

Erler's view on 'True Epicurean Politics'

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 22, 2024 at 2:01 PM

The following text comes from Michael Erler's book *Epicurus: An introduction to this practical ethics and politics*. Erler is professor of classical philology at the University of Würzburg. His book contains six lectures that he delivered in Beijing. This is the third lecture and concerns the topic of Epicurus' politics. He argues convincingly against the traditional misunderstanding of ancient and modern interpreters that the Epicureans were strict legalists. I agree with Erler's view.

1. Epicurus and Socratic 'Politics'

In this chapter, I wish to pose the question whether, and if so, how an Epicurean would accept to live in a community like the Greek polis. At first sight, the answer to this question might seem clear. It is common knowledge, or so it seems, that Epicurus refused to get involved in politics at all. Epicurus advised his followers to disengage from the public and to “abstain from politics”, as we read in a fragment of Epicurus' important, though lost ethical work *On Lives* (*De vitis*). We also learn from Plutarch that, according to Epicurus, Epicureans should withdraw from the ‘many’ and ‘live

unnoticed’ – and indeed, the expression *lathe biosas* has become a kind of hallmark of Epicureanism, but also a target of many attacks by Epicurus' adversaries. So the right answer to the question whether or not Epicureans wished to get involved in public affairs and the community seems to be negative.

In what follows, I would like to try to question what appears to be the common understanding of the Epicurean position. I shall argue that Epicureans – although trying to keep out of the everyday affairs of politics in the traditional sense of the word, nevertheless were well prepared to be involved in society and to practise politics in a different sense of the word. For by ‘practising politics’ the Epicureans did not mean dealing with the political institutions of the community. Rather, Epicurean politics aimed at improving the mental disposition of their fellow citizens in order to help them live a happy life.

I shall argue that Epicureans regarded their philosophy as a political activity in itself, and I shall suggest to call this kind of activity ‘Socratic politics’, since it very much reminds us of the kind of philosophical activity which Socrates practises in Plato's dialogues and calls ‘true’ politics in the *Gorgias*, in contrast to traditional politics, and indicating that he is talking about his own philosophical pragma, i. e. his *epimeleia tes psyches* or ‘caring for the souls’ of his partners and of his fellow citizens in order to provide them with the security they had declared to be the main goal of doing politics. Thus it will be argued that the Epicureans distinguished between two different ways of practising politics and had in mind two different concepts of security – the traditional social security provided by the polis and a security provided by ‘true – i. e. Epicurean

- politics', which does not require traditional institutions or protection by city walls. I shall try to show that in this respect Epicurus' understanding follows the Socratic tradition.

In the second part of this lecture, I shall introduce to you a monumental inscription, which the Epicurean Diogenes put up in Oenoanda, a small town in Asia minor, in the second century AD. The inscription propagates the basic tenets of Epicurus' teachings, and, as I shall argue, is a manifestation of Epicurean-Socratic 'true politics', as far as its intention is concerned.

In addition, I shall try to show that a recently discovered fragment of this inscription confirms the observation that the Epicureans indeed favoured the concept of an ideal community, which resembles Plato's ideal city Kallipolis as presented in the Republic, in so far as both communities are managed by 'Socratic' true politics rather than traditional politics and that in both poleis traditional political institutions and written laws are of minor relevance. This is a new and important aspect for the Epicurean tradition, which often is thought of as legalist by modern interpreters as far as their conception of justice is concerned. I shall argue that this is not true in an absolute sense, just as it is not true for Platonism.

2. Epicurean Politics and its Aim: True Security

2.1 Social Security

So let us first reconsider the Epicurean view on the meaning of politics. In order to understand why Epicurus recommends to live unnoticed and to keep out of politics, we should ask ourselves what is meant by 'politics' when Epicureans warns us not to get involved. In order to do so, one has to keep in mind that the underlying motivation for Epicurus' political thinking and his major criterion for judging politics is the question whether a certain kind of politics is able to provide security, tranquillity, and confidence for its people: This trias is the core of the Epicurean motivation for any political consideration.

