

Cineas the Epicurean

Post by “Maciej” of February 7, 2018 at 3:52 PM

Little is known about epicurean philosopher and orator Cineas, who was advisor and diplomat to king Pyrrhus of Epirus. His diplomatic career is recorded by Plutarch in Life of Pyrrhus http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman...s/pyrrhus*.html

Parts interesting from epicurean perspective are 20.4 and 14.1-8 quoted below:

Quote

Again, at supper, where all sorts of topics were discussed, and particularly that of Greece and her philosophers, Cineas happened somehow to mention Epicurus, and set forth the doctrines of that school concerning the gods, civil government, and the highest good, explaining that they made pleasure the highest good, but would have nothing to do with civil government on the ground that it was injurious and the ruin of felicity, and that they removed the Deity as far as possible from feelings of kindness or anger or concern for us, into a life that knew no care and was filled with ease and comfort.

Quote

It was this Cineas, then, who, seeing that Pyrrhus was eagerly preparing an expedition at this time to Italy, and finding him at leisure for the moment, drew him into the following discourse.

"The Romans, O Pyrrhus, are said to be good fighters, and to be rulers of many warlike nations; if, then, Heaven should permit us to conquer these men, how should we use our victory?"

And Pyrrhus said: "Thy question, O Cineas, really needs no answer; the Romans once conquered, there is neither barbarian nor Greek city there which is a match for us, but we shall at once possess all Italy, the great size and richness and importance of which no man should know better than thyself."

After a little pause, then, Cineas said: "And after taking Italy, O King, what are we to do?"

And Pyrrhus, not yet perceiving his intention, replied: "Sicily is near, and holds out her hands to us, an island abounding in wealth and men, and very easy to capture, for all is faction there, her cities have no government, and demagogues are rampant now that Agathocles is gone."

"What thou sayest," replied Cineas, "is probably true; but will our expedition stop with the taking of Sicily?"

"Heaven grant us," said Pyrrhus, "victory and success so far; and we will make these contests but the preliminaries of great enterprises. For who could keep his hands off Libya, or Carthage, when that city got within his reach, a city which Agathocles, slipping stealthily out of Syracuse and crossing the sea with a few ships, narrowly missed taking? And when we have become masters here, no one of the enemies who now treat us with scorn will offer further resistance; there is no need of saying that."

"None whatever," said Cineas, "for it is plain that with so great a power we shall be able to recover Macedonia and rule Greece securely. But when we have got everything subject to us, what are we going to do?"

Then Pyrrhus smiled upon him and said: "We shall be much at ease, and we'll drink bumpers, my good man, every day, and we'll gladden one another's hearts with confidential talks."

And now that Cineas had brought Pyrrhus to this point in the argument, he said: "Then what stands in our way now if we want to drink bumpers and while away the time with one another? Surely this privilege is ours already, and we have at hand, without taking any trouble, those things to which we hope to attain by bloodshed and great toils and perils, after doing much harm to others and suffering much ourselves."

Display More

Cineas's question is one we must all answer. Why are we doing what we are doing? We live such busy lives with so many pressing matters that we never pause to consider what the point of it all is. Might we not be like Pyrrhus, rushing to act before we know why we doing anything at all?

This is the lesson of Cineas that is often either unknown or forgotten: Happy life is neither about conquering land under our feet nor sky above our heads. Happy life is about peace, safety and pleasure that grows from sober reasoning.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2018 at 4:18 PM

Great post and great addition to the board Maciej - thank you very much!!!

One way of extending the discussion further, especially as it applies to one form of group action (defense), it would be interesting to put the shoe on the other foot and stipulate not that Pyrrhus was about to lead an expedition to conquer Italy, but that he were about to lead an expedition to defend against an invading Roman army. I would think that much of the reasoning would then be different, in that although the actions would be much the same (raising an army, deploying them in battle) would be much the same, but for an entirely different purpose.

And I would draw the conclusion from the occasional need to raise such an army and respond to such a threat that such actions would be blessed by Epicurus as eminently reasonable so as to procure safety and future pleasures.

Because if our goal is indeed to experience the pleasures that come from "drink[ing] bumpers and whil[ing] away the time with one another," then we must as necessary act forcefully to obtain that goal.

Would you agree, Maciej?

Post by “Maciej” of February 7, 2018 at 5:01 PM

No in principle. We can imagine of course extreme circumstances that lead epicurean to war just like other extreme circumstances lead him to take his own life. But we do not praise the man who commits suicide even if he has good reasons for it therefore we will not praise man who goes to war even with good reasons.

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2018 at 5:16 PM

So in your view even a defensive war is non-Epicurean?

Post by “Maciej” of February 7, 2018 at 5:41 PM

There are no "epicurean" wars.

I grant you this. Defensive war is usually necessary. But not always. Czechs surrendered to Hitler immediately. Most of their people and their cities survived the war. Poles fought Hitler fiercely and most of their cities were destroyed thousands of families perished.

In case of Pyrrhus let's do not allow ourselves to succumb to idealized history of Greek Hellenistic kings. Pyrrhus wanted to be next Alexander like many others. Lives and freedoms of Italian Greeks in Tarentum, Krotona and Sybaris meant nothing to him. And his escapades brought after his death revenge of his enemies that fell upon the heads of his subjects.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2018 at 5:53 PM

I'll have to go with my interpretation of the exchange between Cassius Longinus and Cicero, where Cassius justified his actions in Epicurean terms. Certainly specific instances are always tricky, and in the case of the decision the Czechs made vs the Poles that is probably a good example of why one rule doesn't fit all situations. But when necessary to secure my peace and happiness, any action is justifiable and therefore even "virtuous."

