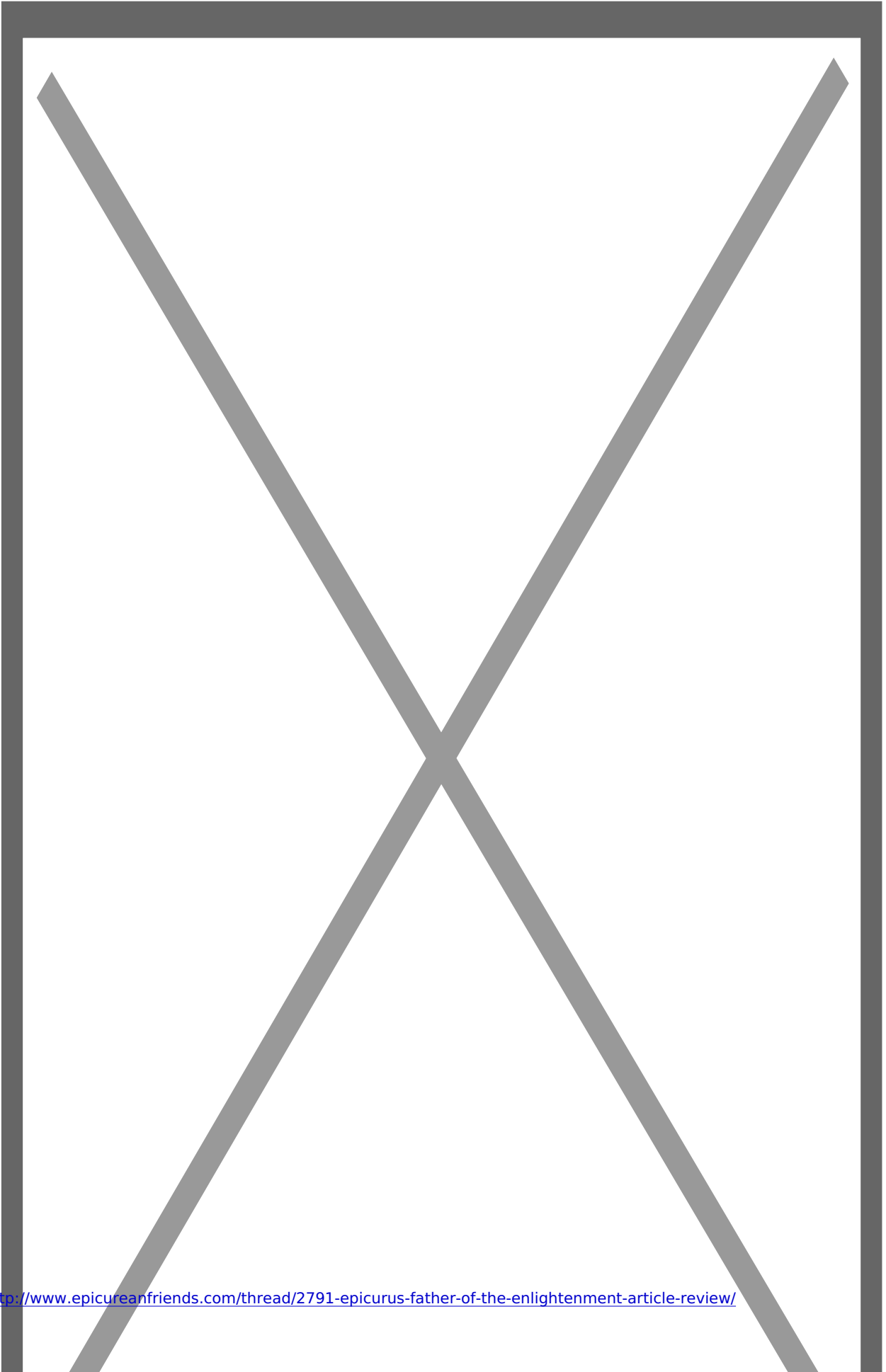


"Epicurus, Father of the Enlightenment" Article Review

Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of December 19, 2022 at 11:07 AM

Admin Edit - This thread refers to the article here:

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[Epicurus: Father of the Enlightenment - Free Life](#)

Epicurus: Father of the Enlightenment Sean Gabb (This is the text of a lecture given on the 6th September 2007 to the 6/20 Club in London) Abstract Epicurus...
libertarianism.uk

The comments originally started [here](#). What follows are comments started by Camotero)

I just read this article and I think is very comprehensive. I wonder if more people in the forums have read it and what their opinion is. As to the points you make [Cassius](#) I think it's clear that Epicurus was a scientist albeit without the resemblance to the modern methodology, and perhaps also without the education that would let him see math as a tool rather than as a means to manipulate people (like he thought of rhetoric, poetry too, no?), so it wouldn't surprise me if there's a quote somewhere stating "he had derided math", but it wouldn't worry me either, as it would be related more the the way the tool was being used by its contemporaries, than to the tool itself.

