for tasty (tasty meaning in his case mostly fatty) foods which probably exacerbated the severity of his condition but he wasn't a gourmand. If he wanted to he could have been one. As you said he didn't lack the money and a culture of fancy-pants gastronomy was well developed in his times. The world record for the longest word is a joke from Aristophanes about fanciful dishes and in some Greek cities there were even cooking competitions taking place.

That said, eating (very) moderately adds a lot to the sensual pleasure of dining as everyone who has really, honestly tried to put the idea into practice understands. When Epicurus warned the visitors to his school that they will be treated to simple fare that will still their senses rather than titillate them he wasn't lying about his dietary philosophy. He ate delicious simple foods in minimalist quantities. Perfect advice if we are serious about taking the chance to reach 90 years of age or more and in such good health of body and mind that we may avoid the indignity of suffering years of daily pain while being handled like an infant by a wife who is sick of us or a complete stranger. This is the miserable way most men who died 'of old age' actually left the world. There's only one reliable way to avoid this: enjoy minimally.