

Epicurean Views On Hierarchy In Social Structures

Post by "Peter Konstans" of March 13, 2024 at 9:19 AM

[Quote from DavidN](#)

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

I don't think centralized hierarchical structures are compatible with Epicureanism. Self-sufficiency, being an epicurean virtue, is increasingly stifled the more centralized and top heavy power structures becomes. I also don't agree with your analysis of the decline of epicureanism in late antiquity, from what I've read most scholars think that in the face of environmental and societal changes the appeal of Epicureanism to the general populis declined.

What was so special about the social and environmental conditions in the centuries when Epicureanism was popular as opposed to those when it declined? Nothing much really. It was the same old agrarian society. In any case Christianity and Islam have survived plenty of devastating social shifts and the same should be demanded of any successful creed aiming at the hearts of as many people as possible.

I agree that modern (and ancient) forms of social organization are not compatible with Epicureanism just as for example a modern Western democracy is not compatible with Islam although it's perfectly possible to live in one as a Muslim and be well-adjusted.

Non-hierarchical forms of social organization are known to be indefinitely viable only in the case of immediate-return hunter-gatherers which today can hardly be said to exist anymore. They represent way less than 1% of the global population. All other egalitarian experiments from within civilization have failed and in the rare case where they were politically successful (starting with revolutionary France) produced nothing more than mass terror and hideous dictatorships. In my view civilization and egalitarianism cannot possibly co-exist and that's why even numerous non-political small-scale egalitarian experiments in the West have failed too. It's not that they were destined to fail, it's just that civilization does everything in its power to destroy such communities and it invariably succeeds because it is resourceful, aggressive and ruthless. It is no accident that resourcefulness, aggression and competition have always been civilizational virtues. It is precisely those traits that civilization needs to sustain itself. Christian theology understands this dynamic too in its own way. That's why Jesus calls the Devil 'the master of this world' in the Gospel of John. Civilization is in a certain sense truly the realm of the Devil. It requires the destruction of our souls and feeds on the darkness in our own hearts. In this world it is not wise to attempt egalitarian experiments. The master of this world will soon

come after you and crucify you.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 13, 2024 at 9:44 AM

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

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I believe that this poetic metaphor (and some of the other ideas in the above post) doesn't lead to finding good health and happiness of the soul. In fact it distracts from seeing the world "as it is". The best way to do that is start with your own life, and ask yourself: are you feeling more pleasure than pain? If not, why not? And what can you do to make your life more pleasant? And then remember that there will always be problems in the world, but if you say to yourself that you can't live a good life until all problems in the world are solved, then you will miss out on your one opportunity to experience what Nature endowed us with: the ability to experience pleasure. And we maximize it by using prudence, which also means that we "choose our fights" as some things just beyond our influence or our control. Don't miss out on making this one life as best as it can be - we only live once - and look for the goodness and pleasure that you can experience while you are yet alive. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2024 at 10:25 AM

I think that Peter K's and Kalosyni's posts are reconcilable by pointing out that "looking for the goodness and pleasure that you can experience while you are let alive" comes in many different forms. Some people have a greater tolerance to the type of society they live in than do others, but I don't think it is valid from an Epicurean point of view to say that one perspective is "wrong" and the other "correct." Peter K is focusing on the "soul-destroying" aspects of certain circumstances, while Kalosyni probably doesn't see the things that Peter K sees as "soul-destroying" as nearly so much of a problem.

I would feel sure that the ancient school had similar differences of opinion. That doesn't mean that one is wrong and the other right, as much as it means that Peter K is focusing on the survival of the school in the face of opposition as a greater pleasure to him than some others might rank it. But it's not a matter of wrong or right nearly so much as it is a matter of what we each individually value the most, and each person has to make their choices based on what

they value the highest.

