

"The Philosophical Mind" enters the skull of Epicurus (Benjamin de Casseres)

Post by "EricR" of July 19, 2023 at 9:05 AM

I am reading a book by an obscure author named Benjamin de Casseres about Spinoza. I came across this passage below and thought of you folks. I love the writing so wanted to share it with you.

The first chapter is a lightning quick tour of ancient philosophy up to 1632 (Spinoza's birth). de Casseres uses a literary device of making "The Philosophical Mind" an actual entity that enters the heads of various thinkers. I thought you'd find his paragraph on Epicurus interesting:

Trapped between the contradictions of Plato and Aristotle, Mind fell into the pits of self-mockery - the autumnal beauty of Scepticism and the winter of grim Stoicism. Aristotle bred Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus, who said there were not only no trails to Truth but there was no Truth. "How shall ye know her?" All speculation is nightmare. All "facts" are phantasmal. There is no Great Detective or Great Director. There is only sensation.

"But I can live!", shouted Mind. "Truth may not exist but Pleasure does!" And Mind entered the skull of Epicurus, the Goethe of antiquity - "the meaning of life is life itself"!

Mind sprawled in the colossal inn of the visible universe and took its pleasure. To hell with Truth! To hell with the Veiled Mystery! To hell with Nirvana! To hell with Plato and Aristotle! Knowledge for knowledge's sake! Art for beauty's sake! Thought for thought's sake! The flesh for the flesh's sake! There is no Truth. All is permitted.

The mind of Epicurus had made a tremendous discovery, the greatest that had ever been made - that the will-to-live and the will-to-pleasure are one!

Post by "Joshua" of July 19, 2023 at 11:30 AM

Very interesting, thank you Eric!

Post by "EricR" of July 19, 2023 at 5:29 PM

Most welcome, Joshua.

It's a literary take rather than purely philosophical. And I found that last line captures something about Epicurus that I had not read before. A simplicity that contains something essential.

Post by “Joshua” of July 19, 2023 at 6:00 PM

Yes, it definitely dovetails with what DeWitt says about the Summum Bonum as it relates to pleasure and life. For clarity's sake it makes sense to say that pleasure is the highest good, but pleasure is inseparable from life both superficially (in the 'duh' sense) and at a very deep level.

I almost quibbled with the sentence "There is no Truth", except that by capitalizing the word the author makes a very important and, as I think, philosophically sound point; that capital-T "Truth" does not exist in the abstract apart from fact, physical nature, human understanding, etc.

Post by “Cassius” of July 19, 2023 at 6:24 PM

Yes Joshua I caught that implication too -

"The mind of Epicurus had made a tremendous discovery, the greatest that had ever been made - that the will-to-live and the will-to-pleasure are one"

I think he is correct as consistent with what Dewitt says in the comment to the effect that even though most people do not currently speak that way, their failure to identify this does not mean that Epicurus was wrong, and in fact they would be better off if they did think that way.

And when we consider the comparison between being alive and nothingness I think the conclusion that life (when not in pain) easily meets a reasonable definition of pleasure.

Post by “Little Rocker” of July 25, 2023 at 4:05 PM

I had the same thought, Joshua. I think you're right that the capital 'T' makes 'truth' sufficiently Platonic to make Epicurus fine with rejecting it, but I wonder what you think about the next sentence--all is permitted.

Post by “Joshua” of July 25, 2023 at 6:37 PM

Quote

I wonder what you think about the next sentence--all is permitted.

You mean the one I was trying to avoid? ☐☐

Of course it too deserves a response. In a [letter](#) of Horace Smith to Cyrus Redding, dated 1822, the author has this to say in reference to the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley;

Quote

Though Shelley is my most particular friend, I regret the imprudence of his early publications on more points than one, but as I know him to possess the most exalted virtues, and find in others who promulgate the most startling theories, most amiable traits, I learn to be liberal towards abstract speculations, which not exercising any baneful influence on their author's lives, are still less likely to corrupt others. Truth is great, and will prevail—that is my motto, and I would, therefore, leave everything unshackled—what is true will stand, and what is false ought to fall, whatever be the consequences. Ought we not to feel ashamed that Lucretius could publish his book in the teeth of an established religion, while martyrs are groaning in perpetual imprisonment, for expressing a conscientious dissent from Christianity?

