

"Classical Wisdom Speaks" Podcast Discussing Differences Between Plato And Aristotle (Helpful Even Though From Ayn Rand Perspective)

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2020 at 7:59 PM

I can't remember the details as I write this, but some time ago I came across the article "[The False Promise of Stoicism](#)" by [Aaron Smith](#), who has been an assistant professor in philosophy at the University of Maryland, and now works for the Ayn Rand Institute. I don't have the time or inclination to repeat all my standard caveats and hesitations to even mention Ayn Rand, so I will pass over that with just a few comments.

Regardless of what you think of Rand, I do think that some of their material about Aristotle from the Randian viewpoint can be helpful to us as Epicureans in analyzing what Epicurus thought both about Aristotle (who we know Epicurus did not hold in totally high regard) and Rand. I therefore write this post because I think it can help us sharpen our understanding of Epicurus.

Tonight I was forwarded the link below to a 30 minute podcast entitled "[Did Ayn Rand Improve on Aristotle](#)" at the [Classical Wisdom](#)" [youtube page](#). I can't get a fix on who produces the Classical Wisdom page, but even though the interviewer sounds very young, the material looks to be reasonably well done. The only episode I have listened to is this one by Aaron Smith, and rather than following the title it is more of a generalist review of the significance of Aristotle. I think Aaron does a very articulate job of discussing Aristotle and explaining from the Rand perspective how he differs from Plato. It's those differences that are what interest us as Epicureans and why I post this.

Be assured that this podcast is not a standard Rand political piece about the ethics of capitalism or selfishness. Instead, it's an articulate presentation of some important philosophical issues in understanding Aristotle. I think you can pretty safely put aside any pre-existing opinions of Rand that you have and appreciate this podcast episode purely for the light it shines on Aristotle.

I listened to the full 30 minutes, but I would particularly point to the area starting around the 18:45 mark where Aaron distinguishes Rand from Aristotle. He does this by pointing out what he says Rand saw as problems in Aristotle's ethics, and I think it is very interesting for us to think about whether (1) we would agree with Rand's criticisms, and (2) whether we would agree with Rand's "solutions."

I think all of us here wrestle regularly with understanding and appreciating Epicurus' view of the proper role of "logic" and "reason." I think listening to this part of the podcast is of help in

seeing why Epicurus was so cautious about the role reason/logic in his "canon of truth."

Listen to Aaron's formulations and see if you don't hear echos of the same problem that Epicurus addressed but Rand did not.

What I hear, when I hear Aaron's criticism of Plato's other-worldly idealism, is him agreeing with both Aristotle and Rand **giving in** to Plato's idealism by just reshaping it into logical abstractions. This is very different from the Epicurean solution of grounding "truth" in the primacy of the senses (along with anticipations and "feelings") and the identification of the faculty of pleasure as the key to human happiness. You'll hear Aaron repeat Aristotle's of "flourishing" and "eudaemonia / happiness," but I would argue that when you listen closely it is easy to see that these words just kick the can down the road further and provide nothing firm as a standard of guidance.

There is a lot more in this podcast than I have the time to comment on, but one point that stands out for its ramifications is where Aaron says at 23:50 that Rand said that she did not blame Aristotle for developing her own formulation of ethics because **"she herself could not have done it before the industrial revolution!"** So the ability of humanity to formulate a proper ethical system changed with the industrial revolution?? Wow!

I am leaving out so much here that I would like to comment on - hopefully I will have time to come back to it and organize this further, or others will listen and the discussion will bring out other points. "Real human standards for success and for flourishing" appears at about the 25:00 mark. That's the kind of formulation from both Rand and the Aristotelians that I think simply falls on its face for being ambiguous and circular.

By no means is Aaron Smith on the Epicurean side in this discussion, and I don't think Epicurus is even mentioned. But when you hear Aaron talk I think it becomes easy to identify the next step that Ayn Rand failed to take. And in my view that key step is that Epicurus properly highlighted pleasure, rather than "reason," as the ultimate guide of life.

That's where I see Aristotle and Plato as ultimately on the same team, and Epicurus being correct in forcibly ejecting "logic" from the primary role that Plato and Aristotle had given to it. Of course we can then debate that the Epicurean perspective on reason is "true reason" and so "reason" really does deserve a special place, but the issue here seems to be that of working with abstractions without tying them tightly to the evidence of the senses and pain and pleasure, which Epicurus does, but which the formulations of Aristotle and Ayn Rand simply don't do. A Randian might want to argue that point, and say that Rand does ultimately point to pleasure, and indeed I think that point may appear in some of her early non-fiction articles. But ultimately the Randians make very clear that "rationality" and "reason" are their indicia of what "flourishing" means as the goal of life, and that is very different from the Epicurean perspective of a life of happiness understood as a life of pleasure.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV4hXPIFIw&feature=emb_title

Post by “Charles” of May 27, 2020 at 10:07 PM

I'm familiar with ClassicalWisdom, it's owned by a LC based in Ireland as well as by Anya Leonard. Though I don't really consume their content, as it's too entrenched within a Stoic and Aristotelian view, though I believe this is mainly due to the guest writers who subscribe to those philosophies (Donald Robertson & Stoicism for example).

They have very few articles on Epicurus, though mostly on Lucretius or by name-dropping Epicurus when it comes to Hellenistic (classical) ethics, I read them early on last year during my self-guided study prior to discovering the forums, even then I found it odd to sublimate ancient ethics into modern political ideas, like how Velleius calls out Chrysippus for claiming Homer & Hesiod were Stoics. Regardless, the dedicated articles to Epicurus at the time were disappointing.

<https://classicalwisdom.com/philosophy/epi...american-dream/>

<https://classicalwisdom.com/people/philoso...cated-hedonist/>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1579-classical-wisdom-speaks-podcast-discussing-differences-between-plato-and-aristot/>