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 13, 2024 at 11:17 AM

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Thanks for your warm and well-meaning words but I should point out that I didn't write the above to express personal grievances of some sort. I just wanted to explain to the contributor to whom I replied certain aspects of my view of Epicureanism. You see, Epicureanism has an egalitarian ethos and a tendency to want to opt out of mainstream culture (traits that it shares with early Christianity and some egalitarian movements in the modern era) but it also shows little interest in fighting or provoking same mainstream culture. I think there was an Epicurean strategy of 'faked conformism' which explains why for example Epicurus and his followers continued to participate in religious rituals and pretended to be as pious as everyone else (I agree that they were not atheists in the modern Anglo-American sense but they were definitely far from traditional polytheists) or why the Epicureans never experimented with things like common ownership of wealth even though the acquisition of wealth and luxuries runs contrary to a marked preference for minimalism. To illustrate how strong the Epicurean tendency for minimalism was consider the cause of Epicurus' death. His kidney disease likely came about as a result of an extremely low-fat diet.

Unlike the Epicureans who were content to be just a philosophical community, the early Christians eventually created real egalitarian communities which sheltered to some degree their low-status members from the highly exploitative social conditions prevailing in the Roman provinces. That's the main secret of their success in rapidly attracting new followers. They grew so numerous that you couldn't just kill them off anymore. So civilization developed a new strategy to defeat the Christian movement. It co-opted it and turned the Church into a formal state-sponsored organization. So ever since then the Christian Church assimilated itself in the realm of the Devil and became complicit in all sorts of depravities. Today the real early Christian ethos survives only within the last vestiges of monasticism and in fact we owe the preservation of ancient texts - including the traces of Epicurus - to those monks.

My personal life is not miserable and being resolutely apolitical I don't wait for the world to change to reach aponia and ataraxia. That said, no philosophy or religion - whatever we call it - can pay the bills or your social security or reduce working hours. Those are impediments that Epicurus didn't have to deal with and they have tangible effects that can't be prayed, meditated or philosophized away. I have no doubt however that if we lived in a society that was officially Epicurean these pressures would be somewhat gentler. Civilization generates numerous evils that can't be eliminated. But they can be helped. And that's where Epicurus 'the one who rushes to help' comes in.

Post by “Cassius” of March 13, 2024 at 12:06 PM

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Perhaps I should be sure we are on the same page as to "egalitarian" -- (Affirming, promoting, or characterized by belief in equal political, economic, social, and civil rights for all people.) I grant you that Epicureanism is interpreted that way today, but I do not take for granted that the early Epicureans interpreted it that way. They were no doubt happy to welcome new friends, but this does not ring of open arms to "all people" regardless of their views and actions: "The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus."

And as for not showing much interest in "fighting" the mainstream culture, I suppose that too depends on the definition of "fight," but I interpret most of Epicurus' views as a very strong rejection of the "mainstream culture" of the time.

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Again I think this is the way Epicurus is interpreted but I do not think that a rigorous interpretation of Epicurus truly results in a "marked preference for minimalism." [VS63](#). Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess. And Epicurus' statement that common ownership of property is not a good idea also seems consistent with [PD39](#) that we have a strong preference for friends over wide-open obligations.

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To illustrate how strong the Epicurean tendency for minimalism was consider the cause of Epicurus' death. His kidney disease likely came about as a result of an extremely low-fat diet.

OK aside from that being very speculative, I don't believe that the evidence supports Epicurus eating an extremely low-fat diet. Yes there are statements about bread and water and cheese but those are more likely to be philosophical statements of the importance of self-reliance than his standard diet. Epicurus' will shows him to have been affluent and I would expect his personal diet reflected at least a middle-class lifestyle. I see no reason to think that the Roman Epicureans, who had access to the sources we don't have, interpreted him as calling for an extreme eating pattern.

Post by "DavidN" of March 13, 2024 at 1:05 PM

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The "tendency to opt out" of contemporary culture in Epicureanism is meant to be a personal strategy for ataraxia. Throughout ~700 hundred year classical period Epicureans were not meek submissive bystanders to history. They wrote scathing works against other philosophical schools, participated in the roman civil war on both sides, actively tried to suppress the christian cults, etc. What they did not do is hide in there gardens and try to "conform" to society. They were popular at the time for the very reason that they gave people a real alternative to mainstream culture. To the original point, If Epicurus was "faking" piety for the sake of conformity, then why would he take the time to write his own theory of the gods. Rather if your theory were correct Epicurus would have simply stated that it is easier and more pleasurable to simply conform to common culture, which is not a tenet of epicurean philosophy. Instead I posit that the idea of Gods was more ingrained in humanity than you think, that it is

easy for us now to accept a world devoid of Gods, but at the time it was a more difficult concept to grasp. But instead what Epicureans did was to create a theory of the Gods that depersonalizes them, and removes them as a weapon of the priesthood. Which was a much easier idea to come to at the time, because as Epicurus noted, "everyman worships his own god."

