"The Story of Civilizations" Vol. II - "The Life of Greece" (1939), Chapter XXIX "The Surrender of Philosophy" II. The Epicurean Escape - Will Durant (A Cautionary Tale)

Post by “Charles” of February 20, 2020 at 1:54 PM

I received this volume of Will Durant's series yesterday from a coworker who majored in Philosophy (Nietzche/Marx/Schopenhauer), saying that I would like it, and almost immediately I flipped to the section that covered Epicurus. Well, it turns out that this is perhaps one of the worst biographies and summaries of the philosophy that I've read. I don't have time today to critique every single bit: but he gets his timeline wrong with Metrodorus, he mistakes Epicurus instead of Metrodorus as the husband/lover of Leontion, he calls Mys Epicurus' favorite pupil (it was Metrodorus), Epicurus did not live in "Stoic simplicity!" or eat only bread and water, as well as living only in "prudent privacy" when Durant later quotes Laertius saying Epicurus had many friends.

I'm not sure where Durant got his information about the people of Lampsacus raising him a fund as it's not cited, The Garden was not in the outskirts of Athens, it was between the Academy and later, the Stoa. It only later helps its case when Durant makes sure to mention the Epicurean Gods and praises Lucretius, not for the physics but for being a complete, extant source that outlines the philosophy, however, in the third from last paragraph Durant breaks form and explains his own problems with EP.

Though he described for many ages the theorist who loses his life in the cobwebs of speculation, Polybius was wrong in supposing that moral problems had lost their lure for the Greek mind. It was precisely the ethical strain that in this period replaced the physical and the metaphysical as the dominant note in philosophy. Political problems were indeed in abeyance, for freedom of speech was harassed by the presence or memory of royal garrisons, and national liberty was implicitly understood to depend upon quiescence. The glory of the Athenian state had departed, and philosophy had to face what to Greece was an unprecedented divorce between politics and ethics. It had to find a way of life at once forgivable to philosophy and compatible with political impotence. Therefore it conceived its problem no longer as one of building a just state, but as that of forming the selfcontained and contented individual.

The ethical development now took two opposite directions. One followed the lead of Heracleitus, Socrates, Antisthenes, and Diogenes, and expanded the Cynic into the Stoic philosophy; the other stemmed from Democritus, leaned heavily on Aristippus, and drew out the Cyrenaic into the Epicurean creed. Both of these philosophical compensations for religious and political decay came from Asia: Stoicism from Semitic pantheism, fatalism, and resignation; Epicureanism from the pleasure-loving Greeks of the Asiatic coast.

Epicurus was born at Samos in 341. At twelve he fell in love with philosophy; at nineteen he went to Athens and spent a year at the Academy. Like Francis Bacon he preferred Democritus to Plato and Aristotle, and took from him many bricks for his own construction. From Aristippus he learned the wisdom of pleasure, and from Socrates the pleasure of wisdom; from Pyrrho he took the doctrine of tranquillity, and a ringing word for it—*ataraxia.* He must have watched with interest the career of his contemporary Theodoras of Cyrene, who preached an unmoralistic atheism so openly in Athens that the Assembly indicted him for impiety—a lesson that Epicurus did not forget. Then he returned to Asia and lectured on philosophy at Colophon, Mytilene, and Lampsacus. The Lampsacenes were so impressed with his ideas and his character that they felt qualms of selfishness in keeping him in so remote a city; they raised a fund of eighty minas ($4000), bought a house and garden on the outskirts of Athens, and presented it to Epicurus as his school and his home. In 306, aged thirty-five, Epicurus took up his residence there, and taught to the Athenians a philosophy that was Epicurean in name only. It was a sign of the growing freedom of women that he welcomed them to his lectures, even into the little community that lived about him. He made no distinctions of station or race; he accepted courtesans as well as matrons, slaves as well as freemen; his favorite pupil was his own slave, Mysis. The courtesan Leontium became his mistress as well as his pupil, and found him as jealous a mate as if he had secured her by due process of law. Under his influence she had one child and wrote several books, whose purity of style did not interfere with her morals.

For the rest Epicurus lived in Stoic simplicity and prudent privacy. His motto was *lathe biosas* —"live unobtrusively." He took part dutifully in the religious ritual of the city, but kept his hands clear of politics, and his spirit free from the affairs of the world. He was content with water and a little wine, bread and a little cheese. His rivals and enemies charged that he gorged himself when he could, and became abstemious only when overeating had ruined his digestion. "But those who speak thus are all wrong," Diogenes Laertius assures us; and he adds: "There are many witnesses of the unsurpassable kindness of the man to everybody—both his own country, which honored him with statues, and his friends, who were so numerous that they could not be contained in whole cities." He was devoted to his parents, generous to his brothers, and gentle to his servants, who joined with him in philosophical studies. His pupils looked upon him, says Seneca, as a god among men; and after his death their motto was: "Live as though the eye of Epicurus were upon thee."