If by "all is permitted" we mean something like "leave everything unshackled" in its above usage, then I am fully on board. St. Augustine wrote that the church permitting the spread of heresy was like the state allowing the sale of poison bread. Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* preferred the metaphor of counterfeit money, and in either case the result is the same--the punishment for counterfeiting was mutilation or death, and Dante has King Philip IV of France tortured in hell for adulterating the coinage.

By contrast, what I find in Epicurus is a thinker for whom questions of justice and morality are approached with measure and care, as in Vatican Saying 51:

Quote

I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will, provided only that you neither violate the laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbors, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by one or more of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm.

Set aside Epicurus' final advice here; the point is that in lieu of a stark prohibition, and without any threat of torture or death, he simply leads the corespondant to examine carefully the consequences of a given course of action, in the particular context in which he finds himself. In another time and place, law and custom might be different. The crime of Onan in the book of Genesis was failing to impregnate his widowed sister-in-law; such a proscription would be unthinkable and grotesque in our age.

Of the 10 commandments, only three are current law; prohibitions against murder, theft, and perjury.

Should literally everything be permitted by law? No, I don't think so. I can't imagine Epicurus did either. But the sope and compass of personal liberty should far exceed the scope of what is forbidden.

The following scene from Robert Bolt's play "A Man for All Seasons" catches the flavor of what I mean to convey;

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=WMqReTjkjgg>

Post by "Pacatus" of July 25, 2023 at 7:14 PM

[Joshua](#)

Re Onan: Some years ago I attended a lecture, at the local synagogue, by a university professor of OT, on the Onan story. He laid out in detail how it was really about controlling property: had Onan impregnated his sister-in-law, she would have controlled the property in question until it was inherited by her child. Onan wanted to keep the property for himself. The larger context was a patriarchal bias (of which, presumably, YHVH was -- again, in the context here -- disapproving). The professor's analysis was that this passage represented a more feminist trope in the Torah.

Note: YHVH, the tetragrammaton, is the name of God that cannot be pronounced. Interestingly, the half that is allowed to be pronounced -- YH: Yah (as in *Hallelu Yah*) -- is feminine in the

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Hebrew.

Post by “Joshua” of July 25, 2023 at 7:26 PM

That is a very interesting take, [Pacatus](#)! Certainly one I'd not heard before.

What it turned into in my Catholic High School religion class was a nun very eager to share with us the manifold dangers of masturbation...

Post by “Pacatus” of July 25, 2023 at 7:30 PM

[Joshua](#): That was how it was expressed in my Lutheran upbringing. 😭

I will add that the lecture was very well received by the synagogue members in attendance (a mixed Reform and Conservative congregation).

Post by “EricR” of July 27, 2023 at 10:23 AM

Great discussion, folks!

Perhaps I am too simple-minded in these matters. The sentence, "All is permitted" seems to have taken us into the well-known religious phrase, "Without God, all is permitted". This has been debated, disputed, dissected, etc. by bigger brains than mine.

Yet I did not interpret the use of that phrase in de Casseres' mention of it that way at all.

As it came on the heels of rejecting all the philosophies prior to Epicurus, and specifically the restriction on what is true inherent in each, I thought the phrase meant something like, "all ideas about truth are permitted."

Further, I thought that because the context was Epicurus, the implication of this was that the ideas are permitted because none are complete yet all bring some pleasure and affirmation of life itself.

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Maybe I missed something, but that was how I took it.

Post by “Joshua” of July 27, 2023 at 10:59 AM

I agree with your interpretation, Eric, and that's also what I get out of the letter I quoted above re: Shelley.

Although as it happens, Shelley was expelled from University College, Oxford, for disseminating a tract he wrote called "They Necessity of Atheism", by which he actually meant Deism.

Edit; we've been talking a lot lately about the Areopagus in Athens and it's relationship with Parrhesia, candor or frank speech. John Milton chose it for the title of his own tract, a defense of free expression called *Areopagitica*.

Post by “EricR” of July 27, 2023 at 11:12 AM

Ok thanks. I was wondering if I was not quite reading it correctly.

I am not familiar with the Areopagus. I recall something about a legal council? Man, I need to brush up on my ancient Greek culture. Old brain! 😊