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What was special, a decline into the dark ages. There were huge environmental and social upheavals. A person could make a living studying them as a system. From volcanic activity and tectonic shifts, to deforestation and desertification. Especially poignant was Romes rate of desertification leading to widespread famine. <https://www.hwalibrary.com/cgi-bin/get/hw...folD=1382439579> The degradational power of imperialism at it's finest. The Empire was not just the same old period of agrarianism, it was in fact quite the opposite. If anything, seen as a whole it is a great example of the destructive powers of unnecessary and unnatural desires.

Post by "DavidN" of March 13, 2024 at 3:22 PM

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I was not positing non-hierarchical structures, Anarchy is always short lived, that's polisci 101. Even hunter gather societies have hierarchy. I was talking specifically about **centralized** hierarchy vs decentralized hierarchy. The french revolution since you mentioned it is the perfect segue into another polisci 101 topic, Alexis de Tocqueville's "*Democracy in America*". As Tocqueville discovers, the reason democracy succeeds in America where it fails in France is in the decentralized nature of colonial America vs the centralized nature of European (cities) countries. Jefferson alludes to this in his agrarianism musing about his vision for America's future in his "Notes on the State of Virginia". I don't want to get to into the weeds of political discourse on the forums so if your interested in my personal line of study I'll leave a list of points for your perusal. Otherwise ignore the following section.

[The Swiss Cantons](#): an example of a successful decentralized form of government used by the Founders as an example of a successful form of confederacy.

Leading to [The Confederation period](#) from which we inherit many of our current checks and balances in government.

A number of [Intentional Communities](#) have been experimenting with novel forms of Decentralized Hierarchical structures that have been, in their own small way, successful and are worth consideration. (And are proof that your view of failed egalitarian experiments is a misconception, just because some may fail does not negate the fact that some succeed.)

As centralized hierarchical structures will always be adversely affected and constrained by [The Iron Law Of Oligarchy](#), as laid out in Robert Michels' "[Political Parties](#)". (also polisci 101)

Decentralized structures must be considered as a viable path otherwise you can never escape [Kyklos](#).

I'd also point out Hobbes and Lockes work in contractual government but I need to revisit this material myself, I think somewhere in this is an Epicurean treatise on proper government but I need to do some work on it.

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Your concept of civilization, though likely accurate, isn't sustainable in a finite universe. It's faults are the same as modern "Growth Economics." (hard to find a good link for this one sorry). Eventually aggressive competitive civilizations, though efficient at subduing wildlands, eventually burn thru exploitable resources in a finite system. Where as egalitarian and cooperative systems may not be competitive against more aggressive systems. However as lower maintenance systems, they are more competitive when set against entropy in a finite system. As such they would outperform in the long run, and may be necessary as a social evolutionary change. But again I'm getting out into the political weeds here so Ima just leave it at that.

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Having an egalitarian ethos is not the same thing as being egalitarian in the sense of having an egalitarian political agenda. Epicurus had an egalitarian ethos insofar as he allowed women and slaves to join his school and declared that philosophy is useful for all humans and not just an elite training programme for those males aspiring to excellence and virtue. But he certainly wasn't egalitarian in the sense that he wanted to abolish slavery or institute common ownership of wealth or women. Some radical ideas along those lines did exist in those centuries and the comedian Aristophanes mocks some of them.

