

"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 "Cassius" of February 20, 2020 at 3:21 PM

Comments on several quotes:

What the HECK is the basis for THIS? Sounds like just gossip for the sake of effect to me -

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

OK, as to this one, yes partly correct, but why not mention first, or at least in passing, that he disliked supernatural religion because he believe it to be FALSE, and not just on pragmatic grounds?

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

If metaphysics means "

the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space" then this next statement is just simply false. Good grief, most of "On Nature" / Lucretius is devoted to the first principles of things!

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

This is worded flippantly as if we should presume he was unwise to do so:

[Quote from Charles](#)

he abandons Democritus in mid-air,

What? Unwise to interest ourselves in them? The doctrine of innumerable worlds is a key aspect of the eternal / boundless universe showing that the Earth and life here are not special playthings of supernatural gods.

[Quote from Charles](#)

There are innumerable worlds, but it is unwise to interest ourselves in them.

At least he gets a few things correct, and this is a pretty important point:

[Quote from Charles](#)

Virtue, in this philosophy, is not an end in itself, it is only an indispensable means to a happy life.

I think this is poorly worded, because without restating that "good" and "bad" are relative terms you imply that we ALWAYS will choose a pleasure, even when it leads to pain that outweighs the pleasure later, which is not what Epicurus said at all.

[Quote from Charles](#)

The only certain propositions in philosophy are that pleasure is good, and that pain is bad.

This is flatly wrong -- "understanding" is nowhere stated to be the "highest Happiness" or even the "highest pleasure" -- it is a tool toward pleasure, not the end in itself.

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

More minimalism which is not accurate, combined with "only the useless is costly" which I think is very far from the meaning of the material that he is claiming to quote. Pleasures of some kinds can be quite costly, and there is no prohibition at all in Epicurus from pursuing them if

you deem the cost worthwhile.

[Quote from Charles](#)

And consider how little is needed to a wise content fresh 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."

This far overstates the case and is a typical distortion. Or Else Epicurus was sentencing Metrodorus' daughter, and the school member who married her, to "unnecessary.. perennial grief" -- which would be a ridiculous assertion.

[Quote from Charles](#)

Even love, marriage, and parentage are unnecessary; they bring us fitful pleasures, but perennial grief.

The greatest of all goods is not peace, it is PLEASURE! Now if you want to parse "goods" the way DeWitt does, you might say "life" but in no way are you going to reach the conclusion "peace."

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

In Epicurean philosophy there is no passion for understanding? And it's a "reaction" "from" the brave curiosity of prior Greeks? RIDICULOUS.

[Quote from Charles](#)

here 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.

NEGATIVITY? Only to a theist who thinks he is giving up life after death, or a stoic who insists on reading the goal of Epicurus as freedom from pain, rather than PLEASURE. And again, pity the poor daughter of Metrodorus, who was being sentenced to marry someone who supposedly was being taught to be a bachelor!

[Quote from Charles](#)

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.

No - there is nothing to support this in the texts; this is just modern political posturing.

[Quote from Charles](#)

Epicurus respected the state as a necessary evil

It is recorded in Diogenes Laertius that he called a group of philosophical opponents "Enemies of Greece," yet he insists on saying:

[Quote from Charles](#)

he appears to have cared little about national independence;

OK maybe "any government" could be acceptable depending on circumstances, but the goal would not be "pursuit of wisdom and companionship" but pleasure!

[Quote from Charles](#)

Epicurus was ready to accept any government that offered no hindrance to the unobtrusive pursuit of wisdom and companionship

Here "the good can be won" is too broad and ambiguous, and "all that we dread can be conquered" is too. "The good" has to be understood to be pleasure in relative terms (not everyone is going to live 70 years of total happiness) and as far as "conquering" all that we fear, we are taught that there is no punishment after death, but that doesn't mean necessarily that we "conquer" if our goal is to live happily and we are deprived of it by forces that overwhelm us.

[Quote from Charles](#)

The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; all that we dread can be conquered."

THANK YOU FOR POSTING THIS CHARLES!