

On The Decline of Epicurean Philosophy In The Ancient World

Post by “Cassius” of August 18, 2019 at 12:19 PM

What do we know about how and why Epicurean philosophy faded in the ancient world? The general and final answer no doubt has to do with the rise of Christianity and its suppression of competitors, but it seems likely that there were other events that contributed to its decline. For example the Emperor Julian is known to have commented that the works of Epicurus were hard to find in his day, and I believe I have also read that even as early as Caesar Augustus, steps were taken against private associations that might have hindered the spread of Epicurean philosophy.

There are also discrete events in history, such as the the remark of Pompeia Plotina, wife of Trajan in about 120 AD, as to her interest and concern for the welfare of the Epicurean school.

What information do we have which a researcher looking into this topic could use as a place to start?

Note: One Place is the Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism, especially the first three essays, including this by David Sedley:



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.

Post by "Cassius" of August 19, 2019 at 2:20 PM

Poster: 2000 is too much. Fine till 400 CE and born again in 1700s. 1500 year doldrums?

Cassius Amicus:

I understand why you cite those years, but I hesitate to call what happened in the 1700's, or even today, as a rebirth. I think it is probably more accurate to consider that we've never had a time when there did not exist individual Epicureans, but they had little or no organization and contact. The 1429 letter by Cosma Raimondi would be an example of such a person.

The great majority of people since the ancient world have been under the oppression of Christianity and not able to speak publicly about the full Epicurean viewpoint. Many others were under the control of "academia" and not able to reject the Platonic/Aristotelian/Stoic orthodoxy. The best they could do, which was ineffective or worse, was to embrace an eclectic mishmash of elements, paint it over with some form of theism, and run from the name of Epicurus. Even today we're not much emerged from those forces. Most of our "friends" on the world stage make no claim to be "Epicureans" but at most to adopt a select few of his positions that happen to suit their taste. And then they rush to distinguish themselves from Epicurus with their own "improvements" to his doctrines. An example here would be the Utilitarians.

So I think a case could be made that the last time Epicurean philosophy, speaking actively and openly and unapologetically and directly in the name of Epicurus, as an open and active major force in society, was sometime before the conversion of the empire by Constantine.

Of course we're just talking very generally here and all sorts of relevant observations could be made about exceptions.

But active and vibrant Epicurean "schools?" With people actively working together to churn out new orthodox Epicurean content, and new polemical works against opposing schools? And working to organize themselves to exist in perpetuity into the future? Not since the fall of the Roman world, and not reborn even yet today.

That should be our goal! 😊