Epicurus rejected mainstream culture but saw no need to replace it, counsel it or modify it and in that sense he was apolitical. He would have held that a life of pleasure is possible regardless of one's social conditions or one's social station. Modern egalitarianism rejects that notion. If someone wanted to be involved in politics he was permitted to do so but Epicurus would not have recommended it. If someone wanted to marry he was permitted to do so but Epicurus would not have recommended it. The idea that you should think twice about getting involved in politics (and there was good money to be made by holding even some minor office) and the

idea that you should think twice before getting married (and the prospect of a dowry was no small thing back then) can only be interpreted as wilful marginalization from society. Today not getting involved in politics and not getting married sound way more harmless than they would have sounded in 3rd century Athens. Although they do carry some lingering stigma they amount to little more than a trivial 'choice'. Back then they meant marginalization and only that. Whatever Roman Epicureans in later centuries chose to do or how they rationalized their choices, Epicurus and his immediate followers clearly advocated avoiding politics. Wise advice indeed considering how petty political conflicts destroyed the magnificent empire of Alexander and Greece itself. They destroyed the Roman Republic too, slaughtering the majority of its ruling class in the 1st century and (as Hennig Börm makes the case) the chief cause of the collapse of the Roman Empire that followed the Republic was in fact endless civil wars, not invasions from beyond its borders.

About Epicurus' condition I mixed something up. It seems more likely that Epicurus problems were caused by too much fat in his diet, not too little. He probably ate way too many olives, brined sheep/goat cheese and sardines which were simple, widely available foods. My grandparents weren't fat or inactive at all but their daily brined-cheese and olives habit clearly damaged their health.

Here's a few words about his condition from a book on medicine: 'About 10 percent of the population develop gallstones in their gallbladder. Fortunately, very few experience symptoms, but some of those that do can wish for the sweet release of death. Gallstones have become an increasingly major pathology due to the excesses of our modern lives. Overeating and a diet high in fat and cholesterol can increase the chances of them forming. Gallstones, like rock solid caviar, can shift into the gallbladder ducts and ultimately block the flow of bile, causing inflammation and pain that can quickly escalate.'

Alternatively he might have been suffering from the complications of prostate cancer a risk factor of which is infrequent sexual activity. Let's be real: whatever a philosopher or sage or brilliant passionate scientist might say about pleasure or beauty or power or other attractive things such people never get around a lot in real life. Brilliant people like Darwin, Nietzsche and Einstein had notoriously sterile sex lives and I don't believe Epicurus was lying about what he believed when he wrote that happiness is not to be found in the joys of servant lads and that one should count himself lucky if his horniness doesn't harm him. He really meant it much as poor Lucretius (who definitely wasn't getting laid a lot) would have felt disappointed. In his reservations about sexuality Epicurus is more right than many of us (including me) want to admit. When we lived in paradise (as hunter-gatherers) we were promiscuous and polyamorous just like our Chimp and Bonobo relatives. But since our fall from grace horniness has for various reasons lost much of its luster and innocence and carries various risks.

Epicurus showed a preference for tasty (tasty meaning in his case mostly fatty) foods which probably exacerbated the severity of his condition but he wasn't a gourmand. If he wanted to he could have been one. As you said he didn't lack the money and a culture of fancy-pants

gastronomy was well developed in his times. The world record for the longest word is a joke from Aristophanes about fanciful dishes and in some Greek cities there were even cooking competitions taking place.

That said, eating (very) moderately adds a lot to the sensual pleasure of dining as everyone who has really, honestly tried to put the idea into practice understands. When Epicurus warned the visitors to his school that they will be treated to simple fare that will still their senses rather than titillate them he wasn't lying about his dietary philosophy. He ate delicious simple foods in minimalist quantities. Perfect advice if we are serious about taking the chance to reach 90 years of age or more and in such good health of body and mind that we may avoid the indignity of suffering years of daily pain while being handled like an infant by a wife who is sick of us or a complete stranger. This is the miserable way most men who died 'of old age' actually left the world. There's only one reliable way to avoid this: enjoy minimally.

Post by “DavidN” of March 13, 2024 at 5:09 PM

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Epicurus rejected mainstream culture but saw no need to replace it, counsel it or modify it and in that sense he was apolitical.

Though modern egalitarian movements may confuse socialism and egalitarianism, I would refrain from making the same mistake.

