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Reasonings About Polystratus' On Irrational Contempt

Polystratus was the third Scholarch of the Epicurean Garden in Athens. He is the first one to guide the community of Friends after the four founders had died, and it's believed that he had met Epicurus and studied under him when he was only a boy and Epicurus a very old man.

Only fragments of two of his writings remain. Here, we are concerned only with his work *On Irrational Contempt*, which is a polemic directed "against those who irrationally despise popular beliefs." It's nearly impossible for us English-speakers to gain access to this work in our own language. The closest thing we have are commentaries from which we can glean the content and the tone of the discourse and introject our own thoughts, opinions, and new examples.

The work is a diatribe against the Cynics, or the Sceptics, or both. Polystratus' adversaries appear to be full of insolence. As in the case of Colotes, Polystratus also argues that the philosophies of the other schools are impractical, cannot be used without doing harm to oneself, and that they do not practice what they preach.

Good and Evil

The skeptics argued that the noble (to kalon) and the base (to aiskhron) are culturally conditioned and therefore not objectively real; that there is no good and evil that can be discerned in nature. As elsewhere in philosophical discourse, there is tension between nomos (law, custom) and physis (nature).

Pyrrho's powerful argument seems to appeal to materialist doctrine. If objective reality is made up of atoms and void, then good and evil, to exist, would have to be similarly made up of atoms and void and would be evident and there would be no disagreement with regards to what these things are:

False is the opinion of those who say that neither the fine, nor the foul, nor generally any of the other things of that sort exist because they are unlike stone and gold and similar things, each of which we say exists by nature and not by convention as these are the same to all and not different to different people. For none of these (the fine, etc.) exist in truth. For if they were to exist they would have to be like bronze or stone and the same to all and everywhere. Bronze is not bronze to one and not to another. If fine things and foul things existed truly they would not be such to one but not agreed upon by another.

Polystratus argues for the objectivity of good and evil and against the notion that the noble and the base are merely conventional distinctions. He does this by discussing in what way these things exist, and begins by saying that these are different categories of things (ethical) and it's an error to dump them together with material things like gold and iron. Ergo, he is accusing the Skeptics of making a false analogy.

He then argues that fair and foul are relational or dispositional properties. In other words, that they are tendencies exhibited by things in relation to other things. A magnet may only attract metal and

not cement, but it remains a magnet insofar as it attracts metal. Peanuts can be nourishing or deadly (to some who are allergic), but they're not inherently deadly: this is a relational property, not a conventional property. Colors and flavors are relational properties: we only see the color of an object when light reflects against it.

Rotten meat is good for vultures and lions who have the enzymes to digest it, but bad for humans who do not and may die after eating a carcass. It's the same carcass, conventionally, but the relational property of the carcass with regards to predator makes it good or bad. Polystratus argues that this does not make good and bad less real. The experiences are real: good and bad are experienced as real pleasure or aversion in the body and mind of the predators or humans, but they are relational properties.

Another example deals with the various curative properties of a single drug, all of which are effective and real. If we suffer from one disease, the drug will treat the symptoms of that one disease. If we suffer from another disease, it will treat the other disease, but it's the same drug (conventionally). Another example of relational qualities is weight, which depends on mass and gravity. In Mars, a human weighs less than on planet Earth. This does not mean that weight is not real but that it's real in a relative manner.

The morality or goodness of a conventionally-existing thing in nature is, therefore, determined by its effects and relational properties. To use an analogy from grammar: they are adjectives rather than nouns, but they are still naming something real and discernable.

Notice that Polystratus stands his ground on a crucial matter: he believes in moral realism or moral naturalism, the idea that there is a natural and objective good for humans. He emphatically and repeatedly references human nature and our natural end, which is pleasure.

Are Gods Natural and Necessary?

In this document, arguments about the existence of the gods are rooted in how we perceive human nature and the human psyche. Since animals have no conception of the gods, the case can be made that such conception is not necessary or natural.

The rationalist distinguished between the psychologies of animals and men, but Epicureans emphasized the similarities. Polystratus argues that fear of the gods and of oracles and omens is unnatural because animals do not exhibit such fears.