Between his lessons and his loves he wrote three hundred books. The ashes of Herculaneum preserved for us some fragments of his central work, *On Nature;* Diogenes Laertius, the Plutarch of philosophy, handed down three of his letters, and late discoveries have added a few more. Above all, Lucredus enshrined the thought of Epicurus in the greatest of philosophical

poems.

Perhaps already conscious that Alexander's conquest was letting loose upon Greece a hundred mystic cults from the East, Epicurus begins with the arresting proposition that the aim of philosophy is to free men from fear—more than anything else, from the fear of gods. He dislikes religion because, he thinks, it thrives on ignorance, promotes it, and darkens life with the terror of celestial spies, relentless furies, and endless punishments. The gods exist, says Epicurus, and enjoy, in some far-off space among the stars, a serene and deathless life; but they are too sensible to bother with the affairs of so infinitesimal a species as mankind. The world is not designed, nor is it guided, by them; how could such divine Epicureans have created so middling a universe, so confused a scene of order and disorder, of beauty and suffering? If this disappoints you, Epicurus adds, console yourself with the thought that the gods are too remote to do you any more harm than good. They cannot watch you, they cannot judge you, they cannot plunge you into hell. As for evil gods, or demons, they are the unhappy fantasies of our dreams.

Having rejected religion, Epicurus goes on to reject metaphysics. We can know nothing of the suprasensual world; reason must confine itself to the experience of the senses, and must accept these as the final test of truth. All the problems that Locke and Leibnitz were to debate two thousand years later are here settled with one sentence: if knowledge does not come from the senses, where else can it come from? And if the senses are not the ultimate arbiter of fact, how can we find such a criterion in reason, whose data must be taken from the senses?

Nevertheless the senses give us no certain knowledge of the external world; they catch not the objective thing itself, but only the tiny atoms thrown off by every part of its surface, and leaving upon our senses little replicas of its nature and form. If, therefore, we must have a theory of the world (and really it is not altogether necessary), we had better accept Democritus' view that nothing exists, or can be known to us, or can even be imagined by us, except bodies and space; and that all bodies are composed of indivisible and unchangeable atoms. These atoms have no color, temperature, sound, taste, or smell; such qualities are created by the corpuscular radiations of objects upon our sense organs. But the atoms do differ in size, weight, and form; for only by this supposition can we account for the infinite variety of things. Epicurus would like to explain the operation of the atoms on purely mechanical principles; but as he is interested in ethics far more than in cosmology, and is anxious to preserve free will as the source of moral responsibility and the prop of personality, he abandons Democritus in mid-air, and supposes a kind of spontaneity in the atoms: they swerve a bit from the perpendicular as they fall through space, and so enter into the combinations that make the four elements, and through them the diversity of the objective scene. There are innumerable worlds, but it is unwise to interest ourselves in them. We may assume that the sun and the moon are about as large as they appear to be, and then we can give our time to the study of man.

Man is a completely natural product. Life probably began by spontaneous generation, and progressed without design through the natural selection of the fittest forms. Mind is only another kind of matter. The soul is a delicate material substance diffused throughout the body.

It can feel or act only by means of the body, and dies with the body's death. Despite all this we must accept the testimony of our immediate consciousness that the will is free; else we should be meaningless puppets on the stage of life. It is better to be a slave to the gods of the people than to the Fate of the philosophers.

The real function of philosophy, however, is not to explain the world, since the part can never explain the whole, but to guide us in our quest of happiness. "That which we have in view is not a set of systems and vain opinions, but much rather a life exempt from every kind of disquietude." Over the entrance to the garden of Epicurus was the inviting legend: "Guest, thou shalt be happy here, for here happiness is esteemed the highest good." Virtue, in this philosophy, is not an end in itself, it is only an indispensable means to a happy life. "It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly; nor to live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly." The only certain propositions in philosophy are that pleasure is good, and that pain is bad. Sensual pleasures are in themselves legitimate, and wisdom will find some room for them; since, however, they may have evil effects, they need such discriminating pursuit as only intelligence can give.