In Epicurean terms, [slavery](#) was an *eventum*, an accident that might befall a person, not a *coniunctum*, something inseparable from a person's nature (contrary to modern slavery). From

this perspective Epicureans didn't need to support or oppose slavery as it wasn't part of a person's identity, but was instead an event in life. Also by allowing slaves to learn in their schools Epicureans could have been facilitating the escape of slaves because slavery in Rome was not ethnically based. If a slave could learn Latin and pass themselves off as a citizen they could have escaped and tried to start over outside the empire.

Though I agree that Epicurus was apolitical, I would deny your assertion that he had no desire to "replace, counsel or modify" mainstream culture. By providing an alternative path for people he was doing just that. His was simply a "[passive resistance](#)" by building what was effectively a parallel culture.

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 16, 2024 at 5:47 AM

A healthy degree of conformism is necessary if you want to be socially successful and institutionally reproduce yourself. An ancient philosophical school was a true institution, not an ad hoc gathering of folks to talk. Because they were institutions they could survive for many centuries if left alone. It was Justinian, an emperor with a near theocratic mentality, that forced the surviving Athenian schools to shut down.

Before Epicurus there were hedonist schools that prized non-conformism. Despite having some very brilliant and interesting people engaged in them, they didn't attract a lot of followers and faded quickly from view. That's because the prospect of social success places hard limits on what you are allowed to say and how you are allowed to say it. Although some things had changed in Epicurus' time, an Athenian citizen who didn't participate in the state religion and all its festivals and sacrificial rites was, simply put, an abomination. Promulgating in your school that all things people believe about the nature of the gods are completely false and then participating in popular religious rites carries a certain degree of hypocrisy. This hypocrisy didn't go unnoticed by the creed's enemies but it was a necessary adaptation.

If Epicureanism is best adapted to a highly particular social setting (decentralized non-hierarchy or whatever) or best reserved only for the good times (and the times were very bad in 1st century BCE Italy when according to Cicero Epicureanism was popular) then it can't fulfill its claim to provide eudaimonia to all its followers.

The ancient Epicureans of all centuries never made any serious effort to affect political change or made any sort of exhortation about how people should best govern themselves because they simply didn't care. The fact that some Epicureans fought in the Roman civil war or other conflicts means that the personal fortunes of those people hinged on political status which forced them to participate. But even if you don't stand to gain anything from participating in

wars it is prudent to do so because of the huge social pressures to conform. Conforming even to regimes you despise is actually wise as many young impulsive people like Sophie Scholl or those in today's Russia find out the hard way.

Ancient Epicureanism is not a political philosophy and as far as we can tell Epicurus doesn't seem to have written a single major work about government, politics and the like. The Epicureans also never mounted a serious polemic effort against Christianity because by the time Christianity was ascendant Epicureanism was not even on the radar as a competitor anymore.

