

On The Decline of Epicurean Philosophy In The Ancient World

Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2019 at 11:51 AM

EC:

After reading from the Cambridge Companion, a couple of general processes stick out to me: first, that the full structure of the philosophy, the sturdy tripod of the Canon, physics and ethics, seems to have been disassembled in favor of one or the other elements, according to personal preference for physics or ethics.

All 3 parts together seem to me, for my own practice of the philosophy, critically important. I would not have become as interested in Epicurus, minus the comprehensive structure. If others are like me, perhaps the loosening of approach would have made it easier for the philosophy to fade. When you have all 3 parts in mind, it is far easier to tell when someone's interpretation has gone off the rails. Also, opponents find it easy to make straw man and ad hominem arguments without the full philosophy in place.

The second process, which could have been made easier by this loosening, is the adulteration of the philosophy by incorporating or accommodating competing philosophies/religions. Where those incorporated elements are incompatible with the original tripod, they could have served to further weaken the philosophy.

This is one of the reasons I think it is so important not to muddy things up by getting our philosophy mixed up with humanist or Buddhist philosophy. The other being that the most direct path to a happy life, a life of pleasures, is to understand and apply the original philosophy without corruption.

Also, it doesn't look as if the decline of the philosophy was owing to a failure of leaders and students to be politically or publicly active, as has been suggested in previous discussions.

Cassius:

I want to emphasize this: "seems to have been disassembled in favor of one or the other elements, according to personal preference for physics or ethics."

We see lots of people who want to focus almost exclusively on the "ethics" as if the physics and the theory of knowledge is unimportant. We also sometimes see people who are taken only with the physics, which they reduce to "the swerve as a precursor to Heisenberg." Amusingly we don't often see people who focus exclusively on the epistemology, presumably because the Academic worship of "reason" and "dialectic" has pushed any alternative view totally into the shadows.

We see this slicing and dicing particularly among the "stoic-minded" because the Epicurean views on the nature of the universe and the proper meaning and path to "knowledge" is particularly incompatible with the fundamental views of Stoicism.

And in the ethics, we see the frequent emphasis on "tranquillity" as the watchword rather than "pleasure," something that would never pass anyone's smell test if "pleasure" were not redefined to equate to "absence of pain" - thereby detaching it from Epicurean physics and Epicurean epistemology.

And that's largely the reason Epicurean philosophy has been in the doldrums for 2000 years. No doubt Christianity and other forces bear a share of the blame, but so do those who too easily gave in to opposition and reduced the comprehensive theory into unrecognisable fragments.