

# Cultivating our own garden [Voltaire Discussion]

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 17, 2020 at 12:09 AM

<https://youtu.be/S22xeq8xxFQ>

Just a video that, despite of mentioning a “stoic end” to the story that is the object of it, seems to me has some Epicurean Philosophy elements to it.

Straightforwardly, the title; but beyond that, the type of life “the Turk” leads, and his opinion of politics; I don’t think the video's author's conclusion is completely on the spot, but his interpretation of it as a suggestion for living a “simpler” life, more focused on what and where you could actually have a physical interaction with, rather than fall for the false opinion of being able to have a “big impact on the world”, I liked.

I don’t particularly endorse that YouTube channel but it has some good “primers” on many philosophers; I saw its take on Epicurus a while ago, but I don’t recall it being particularly enlightening or away from the common places we’re likely to run into more often than not.

Good night. ☐☐

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Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 4:54 AM

This video reminded me why I personally \*REALLY\* react negatively to Alaine de Botton. (I'll check the spelling later).

On the other hand, Voltaire has always interested me, but I've not read him closely enough to know whether this take is accurate or not.

There's clearly a part of it that I agree is Epicurean, especially in the high-level perspective that most people have absolutely no control or ability to influence the world in general, so that it makes no sense to spend your life worrying about trying to change "the world," or however you define accurately the sphere that is indeed beyond your ability to influence.

But I think de Botton carries his quietism WAY too far, and from my hearing his voice tends to revel in the advice to "sit down, give up, tune out, give in" --- in tone that makes me think that de Botton is only to happy to "give out" this advice to others while not following it himself.

I don't think Epicurus was guilty of inconsistency on these points, because I don't have the same view of Epicurus that de Botton apparently does. I think Epicurus DID say that we needed to work as hard as we can to live as pleasantly as possible,, which includes not obsessing about things beyond our control, but also means working as hard as we can to control things that ARE within our ability to influence. And that last part is the message that I NEVER hear in this video or in De Botton's other work. It is as if he is a master propagandist for the "power class" of the world, reveling in this philosophy because it creates compliant sheep for De Botton and his intellectual elite to order around like farm animals.

"Tending your own garden" may sound like a reflection of something Epicurus might have said, but I don't recall anything that is actually recorded in the texts as being so specifically "quietist" - so I think messages like this are much more destructive than helpful.

[But I don't aim this at you camotero! 😊 I think it's hugely helpful to discuss material like this, which in my view presents the majority / academic viewpoint, so we can each come to terms with what we think is the bad and the good of it. Certainly Epicurus did say some things that can be interpreted in this direction, so we have to each of us have a method of understanding and incorporating \*everything\* Epicurus said so that we have a firm grasp of the whole philosophy.]

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### **Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 8:29 AM**

Another comment on Voltaire -- I have the impression that we might want to start a thread devoted to him - (maybe this one should be it) so we can dive deeper into his views.

I have the impression that the context of religious oppression can be so bad for some people that they focus exclusively on attacking religion and their current societal problems without paying much attention to what they would erect to replace it as a way to organize society. Seems to me that Epicurus didn't do that and was much wider in his scope of attention.

So maybe if someone has a general background in Voltaire that they could start us off in discussing him that would be good too.

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### **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 17, 2020 at 8:54 AM**

In the Wikipedia page for Voltaire Epicurus appears listed as one of his influences.

I think we both saw the same elements of Epicureanism, [Cassius](#); that emphasis on what you can and cannot control, I learned about first while I was studying stoicism. I understand now that Epicurus came before and thus could've been the proponent of this. Do we have any evidence of this in the extant documents ?

I would like to understand better, [Cassius](#) , what you mean by quietism and why do you regard it as such a bad thing. What I understand of it is not something that is at odds with seeking pleasure as the greatest good. Heck, even to "sit down, give up, tune out, give in", if it's the only thing you can control, and after your calculations is what could give you the most amount of pleasure, I don't see why we would judge people who decide to act these way. It's analogue to the belief in legends bringing you peace of mind. I'm not on a fixed stance here, so I'd love to hear what you have to say about this.

What I do agree with you on straightforwardly is that De Botton is not the best; he is trying to gain adepts by being easily digestible. Thus, I don't think his focus is on empowering to improve your thinking and ability to gain control over your experience, but rather to get you hooked to his "wisdom pills", and for this, a message of "letting go" is very convenient.

The reason I think the story is the Turk is very Epicurean is precisely for the reasons you state. Tending the garden the way he has, with his family, providing food for their self sufficiency while engaging in commerce with Constantinople, and looking after their 10 acres doesn't seem particularly quiet to me. This would require a lot of labor and care and a desire to not let go. The fact that he was able to sit and enjoy a quiet time underneath the orange tree for whatever pleasure he was getting from it is a fruit of all the previous labor.

And I know your critique is not directed at me, dear [Cassius](#) , but I appreciate you caring to clarify it. ☐

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## Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of September 17, 2020 at 9:00 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

I have the impression that the context of religious oppression can be so bad for some people that they focus exclusively on attacking religion and their current societal problems without paying much attention to what they would erect to replace it as a way to organize society. Seems to me that Epicurus didn't do that and was much wider in his scope of attention.