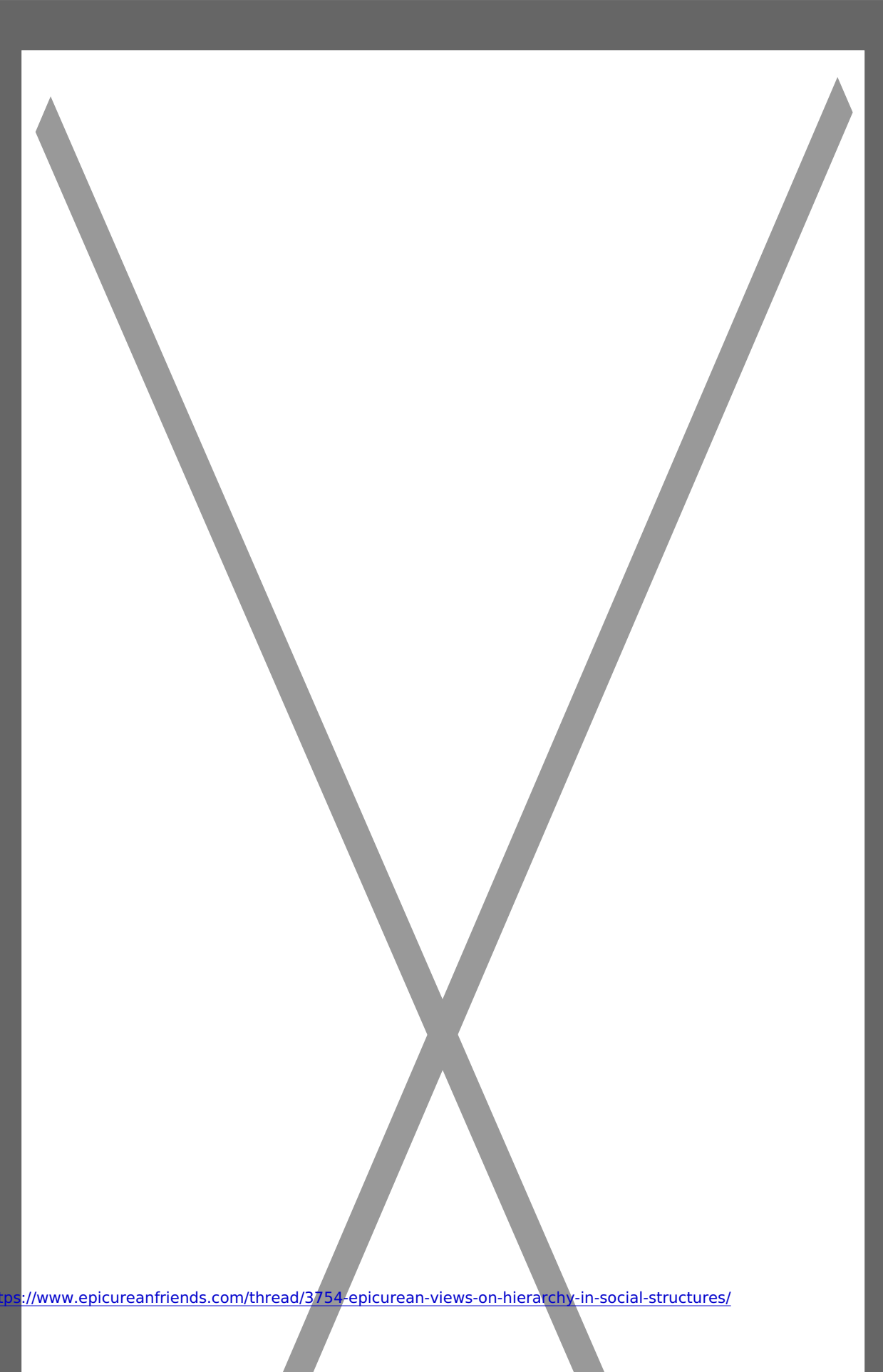
You said that hunter-gatherers have hierarchy. That's not accurate. Immediate-return hunter gatherers (meaning people who subsist entirely on wild foods they they consume soon after catching and who do not cultivate any plants or keep any livestock and possess nothing that they can't carry with them) have some status differences as all primates have but these don't translate in anything we would recognize as hierarchy and systematic coercion. Leaders in those societies are just people whose opinion on some matters is valued more because they have convinced others that they are wise. They are not some authority figure who says 'jump!' and you must jump or else and he isn't someone who is entitled to more food, and entertainment than you. In fact 'leaders' are expected to outperform others in pro-social gestures.

Only under the conditions of agricultural surpluses does our natural propensity to assign status tend to express itself as a hierarchical pyramid. Similarly, climate change manifests itself by producing more drought in some places and more snow and rain in others. Same underlying cause, different effects.

People in remote tropical regions of the world with dark skin and scant or crude garments that grow yams and bananas and keep domestic pigs and chickens but sometimes also hunt and gather are not hunter-gatherers. The right word to call them is peasants. My grandparents hunted and gathered everything that was in season and my great-grandparents almost never used money. But they were simply peasants. If they had dark skin and lived in Australia or the Amazon they could have been called 'hunter-gatherers'.

Steven Pinker does exactly that. He considers some peasant groups in the tropics who are as poor or poorer than my great-grandparents and who occasionally engage in vendetta-like squabbles very typical of peasant communities to be the same thing as prehistoric hunter-gatherers and uses this to prove that our pre-historic ancestors lived in a Hobbesian nightmare. He also apparently considers the famous Ötzi mummy to have been a hunter-gatherer. But he was a neolithic farmer and ore smelter of Anatolian descent who for some reason got into a fight before being stalked up a mountain and taken out with an arrow.

