

Somerset Maugham on Epicureanism over one hundred years ago

Post by “Jon M” of May 23, 2020 at 4:44 PM

I am reading Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* which he wrote in 1915, and is his thinly disguised autobiography. I was tickled to read this dialogue on Epicurus and pleasure. The characters are Cronshaw (based on the Canadian artist James Wilson Morrice) and Philip Carey, the main character, who is based on Maugham himself. The scene is a Parisian cafe (the *Closerie des Lilas*) in the late 1890's.

I am amazed at the clarity of this piece of writing, and explanation of Epicurean thinking, written over a hundred years ago.

Quote

“When you are reconciled to the fact that each is for himself in the world you will ask less from your fellows. They will not disappoint you, and you will look upon them more charitably. Men seek but one thing in life—their pleasure.”

“No, no, no!” cried Philip.

Cronshaw chuckled. “You rear like a frightened colt, because I use a word to which your Christianity ascribes a deprecatory meaning. You have a hierarchy of values; pleasure is at the bottom of the ladder, and you speak with a little thrill of self-satisfaction of duty, charity, and truthfulness. You think pleasure is only of the senses; the wretched slaves who manufactured your morality despised a satisfaction which they had small means of enjoying.

“You would not be so frightened if I had spoken of happiness instead of pleasure: it sounds less shocking, and your mind wanders from the sty of Epicurus to his garden. But I will speak of pleasure, for I see that men aim at that, and I do not know that they aim at happiness. It is pleasure that lurks in the practice of every one of your virtues.

“Man performs actions because they are good for him, and when they are good for other people as well they are thought virtuous: if he finds pleasure in giving alms he is charitable; if he finds pleasure in helping others he is benevolent; if he finds pleasure in working for society he is public-spirited; but it is for your private pleasure that you give twopence to a beggar as much as it is for my private pleasure that I drink another whisky and soda. I, less of a humbug than you, neither applaud myself for my pleasure nor demand your admiration.”

“But have you never known people do things they didn't want to instead of things they did?”

“No. You put your question foolishly. What you mean is that people accept an immediate pain rather than an immediate pleasure. The objection is as foolish as your manner of putting it. It is clear that men accept an immediate pain rather than an immediate pleasure, but only because they expect a greater pleasure in the future. Often the pleasure is illusory, but their error in calculation is no refutation of the rule.

“You are puzzled because you cannot get over the idea that pleasures are only of the senses; but, child, a man who dies for his country dies because he likes it as surely as a man eats pickled cabbage because he likes it. It is a law of creation. If it were possible for men to prefer pain to pleasure the human race would have long since become extinct.”

“But if all that is true”, cried Philip, “what is the use of anything? If you take away duty and goodness and beauty, why are we brought into the world?”

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