This confuses me a bit. Why would an Epicurean would think of trying to erect something to replace religion which is, almost by definition, aimed at the masses and with the greatest scope possible, hence making it analogous to “public” work, and something we should refrain of engaging in.

Could you please elaborate more on this comment of yours? Thanks.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 9:30 AM**

Camotero:

First I want to totally agree with you that these issues are contextual, and that each person can only pursue the pleasure that is available to them under their particular circumstances, which includes all sorts of things including health, age, and all the issues of what is going on in surrounding society. So I do not in any way intend to be disapproving of someone who lives a quiet and selfcontained life, even subsistence farming as an example, if in fact that is their personal choice and that is all that is open to them.

The main concern that I have which you are seeing is that I think that for most people in most places, a life of subsistence farming is NOT all that is open to most people, nor would most people voluntarily choose to limit themselves to a life of subsistence farming when other options are available. Again, if any individual truly does wish to live that way then I would say more power to them for it, but in my experience that is not the way most people are wired by nature. In my experience most people agree with the formulation from Torquatus as to the best life:

"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

Of course in this context I also always cite Vatican Saying 63: "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess."

To me, the clear implication of knowing that life is short and then for an eternity we no longer exist is that we should use the time we have to achieve the "most pleasure possible." Now of course that needs all kinds of scare quotes and qualifications, because we are also looking to experience as little pain as we can as the price of that pleasure, but all of us as humans are going to experience pain, and we all have to make our own calculation as to what price we are willing to pay to achieve the pleasures we would like to achieve.

There are definitely some people who are so averse to pain of any kind that they are willing to live a life of subsistence farming, valuing tranquility and stillness etc, and if they truly wish to do that then that is the life they "should" pursue so far as I can see under Epicurean philosophy.

But by no means is that life just described the only kind of life that is valid under Epicurean philosophy, because in my experience most people are willing to put up with significant pain in order to achieve significant pleasures. That's the way I see life - when you only go around once, you should enjoy life to the best extent you can. That means doing far more than subsistence farming (my catchall term for the most tranquil life in this discussion) and being willing to accept the effort and pain that such a life requires.

And that leads me to the concern that I observe frequently -- that while it is very easy for me to accept and say that the tranquil subsistence life is fine for those who wish to pursue it, those who think that Epicurus elevated "tranquility" as the highest good are very very disapproving (an understatement) of the idea that pursuing pleasure in the manner described by Torquatus is acceptable under Epicurean philosophy.

And that is my diagnosis of why there is so much reluctance to accept "Pleasure" as the goal set by Epicurus in the normal meaning of that word. And thus one result is that even those who admit that "pleasure" is a term that Epicurus used then resort to redefining "pleasure" so that it means something that is not recognizable to an ordinary person -- they turn it into a variant of stoicism.

So let me comment on "things under our control." Certainly Epicurus held that it is smart not to concern ourselves too much with things that are not under our control. The fact that we are going to die is probably an example, but even there Epicurus didn't advise that we block death from our mind - on the contrary he emphasized that it is important to remember that life is short. Why? For many reasons, but I think that one of the reasons is to remind us to "make hay while the sun shines" -- to pursue pleasure while life is available to us to pursue it.

As to this question:

#### [Quote from camotero](#)

This confuses me a bit. Why would an Epicurean would think of trying to erect something to replace religion which is, almost by definition, aimed at the masses and with the greatest scope possible, hence making it analogous to "public" work, and something we should refrain of engaging in.

I think that this is the reason that the last ten PD's are devoted to "justice" and to comments on preferred living situations. And it's why Cassius Longinus participated in the Roman Civil War. And it's why Epicurus and the school devoted so much time to pamphleteering and working to expand their circle of friends. It's because humans are social beings, and we get our greatest pleasures, and greatest safety, through associating with like-minded people.

There's nothing intrinsically "wrong" with being like the Turk and essentially sticking his head in the sand in many ways - the problem with his lifestyle in many situations is that the world doesn't leave us alone, and we have to organize our friends to maintain our safety. If we fail to do that, then we are essentially choosing to make no effort whatsoever to effect what IS often at least somewhat within our control. And of course the perils of doing that are clear - we will frequently fall prey to robbers and wars and enemies of all kinds which we might well avoid if we take precautionary action to monitor what is going on around us and - for example - get out of the way of oncoming armies before they strike.

I'll conclude for now by agreeing again that it is impractical and therefore a bad idea to try to "change the world." But the issue of what part of the world we CAN have influence over is very complex and varies by individual, and it seems to me absolutely wrong to imply (as Debotton does, in my view) that there is a single best life for everyone, and that everyone should essentially look for a cave to dwell in.

Exactly what motivates his perspective would be a very speculative thing to pursue, but for now I'm firm in thinking that regardless of what de Botton's motivation may be, what he is describing is not accurate Epicurean philosophy as we can reconstruct it from the historical record.