

Studies on Epicurus' Influence on Marx

Post by “Joshua” of May 15, 2020 at 4:55 PM

I wrote this post earlier. I wasn't sure if I should post it, since I'm largely out of my depth here. I'll drop it here anyway—think of it as the words of an overconfident contrarian interlocutor. It doesn't really feel like my voice when I read it again; I'm not even sure that it is actually my opinion.

Quote

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. ***The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.***

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. ***To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.***

from Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. I've highlighted in bold the passages where he departs significantly (in my view) from Lucretius.

It is true that Lucretius (and Epicurus) developed a critique of religion that derived in part from its role in biological and cultural evolution. But the urging to abandon religious fear—and, by extension, religion's false consolations—is an urging that Epicurus presents on its own

foundation. The secondary case—the urging for Man to abandon his soulless economic conditions through revolution—is one that was never made; indeed, one that seems not to have been considered.

A clue to this may be found in Epicurus' refusal to instate in his Garden a Pythagorean-style 'commune', which he believed would betray a lack of trust among its members. Possibly Epicurus would not have been surprised by what followed. What Marx desired was to re-invert the mistaken inversion; to correct what was badly wrong in mankind's relationship with the material, both spiritually and economically—the halo, *and* the 'vale of tears'. Both of these were best represented in the ancient world by Platonism; it had a class or a caste system. It had an ethereal and incomprehensible metaphysic. It had a political theory, not only descriptive but prescriptive. *That* was the system Marx inverted. *That* was the original error whose over-correction and mirror-image was Marxism.

Where Marx and Plato sought to instruct nations, Epicurus addressed himself to individuals. Where Marx and Plato denied to the poor masses¹ the capacity to arrive at metaphysical truths, Epicurus taught even slaves.

Epicurus did not build castles in the air. He developed a philosophy on the ground that was prudent and practical, and tailored to lived experience. It didn't call for a revolution in political life—nor did it call for a philosopher king. It called only for the mental discipline of the student, and a willingness to try.

He didn't engineer a utopia; he plotted the course of a happy life. If he has an heir among political theorists, we should look not to Marx, but to Thomas Jefferson.

¹For Marx, the "oppressed"; for Plato, the 'baser metal'.