

# Guyau - Interesting Summary Essay - The Morality of Epicurus And Its Relationship To Contemporary Doctrines

**Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2019 at 4:18 PM**

Just one perceptive observation after the other, all which ought to be to the embarrassment of "modern Epicureans" - this one on "free will":

"In the problem of liberty we find the ancient and modern Epicureans in total disagreement with each other. We know that Epicurus accepts free will and places, not only in man, but in nature and atoms a spontaneity, drawing from itself the principle of its action. On the contrary, Hobbes, Helvetius, d'Holbach, in a word, all the modern Epicureans without exception, reject this freedom and show themselves to be determinists, and at times, as is the case with Hobbes and La Mettrie, even excessively fatalist. We're not going to examine here the absolute truth of these contrary doctrines, but we can ask which is most in conformity with Epicurean principles. One must recognize that belief in freedom is an anomaly in Epicurus' system.

The latter, after having posed happiness as the goal, recognizes that tranquility of the soul is the necessary condition of this happiness, and he believes that the idea of a universal necessity dominating nature would be incompatible with the tranquility of the soul. According to him, as we know, there is something dark and troubling in the sentiment of fatalism; it is for this reason that he rejects it. And once he begins to reject it, with a remarkably logical spirit he casts it out from everywhere and places spontaneity in everything. What he hasn't proved is that this spontaneity exists; he doesn't even try to prove it. For him moral freedom is an obvious fact of consciousness. And man's freedom being given, he deduces from it the spontaneity of nature. But he doesn't think that only one of the following is true: either moral liberty is doubtful, and his system is enveloped in the same uncertainty, or it is certain and it is a new principle that must be taken into account.

If I am free I can found a morality on this and ignore the principle of interest. Duty can be deduced from the same idea of liberty without having to appeal to pleasure. It is understandable that a determinist could be a Utilitarian; but that a partisan of free will, who believes he feels in himself a certain amount of the absolute, a cause living and acting by itself, possessing intrinsic value and dignity should submit this to an external rule of action, turn it toward a foreign end and make of it an instrument of pleasure, this is a contradiction from which we were right to defend the modern Epicureans. On this point, in our time the Epicurean system has acquired new strength and homogeneity. Epicurus complained that the idea of universal determinism weighs on the human soul, for man suffers when he sacrifices to nature his full and complete independence. He forgot that morality, as much as any other science, can enter into this question of individual preferences. Science seeks, not what pleases intelligence

or sensibility, but what is. It pursues not absolute happiness, that utopia of ancient Epicureanism, but relative happiness, compatible with reality, and it retreats before no truth, however difficult it might be."