From this, I think there's an analogy to be made about his concern for politics. I agree with you that such an active individual wouldn't shy away from action with the potential to shape their world/experience/pleasure (he even advocated against passiveness), but perhaps what he rejected was the falling in the trap of the useless politics game, which I can only assume was less effective than it is today.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2022 at 12:44 PM

Camotero thank you for bumping this very old thread. I can't recall the details of this article and I see that I picked out a couple of things I did not like about it, but I can't remember my overall opinion as to its usefulness.

You're exactly right to ask this question, especially since we have almost a whole new group of people here now than we had in 2018. I will add it to my list to read and update my opinion. Given it's length and generality we ought to consider how useful it would be as a general introductory article.

[Quote from camotero](#)

I wonder if more people in the forums have read it and what their opinion is.

Post by "Cassius" of December 19, 2022 at 1:23 PM

I am moving this to a new thread so we can start afresh with comments.

Post by "Cassius" of December 19, 2022 at 1:40 PM

I don't have time right now to read the whole article but I do want to comment on the opening paragraph:

Quote

Abstract

Epicurus (341-270 BC) was, with Plato and Aristotle, one of the three great philosophers of the ancient world. He developed an integrated system of ethics and natural philosophy that, he claimed and many accepted, showed everyone the way to a life of the greatest happiness.

Yes I agree, and I understand that when someone writes an article or gives a speech, you want a hook to get peoples' interest, and telling them that what they are about to hear can make them happier is a great way to gain their attention.

But I personally tend to identify with the Lucretian approach, which I see, from the way Lucretius chose to open his poem, as being much better stated as something like:

"What I am about to tell you is - whether you like it or not - "the way things are." You will find some of it to be bitter, but if you want true health, and if you want to be a man and deal with reality, then I will tell you about the leader who broke the chains of supernatural religion, exposed the fraud of priests and false philosophers, and shows you that you only have one life to live -- so you better make hay while the sun shines.

And by the way, you'll also have more pleasure and less pain living this way too."

If I could put myself in Epicurus' shoes at the end of his life, by far that is the way I would have wanted to be remembered.

Post by "Godfrey" of December 19, 2022 at 6:11 PM

[Quote from camotero](#)

From this, I think there's an analogy to be made about his concern for politics. I agree with you that such an active individual wouldn't shy away from action with the potential to shape their world/experience/pleasure (he even advocated against passiveness), but perhaps what he rejected was the falling in the trap of the useless politics game....

Agreed.

Having dipped just a little into reading Aristotle, I would say that Epicurus was reacting against basing a philosophy on the polis rather than the individual. Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics and others determined that what was good for the polis was best for the individual, whereas Epicurus determined that the best life results from an understanding of nature and through the experience of the individual. Beginning with the polis tends to lead to duty ethics and state religion, both of which Epicurus reacted against.

Whether a particular individual chooses to be active in politics would be based on that individual's analysis of their desires, not on a blanket proclamation that politics is to be avoided.

Post by "Cassius" of December 19, 2022 at 6:16 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Having dipped just a little into reading Aristotle, I would say that Epicurus was reacting against basing a philosophy on the polis rather than the individual. Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics and others determined that what was good for the polis was best for the individual, whereas Epicurus determined that the best life results from an understanding of nature and through the experience of the individual

You know things can begin to come into focus pretty easily when you realize that ANYTIME someone suggests a goal other than "pleasure" as an end in itself then the reasoning is going to come to grief. On the other hand, it's as clear as day that when seen as "tools" these other things (virtue, money, even "politics") can have their uses when they are strictly kept on a leash with the ultimate goal in mind, rather than ends in themselves. It really should not be so hard for anyone to understand that "sometimes" it is going to be necessary to engage in political activity, just like in general we choose any tool that helps us toward our goal, and that we even choose pain for the sake of greater pleasure or less pain in the end. Epicurus doesn't reject virtue or anything else as "bad in themselves" except as they factor into the ultimate

question of happy living.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2022 at 6:59 PM

I will add a couple more disjointed comments on the article here:

1. I think it's a well written article-length summary that presents basic facts in very readable form.

2. Under the topic "The Pursuit of Happiness" I would say that this summary suffers from what I complain about ad nauseum as to excessive focus on "absence of pain" while leaving the issue of positive pleasure either floating ambiguously or in fact defined totally negatively. And so it ends up with a negative assessments of "We do not have any of the more detailed works in which Epicurus might have attempted what Jeremy Bentham later called a “felicific calculus”. But, bearing in mind the difficulties that Bentham and the nineteenth century utilitarians found when they tried to move from principles to details, there is no reason to suppose he was more successful." That's probably why i didn't have more to say about the article when I first read it years ago.

