

Nietzsche's References to Epicurus As Decadent

Post by "Cassius" of September 9, 2018 at 12:30 PM

Thoughts on this passage from "Antichrist": <<The instinctive exclusion of all aversion, all hostility, all bounds and distances in feeling: the consequence of an extreme susceptibility to pain and irritation — so great that it senses all resistance, all compulsion to resistance, as unbearable anguish (— that is to say, as harmful, as prohibited by the instinct of self-preservation), and regards blessedness (joy) as possible only when it is no longer necessary to offer resistance to anybody or anything, however evil or dangerous — love, as the only, as the ultimate possibility of life. . . .

These are the two physiological realities upon and out of which the doctrine of salvation has sprung. I call them a sublime super-development of hedonism upon a thoroughly unsalubrious soil. What stands most closely related to them, though with a large admixture of Greek vitality and nerve-force, is epicureanism, the theory of salvation of paganism. Epicurus was a typical decadent: I was the first to recognize him. — The fear of pain, even of infinitely slight pain — the end of this can be nothing save a religion of love. . . .>>

This passage from Nietzsche causes me to also think about the discussion of the Cyreniacs in Diogenes Laertius which I was listening to yesterday in my car. I think the basic point I will be arguing is that we have to deal with the fact that - like what is said about the Bible - it is possible to take certain sections of the remaining texts and commentaries out of context and "prove" almost any position we want to take about Epicurus. We can redefine pleasure as "absence of pain" and therefore make Epicurus into a super-stoic, which is what I think Nietzsche was doing in passages like this.

But is it also possible to see Epicurus as a technician fixing a broken machine, or doctor healing sick body, who has to start with what he was given at that point in Greek philosophy and deal with errors before he can emerge into a new totally different healthy creation. As I have said many times before I think the primary reason Epicurus discussed "Absence of pain" the way he did was because he knew he needed to "Deprogram" Platonists and Aristotelians who had taught everyone that pleasure cannot be the goal of life because pleasure supposedly has no limit, and he wanted to draw attention to the natural limit of pleasure (which is the life full of pleasure when all pain is gone). Similarly there were all sorts of Greek dialectical "trick" arguments which led toward nihilism and doubting the senses and toward oppressive gods and toward determinism, all of which he had to deal with to heal his students.

Where I am going with this is that these parts of the philosophy were the major parts of interest to the anti-Epicureans, so they are the only parts that have survived to us. I think the parts we

have lost would have been expansions on the PROPER way of life and thought, which is what proved attractive to the ancient world and made it popular. Most of the ROMAN examples we have fit that mold - people who were aggressively living life and in no way afraid of pain if it meant more successful pursuit of real pleasure. We don't seem to have many examples of GREEK lives to use as an example, but I don't doubt that they existed.

The result of the problem is that the Roman examples are today made out to be "bad Epicureans" while the only examples of people who are praised for their Epicurean comments are people like Marcus Aurelius who were a mishmash or actual Stoics.

I think Nietzsche could have come to the conclusion I'm suggesting here but decided rather than fight the establishment he'd just jettison the problem and not worry about crediting or rehabilitating Epicurus and just go forward under his own name with his own version of correct philosophy.

In my view the version of Epicurus praised by the majority IS decadent, and their version has to be rejected clearly and affirmatively. That's the path that has been started only recently by DeWitt, and by virtually no one else other than the works by Gosling & Taylor and by Boris [Nikolsky](#), which consists in untangling Epicurus from the rest of Greek philosophy.

So to repeat my view is that Nietzsche was discussing the establishment's version of Epicurus, the establishment's version IS decadent, and it should be rejected because it is not historically correct.

(Edit: my comment about the Cyreniacs is a reference to the fact that many of Epicurus' views clearly were originated by them earlier, and in order to understand how everything fits together we need to consider not only the prior ANTI-pleasure arguments, but the prior PRO-pleasure arguments. That way we see what Epicurus was facing and how he pulled everything into a final package.)

"Now now, little Tommy, no more running and playing ball on the playground. No more playing like you're an astronaut going to the moon, or a cop fighting a robber, or an explorer going to a new land - just go over there and sit in the corner with your nose to the wall, and you'll experience no pain whatsoever! Trust me - sitting there with your nose to the wall is not only the best way to avoid pain, it's the highest pleasure possible to you!"

For a philosophy that would teach anything like that, "decadent" is far too nice a word. And yet that is *exactly* what the mainstream view of Epicurus amounts to.

Normal nice people resist the idea that such an extreme perversion is possible, since it cannot have been by accident, and it is hard to go against the crowd when it is in such a large majority. But that is exactly what has happened with Judeo-Christian religion -- a total lie that has prospered for 2000+ years now.

And that probably played into some of Nietzsche's negativity, and may be why he had bad things to say about "Darwinism" -- because we can just look around us to see that the "true" and the "better" do not always prevail (and thus he questioned whether "evolution" leads

upward).