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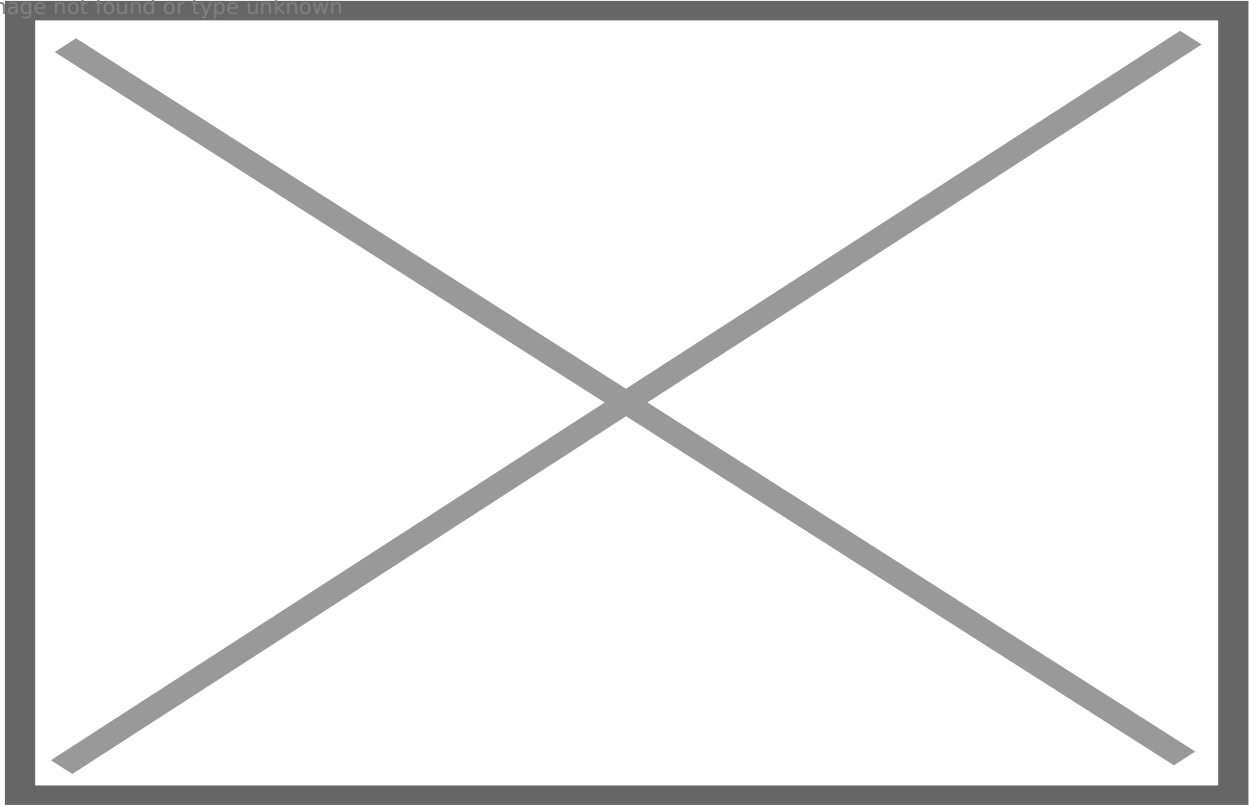


[Steven Pinker's Stinker on the Origins of War](#)

Did Steven Pinker knowingly mislead his audience at TED?

www.psychologytoday.com

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[The Famous 'Iceman' Ötzi Is Not Who We Thought He Was](#)

A new and improved DNA analysis of the famous 'Iceman' mummy suggests this ancient individual is not who we thought he was.

www.sciencealert.com

I disagree with your view that colonial America or Switzerland are somehow relevant as examples of fair and just societies. And I disagree with your view that non-traditional ways to organize a small community are indefinitely viable within a civilized society. But anyway you might want to look at this book which traces such recorded experiments and presents them from a favorable perspective.