For sure, the Epicureans recognise the fact that one needs to try to create social security for human beings. This is what Epicurus expects from traditional politics and this is why Epicureans were well prepared to get involved in politics - but only if necessary, as we read in Seneca's treatise *De otio* and realise in the final crisis of the Roman republic. For at that time, Roman Epicureans indeed decided not to "stay out of politics", if I may remind you, for instance, of Cassius, who in about 48 BC converted to Epicureanism and despite or, perhaps, just because of this fact, joined the Academic Brutus in fomenting the conspiracy against Caesar in 44 BC.

So he and many others who we know of did not wish to disengage from political affairs at all costs - or at least, if they thought it to be unavoidable. We learn from a passage by the Epicurean Colotes and quoted by Plutarch in his treatise *Adversus Colotem* that „The men who appointed laws and usages and established the government of cities by kings and magistrates brought human life into a state of great security and peace and delivered it from turmoil“. From this it seems to become clear that Colotes praises lawgivers and law-governed communities because of the protection they provide against any threats to life and because of the social

security they offer. It is because of statements like these that Epicureans often are regarded as legalists by ancient as well as by modern interpreters. But, as we shall see shortly, this judgement is at least one-sided.

2.2 From the Inside

According to the Epicureans, it is not enough to provide social security, that is against external danger. For sure, traditional politics might be helpful in order to protect us against enemies and to secure physical integrity, in so far as it provides us with social security and therefore might mitigate the fear of external enemies. But traditional politics is regarded as a dangerous business and based on a wrong view of how security is to be attained. In *Kyria Doxa* 7, we read:

Some men have sought to become famous and renowned, thinking that thus they would make themselves secure against their fellow-men. If, then, the life of such persons really was secure, they attained natural good; if, however, it was insecure, they have not attained the end which by nature's own promptings they originally sought.

The Epicureans were convinced of the fact that there exists a form of uneasiness or insecurity which stems from inside of man and cannot be fought by building walls or by creating laws or a good government. For even if walls and castles and laws protect our bodies from the fear of death, the fear of the gods and irritations, which result from misunderstanding how the world works and from wrong judgement of traditional values like wealth or power, remain inside. And these misunderstandings cause irritation and insecurity, which often result in misbehaviour and aggressiveness towards others. That is to say, insecurity and uneasiness within man are caused by a lack of knowledge and wrong understanding of what death means, what the gods do, or how natural phenomena are to be understood. According to the Epicureans, it therefore is of greater importance to achieve security in the sense of tranquillity of mind. For according to them, this kind of security alone guarantees true happiness.

Thus, for the Epicureans there are two kinds of insecurity and two methods of providing security: First, external insecurity, which can be fought by traditional politics, and secondly, insecurity stemming from within, and which must be erased by complete clarification of the real causes of phenomena. For it is impossible to remedy fear of the phenomena, the gods, or death, if one does not understand how the world functions, as Epicurus states: "It would be impossible to banish fear on matters of the highest importance if a person did not know the nature of the whole universe, but lived in dread of what the legends tell us (mythos). Hence without the study of nature there was no enjoyment of unmixed pleasures".

From this follows, to quote Epicurus again:

There would be no advantage in providing security against our fellow humans, so long as we were alarmed by occurrences over our heads or beneath the earth or in general by whatever happens in the boundless universe.

Only then, a tranquil state of mind, the *ataraxia*, can be guaranteed – namely by explaining why [death is nothing to us](#), that the gods do not care about us and therefore are not to be feared,

and that phenomena should not irritate us because everything can be explained without any teleological intention.

That is to say, since there are two causes for feeling insecure: one from outside of men, one from inside, there also have to be two kinds of politics: one that tries to provide social security with respect to men by dealing with social affairs, institutions and government, which is called traditional politics; and another kind of politics, which is able to explain how the world functions, why [death is nothing to us](#), why the gods are not to be feared and that all goods that are necessary for a good life are readily available – in short: what is needed is the Epicurean *physiologia*. Lack of knowledge and fear often are the causes for breaking the rules and for other forms of misbehaviour, as the Epicurean poet Lucretius writes in his poem *De rerum natura*:

that for fear of death men are seized by hatred of life and of seeing the light, so that with sorrowing heart they device their own death, forgetting that this fear is the fountain of their cares: it induces one man to violate honour, another to break the bonds of friendship, and in a word to overthrow all natural feeling.