3. I see under "Maintenance of Social Control" that he goes into the evaluation of the philosophy from the point of view of how well it helps to 'reconcile the great majority to distributions of property in which they are at a disadvantage.' While the writer may be a libertarian rather than a Marxist, i see that as actually way a Marxist way of looking at the question, evaluating everything by economics. That kind of perspective in my view obscures the central issue that I think Epicurus was pursuing: "What is the truth about our place in the universe?" And I think Epicurus was pursuing that question come hell or high water as to economics -- the answers to questions like chaos and life after death and supernatural religion isn't a matter of economics.

4 -- i think he's just simply wrong here, and that there is no need to ask the second question about "laws of nature beyond the existence and movement of atoms" because Epicurus plainly rejected that: "Then there is an apparent defect in his conception of the atomic movements. Does the universe exist by accident? Or are their laws of nature beyond the existence and movement of the atoms? The first is not impossible. An infinite number of atoms in an infinite void over infinite time will, every so often, come together in an apparently stable universe. They may also hold together, moving in clusters in ways that suggest regularity. But this chance combination might be dissolved at any moment—though, given every sort of infinity, some of these universes will continue for long periods. If Epicurus had this first in view, what point in trying to explain present phenomena in terms of cause and effect? Causality only

makes sense on the assumption that the future will be like the past. If he had the second in mind, it is worth asking what he thought to be nature of these laws? Might they not, for example, have had an Author? Since Newton, we have contented ourselves with trying to uncover regularities of motion and not going beyond these. But the Greeks had a much stronger teleological sense. Perhaps these matters were not discussed. Perhaps they were discussed, but we have no record of them in the surviving discussions. Or perhaps they have survived, but I have overlooked them. But it does seem to me that Epicurean physics do not fully discuss the nature of the laws that they assume."

5 - This is not optimally worded, as Lucretius does not suggest this possibility, he's clear that Epicureanism is not impious: "It may be, Lucretius says, that beating down religion is impious and the entry to a life of crime. Much rather, it is religion which has brought forth criminal and impious deeds. He lived before the most notable acts of religious mania. But he was poet enough to know the psychology of enthusiasm."

6 - I like his section on Social Contract pretty well but I would differ with this: "As said, we do not have much Epicurean writing on this point. As with the Benthamites, he does not seem to have found any imperative for these ethical teachings. We may ask, for example, what reason there is against my killing someone if I can thereby take possession of his property—or just enjoy the sensation of killing—and if there is no chance of my being caught. The only answers we have are: "Do nothing in your life that will cause you to fear if it is discovered by your neighbour.[xxviii] And: 'The just man is most free from disturbance, while the unjust is full of the utmost disturbance.[xxix]" If these are attempts at answering the question, they are feeble attempts. That the unjust are invariably unhappy is plainly false. As for the threat of discovery, the opportunities for secret crime have always been everywhere." ----- I think the problem with that is that Epicurus would say that it is an error to look for an "imperative for these ethical teachings" because - and this is probably the same issue I have in point 4 above, I think Epicurus would say that "imperatives" don't exist and it is error to look for them. Yes in the end the writer is right that "Epicurus believed a stable and just social order could be sustained by the self-interest of individuals" but the emphasis is on the "could." I think Epicurus would say that there's no divine order in the universe and no fate and there's no force that guarantees a "just" result, and we just simply have to acknowledge that if we act rationally we will respect generally respect each others' interests, but that there are no guarantees and we simply do the best we can - because that's the way things are. Epicurus wasn't going to invent non-existent imperatives.

7 - A GREAT conclusion: "We have virtually everything that Plato wrote and almost nothing that Epicurus wrote. Plato, however, has had no discernable impact on the social sciences beyond providing legitimation to various cliques of demented and often murderous intellectuals. But, for all we have so few of his writings, the ideas of Epicurus have survived. And they have made the world a better place."

Post by “Todd” of December 19, 2022 at 7:46 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Plato, however, has had no discernable impact on the social sciences beyond providing legitimation to various cliques of demented and often murderous intellectuals

What? What?!?!?! Plato has had no discernable impact??? Strong disagree. It's a good thing I came back to say something about this! 😊

I mean, I suppose the author could be including Christianity and Marxism in the "various cliques of demented...intellectuals" bucket. But aren't those two of the most influential intellectual movements, like, ever, in recorded history? Maybe I'm missing some, but come on, those two exceptions are HUUUUGE - enough to make nonsense of that entire sentence.

Should have just stuck with the final 2 sentences.

Post by “Cassius” of December 19, 2022 at 7:48 PM

[Quote from Todd](#)

Should have just stuck with the final 2 sentences.

Agreed -- Maybe he was trying to be too cute with the way he phrased that, but clearly there's lots of discernable impact -- albeit negative!

Post by “Charles” of December 20, 2022 at 10:32 AM

A pretty decent article if a bit biased, but at least those biases are plainly visible. However, you'd think a libertarian would be keen to hammer down the notion of justice and the social contract. The two philosophies in that regard have considerable overlap with each other.