<https://www.amazon.com/Everyday-Utopia-Years-Experiments-Teach/dp/1982190213>

Post by “Don” of March 16, 2024 at 8:04 AM

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

or made any sort of exhortation about how people should best govern themselves

They did have thoughts on how those who govern should act.

There's a missing book of Epicurus titled Of Kingship.

Philodemus wrote On The Good King According to Homer.

There were Epicurean advisors to kings.

It seems to me they had specific ideas on how to govern but they would rather advise rulers than rule themselves.

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 17, 2024 at 9:47 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

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According to Plutarch the Epicureans wrote on kingship (with which they had the new Macedonian monarchies in mind) to warn of the dangers of living with kings or of being a king.

How many instances we have of them advising kings? The only instance I know of is an Epicurean warning Pyrrhus to stop his adventures. But this was not in a formal capacity in the

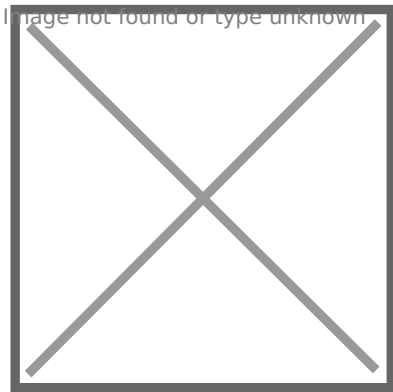
way modern governments have paid advisors but in the context of monarchs surrounding themselves with refined company, including philosophers.

Do you agree with McConnell's idea that the Epicureans considered kingship to be the ideal form of government for Epicureans to adjust to?

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44698386>

Post by “Don” of March 17, 2024 at 10:59 AM

Here's McConnell's paper on Academia.edu



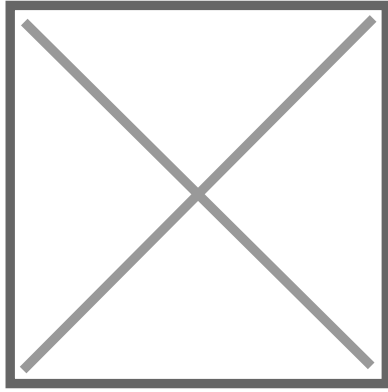
[Epicureans on kingship](#)

Diogenes Laertius lists in his catalogue of Epicurus's works (10.28) a treatise On Kingship, which is unfortunately no longer extant. Owing to the...
www.academia.edu

Post by “Don” of March 17, 2024 at 11:11 AM

And here's a paper by Dr. Fish:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3754-epicurean-views-on-hierarchy-in-social-structures/>



[The Closing Columns of Philodemus' ON THE GOOD KING ACCORDING TO HOMER, PHERC. 1507 COLS. 95-98 \(= COLS. 40-43 DORANDI\)](#)

This article presents a reedition of the nal columns of Philodemus' On the Good King According to Homer (columns 95-98 = cols. 40-43 Dorandi). In the nal...

www.academia.edu

And yes I fully realize I'm not responding to [Peter Konstans](#) 's specific questions yet. Patience



Post by “Don” of March 17, 2024 at 12:35 PM

I think Philonides was the court advisor I was trying to think of:

[Philonides of Laodicea - Wikipedia](#)

Post by “DavidN” of March 20, 2024 at 7:54 PM

[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

Ancient Epicureanism is not a political philosophy and as far as we can tell Epicurus deosn't seem to have written a single major work about government, politics and the like. The Epicureans also never mounted a serious polemic effort against Christianity because by the time Christianity was ascendant Epicureanism was not even on the radar as a competitor anymore.

There's a principal doctrine on the benefits of proper government. Even without the lost work on kingship this points to a discussion within the Epicurean community about the proper place

of government. KYRIA DOXA 6: In order that men might not fear one another, there was a natural benefit to be had from government and kingship, provided that they are able to bring about this result.

Lucian's ***The Death of Peregrinus***, may not be as direct an attack on christianity as Celsus ***True word***, but is still an attack on the character and dogma of the early christian cults.