Therefore, freeing one's mind from these kinds of fear by means of *physiologia* is of much greater importance than achieving security. From this follows that the Epicurean ban on politics only concerns traditional politics, but not true or rather philosophical politics, i. e. the Epicurean *philosophia medicans*, which, in fact or at least according to the Epicureans, does a better service to the souls of people and in doing so, to communities and *poleis*. It is not by chance that Epicurus was called the saviour of mankind and the city, because he tries to save the souls of the city, not its institutions. Epicurus is the true politician and Epicurean *physiologia* or philosophy is true politics: this might seem strange to us – or at least a utopian programme; but it is interesting to see that Epicurus was neither alone nor the first to recommend this kind of approach. In fact, as I shall suggest, he picks up what Plato's Socrates recommends in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*. And in the *Apology*, Socrates even calls himself the saviour of the city.

3. Socrates, the True Politician: *Gorgias*

So let us turn to Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* for a moment and see what Socrates tells us there about politics and what he calls 'true politicians'. Although Socrates discusses different topics with different partners in the *Gorgias*, he focuses on the question how to live a happy life. In the dispute with Callicles, the question concerning the correct mode of life comes to a head over whether one should choose to become a 'politician or philosopher'.

Callicles defends the political life while Socrates represents the philosophical side. Traditional 'political life' stands for a lifestyle, which, according to Callicles, is oriented around common sense. It deals with the institution of the polis and orients itself towards the enforcement of one's own interests. Socrates confronts this understanding of politics with what he calls "true politics", the aim of which, in contrast to traditional politics, is to help others to become better and to be happy. To improve other people's souls is the goal of Socrates' question-and-answer game, which leads people to perplexity (*aporia*), but also to awareness of the fact that they are

dependent upon mere illusions.

For Socrates, it turns out, the topic of the discussion of whether to do 'philosophy or politics' does not involve mutually exclusive alternatives. For Socrates, to do politics means to do philosophy because politics as he understands it should be concerned with creating order in the soul of the citizens and in society as the source of justice and therefore of individual and civic happiness. The goal of true politics, which does not regard philosophy and politics as incompatible, is the conversion of men and the restoration of order in their soul. The leading representative of this lifestyle is Socrates as he says himself:

I think I am one of few, not to say the only one, in Athens who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state.

A true politician, such as Socrates - it seems - is not concerned with power and with institutions, but rather with creating the conditions in individuals that will allow them to interact with the powerful, that is institutions and other people, in a correct manner. For real power consists in what is actually good for one's own soul and having the capacity to implement this knowledge.

People like Pericles, Cimon, or other well-known celebrities do not represent the politicians who serve Athens well, but it is Socrates, the philosopher, who claims to serve the Athenians best. For Socrates is not interested in dealing with political institutions. Instead, he cares for the souls of his fellow citizens (*epimeleia tês psychês*), an approach which therefore could be called *philosophia medicans* since it tries to free people from misconceptions by refuting them.

Socrates is the true politician because he cares for the souls of his fellow citizens: This might seem bizarre to some modern interpreters. However, one should not forget that to the ancients the word *polis* does not necessarily entail the aspect of territory or institution as the modern concept of state does. *Polis* rather means community of people as individuals.

This is why Socrates calls his philosophical pragma 'true politics' and this is why in Plato's *Republic*, where Plato talks about true politics and develops his ideal *polis*, *Kallipolis*, laws play only a minor role. In the *Republic*, Socrates has much to say concerning the human soul, but much less concerning laws and next to nothing about political institutions.

Although laws exist in *Kallipolis*, these laws often stand for unwritten rules only, which should be supervised by the philosopher-ruler. In the *Republic* Socrates regards them as helpful, but inflexible and therefore as a second-best solution. A life without rules is described in the *Politicus* in the context of a myth. It is only in *Magnesia*, the second-best option of a state described in the *Laws*, that institutions and laws really matter.

This notion of *polis* forms the background to Socrates' discussions on traditional elements of political concepts just as much as rhetorical or ethical concepts like shame, benevolence, or punishment. From Socrates' perspective of therapeutic - i. e. philosophical - 'politics' these traditional political concepts need to be transformed and integrated into Plato's understanding of philosophy: Traditional

rhetoric as an art of defence changes into an art of therapeutic accusation which is meant to cure the souls of others from error, which is illustrated by Socrates in the Apology; punishment also becomes part of Socratic therapy, insofar as it aims at the improvement of his dialogue partners.