The argument here lies on how similar or different men's minds are from the minds of animals. This matter is made more crucial by Epicurean insistence that nature is not to be dominated, but that it serves as a guide for living. Good Epicureans are not instructed to repress or hate that which is natural. Therefore, if the gods are natural beings, or if belief in gods is shown to be within human nature, then a case can be made for the relational existence of gods, even if they are merely cultural or mental constructs as the idealist interpretation proposes.

This seems to have been Polystratus' argument, since men seem to universally form preconceptions of the gods even if other animals do not, and since it is clear that with regards to other faculties (reasoning abilities, language, etc.) we are also distinct and/or superior to other animals.

Ergo, it seems that Polystratus' argument for the gods is based on the human psyche (Greek word for soul), as distinct from the psyche of other animals; as well as on human nature and on the idea that it's pointless and/or unhealthy to resist human nature.

In Philodemus' On Piety we learned that all the founders, in unison, argued that religion and gods were natural and necessary, and that arguments within our school to the contrary are a modern development. In Polystratus' writings we see that the original doctrine is elaborated, but his arguments raise several questions:

- If gods are a relational or dispositional property of the human condition and if they are natural, why did natural selection favor this? Do these gods assist us with societal cohesion? Do they have therapeutic value, or help us to cross the initiatory thresholds and are therefore a natural part of life-span development?
- If humans have a natural faculty that leads us to create gods, then it is clear from many examples in history that this faculty has been misplaced and manipulated by unscrupulous prophets and leaders. One example from nature is how moths are attracted to a flame, or how bees find the nectar of carnivorous plants irresistible: if nature knows how to exploit the faculties of other animals to their detriment, is it not possible that both nature and culture can do the same with humans? What are the dangers associated with this faculty?
- It is clear from the Four Cures that we are never to fear the Gods, but if it is natural to have gods and if nature is not to be repressed or shunned, then what may be the best and healthiest way to channel this natural tendency once we have dismissed fear-based views?
- Are there any discernable detrimental effects to the denial of gods for an individual? If this is the case, then we must conclude that gods are not only natural, but also necessary. If it is not the case, then they are natural and unnecessary. Judging from [Gregory Paul's research on the statistical correlation between crime and religiosity](#), my first impulse is to argue that religion and gods are unnecessary, but others may argue otherwise.

Conclusion

While speaking of the free life (a life with no fear and superstition), Polystratus seems to contrast the irrational (unjustified) contempt of other schools versus the justified confidence of the Epicurean and his contempt for fears and superstition. He concludes that other schools' views are a hindrance to

attainment of happiness and of the good life:

*Your inability to distinguish what goal our very nature requires and with what it is by nature satisfied ... the non recognition of these is **the architect of all evils.***

By not setting pleasure as the natural goal, it's true that many ethical thinkers have elaborated artificial ideologies that, in the end, generate vast amounts of suffering. From examples in history, we see that millions of human beings were sacrificed at the altar of Karl Marx's unfounded and unscientific prophecies about how the dictatorship of the proletariat would bring about an ideal stateless society (even if his views on how labor relations shape societal values were extremely insightful). We also see that the unchallenged premises of Ayn Rand's neoliberal free-market capitalist ideology and her promise of a free society under a corporatocracy led to the squandering of 40% of American retirees' funds and the collapse of the economy in 2008, as well as the four-month-long water wars in Bolivia and other calamities.

We may forgive these ideologies for their harm by taking into account that they never promised a pleasant life. If we do not set this goal from the onset, how can we expect it as an end result?

When we do not base our views firmly on the study of nature, and when we do not have clear insight into how the good is the pleasant and the bad is the unpleasant in our direct, real and immediate experience, we end up serving ends other than the ends that nature has established for us as natural beings.

Naturalist moral realism is simple: as natural beings we can directly discern, with our faculties, both good and evil.

Read also:

[Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia](#), by James Warren

[Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate](#),

edited by Lawrence Nolan

Very fragmentary transliteration of the Polystratus papyrus