

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?”

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of May 23, 2020 at 6:54 PM

Oh My Gosh That is GREAT! Thank you! Never had a clue that that existed! Please post more as you find it! Thanks!

Also I should ask - What comes after that? Does Philip get a reply?

Also, I know nothing whatsoever about Maugham or that book other than that it is famous. However I'll likely file that quote away in a special place. Please be sure to post if there are

other aspects of that book that are relevant to our use of it.

Post by “Jon M” of May 23, 2020 at 10:14 PM

Philip doesn't get the kind of reply we would like. The novel is really Philip's growing up and learning things for himself, and all the conversations he has with people end in an inconclusive 'figure it out for yourself' kind of way. Maugham (as Philip) had a very conventional Victorian Christian upbringing, and at this point in the novel he is slowly and painfully shedding all this Victorian morality.

I don't know if Morrice (Cronshaw) was really an Epicurean. He led an interesting life in both Paris and Canada, so it is possible.

Or maybe this is just Maugham putting the words into Cronshaw's mouth, what he (Maugham at the time of writing the book in 1915) thought himself, and how the Maugham twenty years earlier in 1895 would have reacted (as Philip).

Anyway, at this point in the novel the conversation is interrupted, and a little while later it resumes like this:

Quote

Cronshaw turned to Philip.

"Have you ever been to the Cluny, the museum? There you will see Persian carpets of the most exquisite hue and of a pattern the beautiful intricacy of which delights and amazes the eye. In them you will see the mystery and the sensual beauty of the East, the roses of Hafiz and the wine-cup of Omar; but presently you will see more. You were asking just now what was the meaning of life. Go and look at those Persian carpets, and one of these days the answer will come to you.

"You are cryptic", said Philip.

"I am drunk", answered Cronshaw.

Post by “Jon M” of May 23, 2020 at 10:25 PM

Maugham clearly likes Epicurus. He mentions him now and again in all sorts of places.

Much later in the novel is this line:

Quote

[Philip's] reason was someone looking on, observing the facts but powerless to interfere: it was like those gods of Epicurus, who saw the doings of men from their empyrean heights and had no might to alter one smallest particle of what occurred

And on Maugham's ninetieth birthday in 1964 he wrote in the *Sunday Express* newspaper (January 26, 1964):

Quote

I have had such a full life - but I face what will come calmly. I still do not fear death; in fact, I look forward to death with no apprehension for I do not believe in a hereafter and so, if I have sinned in men's eyes and have not been punished, I have no fear of punitive treatment when I cease to remain on this planet.

I do not know whether God exists or not. None of the arguments that has been adduced to prove His existence carries conviction, and belief must rest, as Epicurus put it long ago, on immediate apprehension. That immediate apprehension I have never had...

I have been a hedonist always and now there are so few pleasures left to me.

Post by "Cassius" of May 24, 2020 at 8:41 AM

Very very interesting. He was clearly very familiar with Epicurus and had thought about him carefully. I had no idea about all this but I will definitely add Maugham to my list of people to follow more closely.