When, therefore, we say that pleasure is the chief good we are not speaking of the pleasures of the debauched man, or those that lie in sensual enjoyment. . . but we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and of the soul from disturbance. For it is not continued drinkings and revels, or the enjoyment of female society, or feasts of fish or other expensive foods, that make life pleasant, but such sober contemplation as examines the reasons for choice and avoidance, and puts to flight the vain opinions from which arises most of the confusion that troubles the soul.

In the end, then, understanding is not only the highest virtue, it is also the highest happiness, for it avails more than any other faculty in us to avoid pain and grief. Wisdom is the only liberator: it frees us from bondage to the passions, from fear of the gods, and from dread of death; it teaches us how to bear misfortune, and how to derive a deep and lasting pleasure from the simple goods of life and the quiet pleasures of the mind. Death is not so frightful when we view it intelligently; the suffering it involves may be briefer and slighter than that which we have borne time and again during our lives; it is our foolish fancies of what death may bring that lend to it so much of its terror. And consider how little is needed to a wise contentfresh air, the cheapest foods, a modest shelter, a bed, a few books, and a friend. "Everything natural is easily procured, and only the useless is costly." We should not fret our lives out in realizing every desire that comes into our heads: "Desires may be ignored when our failure to accomplish them will not really cause us pain." Even love, marriage, and parentage are unnecessary; they bring us fitful pleasures, but perennial grief. To accustom ourselves to plain living and simple ways is an almost certain road to health. The wise man does not burn with ambition or lust for fame; he does not envy the good fortune of his enemies, nor even of his friends; he avoids the fevered competition of the city and the turmoil of political strife; he seeks the calm of the countryside, and finds the surest and deepest happiness in tranquillity of body and mind. Because he controls his appetites, lives without pretense, and puts aside all fears, the natural "sweetness of life" (*hedone*) rewards him with the greatest of all goods, which is peace.

This is a likably honest creed. It is encouraging to find a philosopher who is not afraid of pleasure, and a logician who has a good word to say for the senses. There is no subtlety here, and no warm passion for understanding; on the contrary Epicureanism, despite its transmission of the atomic theory, marks a reaction from the brave curiosity that had created Greek science and philosophy. The profoundest defect of the system is its negativity: it thinks of pleasure as freedom from pain, and of wisdom as an escape from the hazards and fullness of life; it provides an excellent design for bachelorhood, but hardly for a society. Epicurus respected the state as a necessary evil, under whose protection he might live unmolested in his garden, but he appears to have cared little about national independence; indeed, his school seems to have preferred monarchy to democracy, as less inclined to persecute heresy—an arresting inversion of modern beliefs. Epicurus was ready to accept any government that offered no hindrance to the unobtrusive pursuit of wisdom and companionship. He dedicated to friendship the devotion that earlier generations had given to the state. “Of all the things that wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is friendship.” The friendships of the Epicureans were proverbial for their permanence; and the letters of the master abound in expressions of ardent affection. His disciples returned this feeling with Greek intensity. Young Colotes, on first hearing Epicurus speak, fell on his knees, wept, and hailed him as a god.

For thirty-six years Epicurus taught in his garden, preferring a school to a family. In the year 270 he was brought down with the stone. He bore the pains stoically, and on his deathbed found time to think of his friends. “I write to you on this happy day which is the last of my life. The obstruction of my bladder, and the internal pains, have reached the extreme point, but there is marshaled against them the delight of my mind in thinking over our talks together. Take care of Metrodorus’ children in a way worthy of your lifelong devotion to me and to philosophy.” He willed his property to the school, hoping “that all those who study philosophy may never be in want. . . so far as our power to prevent it may extend.”

He left behind him a long succession of disciples, so loyal to his memory that for centuries they refused to change a word of his teaching. His most famous pupil, Metrodorus of Lampsacus, had already shocked or amused Greece by reducing Epicureanism to the proposition that “all good things have reference to the belly”—meaning, perhaps, that all pleasure is physiological, and ultimately visceral. Chrysippus countered by calling the *Gastrology* of Archestratus “the metropolis of the Epicurean philosophy.” Popularly misunderstood, Epicureanism was publicly denounced and privately accepted in wide circles throughout Hellas. So many Hellenizing Jews adopted it that *Apikóros* was used by the rabbis as a synonym for apostate. In 173 or 155 two Epicurean philosophers were expelled from Rome on the ground that they were corrupting youth. A century later Cicero asked, “Why are there so many followers of Epicurus?” and Lucretius composed the fullest and finest extant exposition of the Epicurean system. The school had professed adherents until the reign of Constantine, some of them, by their lives, degrading the name of the master to mean “epicure,” others faithfully teaching the simple maxims into which he had once condensed his philosophy: “The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; all that we dread can be conquered.”