

Claude Adrienne Helvetius

Post by "Cassius" of July 21, 2021 at 12:26 PM

We received this post today at Facebook:

Quote

Has somebody here studied Helvetius?

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Adrien_Helv%C3%A9tius

I noticed that nobody mentions him here. I haven't studied or read any of his work, but based on the discription in Wikipedia, there are clear similarities.

I responded:

That's a great question and not someone I am familiar with, but I see this at wikipedia - "In 1758 Helvétius published his philosophical magnum opus, a work called De l'esprit (On Mind), which claimed that all human faculties are attributes of mere physical sensation, and that the only real motive is self-interest, therefore there is no good and evil, only competitive pleasures. "

I see also that he was associated with Frederick the Great, who was a known fan of Lucretius.

Thanks very much for this post and we'll see what others come up with. He definitely looks work looking into!

So as we have time, let's look into him!



Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 6:05 PM

I am going to tag [Charles](#) on this one - old French philosophy is his department!

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 7:42 PM

I see that Helvetius is described as following Locke (and this Aristotle) on a radical "blank slate" position. That would likely indicate a deviation from Epicurus, but I would trust summaries until we see what he wrote himself.

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 7:53 PM

It's going to take some digging to really get a fix. I found the Essays on the Mind in English but a word search indicates no mention of Epicurus or Lucretius.

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 7:55 PM

Helvetius as an Epicurean political theorist

<http://www.columbia.edu/~pf3/helvetius.pdf>.

"There is no explicit mention of Epicureanism in De l'esprit, or De l'homme, even though De l'esprit has an epigraph from Lucretius. Helve'tius' posthumous Notes, however, mention Lucretius and Epicurus many times. For instance, Epicurus is praised as 'le seul des anciens qui humanisa la vertu philosophique'.7"

Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 8:01 PM

Seeing lots of references to this La Rochefoucauld person with whom I am also not familiar:

Another classic reference shared by Epicureans and Augustinians is the image of drugs, which are beneficial or harmful depending on the dose: 'Les passions sont comme les herbes empoisonnées. Les doses seules en font des poisons ou des antidotes.'¹⁰ This passage is an allusion to a famous maxim by La Rochefoucauld: 'Les vices entrent dans la composition des vertus comme les poisons entrent dans la composition des remèdes.'¹¹ La Rochefoucauld is himself alluding to a passage from *The City of God*: 'Even poisons, which are disastrous when improperly used, are turned into wholesome medicines by their proper application.'¹² I have argued elsewhere, following Lafond,¹³ that there is such a convergence of language as well as of polemical aims between authors like La Rochefoucauld, Bayle and Mandeville that it is often difficult to tell whether a particular argument is Epicurean or Augustinian: so much so