The best article I have found on this topic is David Sedley's "Ethics of Brutus and Cassius: http://www.jstor.org/stable/301367?...an_tab_contents

I pasted excerpts from it here: <http://newepicurean.com/a-brief-good-w...-of-the-stoics/>

including - "*an Epicurean tenet already familiar to Cicero (Republic 1.10) that in exceptional crises the "no politics" rule might have to be suspended.*" Sedley indicates that Seneca attributed this position to Epicurus himself.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2018 at 6:04 PM

If I were accumulating lists of examples of going to war for pleasure properly interpreted, I would have to include the examples used by Torquatus in "On Ends":

"This being the theory I hold, why need I be afraid of not being able to reconcile it with the case of the Torquati my ancestors? Your references to them just now were historically correct, and

also showed your kind and friendly feeling towards me. But all the same I am not to be bribed by your flattery of my family, and you will not find me a less resolute opponent."

"Tell me, pray, what explanation do you put upon their actions? Do you really believe that they charged an armed enemy, or treated their children, their own flesh and blood, so cruelly, without a thought for their own interest or advantage? Why, even wild animals do not act in that way -- they do not run amok so blindly that we cannot discern any purpose in their movements and their onslaughts. Can you then suppose that those heroic men performed their famous deeds without any motive at all?"

"What their motive was, I will consider in a moment: for the present I will confidently assert, that if they had a motive for those undoubtedly glorious exploits, that motive was not a love of virtue in and for itself.

"He wrested the necklet from his foe?" "Yes, and saved himself from death." "But he braved great danger?" "Yes, before the eyes of an army." "What did he get by it?" "Honour and esteem, the strongest guarantees of security in life. "He sentenced his own son to death?" "If from no motive, I am sorry to be the descendant of anyone so savage and inhuman; but if his purpose was by inflicting pain upon himself to establish his authority as a commander, and to tighten the reins of discipline during a very serious war by holding over his army the fear of punishment, then his action aimed at ensuring the safety of his fellow-citizens, upon which he knew his own depended."

And this is a principle of wide application. People of your school, and especially yourself, who are so diligent a student of history, have found a favourite field for the display of your eloquence in recalling the stories of brave and famous men of old, and in praising their actions, not on grounds that those actions were useful, but on account of the splendour of abstract moral worth. But all of this falls to the ground if the principle of selection that I have just mentioned be established -- the principle of forgoing pleasures for the purpose of getting greater pleasures, and enduring pains for the sake of escaping greater pains."

Post by "Elli" of February 7, 2018 at 6:08 PM

"There are no epicurean wars" ... IMO the wars are not a matter of labeling as epicureans or platoneans. The wars are an issue that is based on the nature of all things.

Epicurus when he was 18 years old, he went to serve the greek army. His exhortation of "Lathe Viosas" then , it is only because he already saw, knew and lived all the consequences of wars

and how painful they are. So, he warned us with his "lathe viosas" to not be provocative of any war and stole the territories of our neighbors with their natural and necessary. But in a situation of a danger, he would advice us to defend our natural and necessary and not living like slaves to anyone. Moreover this is not a situation based on a duty. This is a situation based on a danger and in any situation of a real danger the sentence is formed like this : <<either They or We>> and nothing third.

I quote here an excerpt by George Kaplanis founding member of the Epicurean Garden of Thessaloniki.

"Created easily one overwhelming impression that Epicurus was calm, gentle and benevolent, and this is correct, as is confirmed by Diogenes Laertius. However if we assume that the shape of Epicurus comes up "straight in the eyes" and against some tough and dangerous reality, a situation of life or death, then how would we imagine Epicurus?

Rather awkward and passive? Maybe a little Stoic ??

I convey only two sentences of Epicurus, and an extract of his letter to Idomeneus, on The Urgent Need for Action (Seneca's Letters - Book I - Letter XXII)

It reminded me like we watch in the TV the wildlife documentary:

"..... You will attempt something only when you can attempt it in appropriate circumstances and in the appropriate opportunity. But when comes the right opportunity, you be ready to grab it....", "When you contemplating the fleeing prohibited to stay empty-handed ... there is a hope for a way out even in the most difficult situations, if not in too great a hurry before your time, nor too dilatory when the time arrives.... "

This is the psychological structure which allows the survival in harsh conditions. The soul of the warrior as connected with instinct, and the strategic thinking. The Goddess Athena emerges behind Epicurus.

It is remarkable in the battle at Salamis Aeschylus claims that as the Persians approached (possibly implying that they were not already in the Straits at dawn), they heard the Greeks singing their battle hymn (paeon) before they saw the Allied fleet:

ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων ἴτε

ἐλευθεροῦτε πατρίδ', ἐλευθεροῦτε δὲ

παῖδας, γυναῖκας, θεῶν τέ πατρῶων ἔδη,

θήκας τε προγόνων: νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών.

O sons of the Greeks, go,

Liberate your country, liberate

your children, your women, the seats of your fathers' gods,
And the tombs of your forebears: now is the struggle for all things.