

# **Guyau - Interesting Summary Essay - The Morality of Epicurus And Its Relationship To Contemporary Doctrines**

**Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2019 at 1:21 PM**

Thanks to JAWS for this link: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guyau/1878/epicurus.htm>

Final Paragraph:

"In summary, the Epicurean doctrines exercised an unquestionable influence on the development of human thought. In the natural sciences Democritus' and Epicurus' cosmological system appears to have triumphed in our time. In the moral and social sciences the doctrines derived from Epicureanism are also more powerful than they ever were. At this very moment the English school has brought forth, in the face of the Stoicism restored by Kant, an Epicureanism renewed by the facts of modern science. How many old ideas and rooted customs Epicureanism has contributed to ridding the moral domain of! In the same vein, we have seen that in the religious sphere Epicurus has labored, more than any other philosopher of antiquity, to liberate human thought from belief in the marvelous, the miraculous, and the providential. Well before the arrival of Christianity he had already attacked pagan religion and reduced it to impotence. Still today still it is the spirit of old Epicurus who, combined with new doctrines, works away at and undermines Christianity. Among the free-thinkers of today, how many merit the name of "Epicureans" in which the church and Jews included the free-thinkers of yesterday."

I find it interesting to see how he stresses that the warping of Epicurus into contemporary views happened significantly due to British writers. (Which I don't consider to be a good thing!)

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**Post by "Cassius" of May 2, 2019 at 2:41 PM**

Poster: "In fact, it believes, the individual pursues only his own pleasure". Is this true? I was under the impression that Epicurus was more utilitarian than that

Cassius:

Here's the full paragraph the poster is quoting from. Guyau writes from the position that Epicurean philosophy needed to "advance" from that viewpoint. In my view the statement of the original Epicurean position is correct, and changes are not advances but regression. The point that people want to ignore in Epicurean philosophy so that they can "advance" to something else is that only if you consider other people's pleasure and pain are you going to be successful in maximizing your own.

"This principle posed, Epicurus and his continuators conclude from it that pleasure being the sole end of beings, morality for each individual must be the art of procuring for oneself the greatest amount of personal pleasure. As a Utilitarian said, morality thus understood is nothing but the regularization of egoism. Hobbes before Spinoza attempted to construct a geometry of morals, Helvetius constructed a physics of morals, d'Holbach a physiology of morals. But under various names, Epicurean morality is, in summary, nothing but the search for personal interest; it rests on the confusion between fact and duty. In fact, it believes, the individual pursues only his own pleasure. By right it is also his pleasure he should pursue, whether this pleasure finds itself by chance in opposition with that of others or if it finds itself in harmony with it. But even so, all the Epicureans, even La Mettrie, are in agreement in committing the individual to not retreating into a foolish egoism. According to them, there is harmony in most cases between the pleasure of the individual and that of others. But let us understand each other, this is not a fundamental and primitive harmony: egoisms work together like pendulums, without mixing and without uniting, and the goal of morality is not the producing of this union, since it would be impossible. On this point Epicureanism has again advanced very little in France: D'Alembert, d'Holbach, and Volney at moments give us a presentiment of the contemporary English school, but they never fail to return to personal interest as a principle of all morality. In this there is a notable divergence between the Epicureans and the contemporary English school. This divergence grows from Bentham to Stuart Mill and especially to Mr. Spencer, with whose principles we can for the first time construct a nearly complete physics or physiology of morals. The English moralists still preserve personal pleasure as the sole lever capable of setting a being in motion. It is only that instead of positing this pleasure as the legitimate end of the moral being, they work with all their might at having it pursue the pleasure of others. Expressed in this way, their Utilitarianism seems at first glance to be of a manifest inconsistency, and we will elsewhere examine if it doesn't contain, in fact, any inconsistency. Nevertheless, there is in this doctrine something profound that we must now bring to light. "

-----Cassius again:

"The English moralists still preserve personal pleasure as the sole lever capable of setting a being in motion. It is only that instead of positing this pleasure as the legitimate end of the moral being, they work with all their might at having it pursue the pleasure of others. "

<<< This is the source of the corruption in Epicurean philosophy, and again the writer appears to me to be correct in blaming it on the English.

## **Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2019 at 2:44 PM**

This is a very interesting sentence, and I think a correct one:

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

But let us understand each other, this is not a fundamental and primitive harmony: egoisms work together like pendulums, without mixing and without uniting, and the goal of morality is not the producing of this union, since it would be impossible.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2019 at 2:47 PM**

Whether we agree with it or not (and I disagree with a lot of it) there is some very interesting material in that article. It definitely hits some major points and controversies.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2019 at 4:18 PM**

Another perceptive but regrettable observation: "It is also for the same reason that modern Epicureanism has generally renounced the consolations that the Epicurean theory of death claimed to offer. Modern Utilitarians generally are more concerned with life than with death. According to them, morality has as its goal the regulating of our conduct while we are alive; its goal is not to modify our ideas on the subject of death: this is more a question for metaphysics or religion. "

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## **Post by “Cassius” of May 2, 2019 at 4:18 PM**

Just one perceptive observation after the other, all which ought to be to the embarrassment of "modern Epicureans" - this one on "free will":

"In the problem of liberty we find the ancient and modern Epicureans in total disagreement with each other. We know that Epicurus accepts free will and places, not only in man, but in nature and atoms a spontaneity, drawing from itself the principle of its action. On the contrary,

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/919-guyau-interesting-summary-essay-the-morality-of-epicurus-and-its-relationship-to/>

Hobbes, Helvetius, d'Holbach, in a word, all the modern Epicureans without exception, reject this freedom and show themselves to be determinists, and at times, as is the case with Hobbes and La Mettrie, even excessively fatalist. We're not going to examine here the absolute truth of these contrary doctrines, but we can ask which is most in conformity with Epicurean principles. One must recognize that belief in freedom is an anomaly in Epicurus' system.

The latter, after having posed happiness as the goal, recognizes that tranquility of the soul is the necessary condition of this happiness, and he believes that the idea of a universal necessity dominating nature would be incompatible with the tranquility of the soul. According to him, as we know, there is something dark and troubling in the sentiment of fatalism; it is for this reason that he rejects it. And once he begins to reject it, with a remarkably logical spirit he casts it out from everywhere and places spontaneity in everything. What he hasn't proved is that this spontaneity exists; he doesn't even try to prove it. For him moral freedom is an obvious fact of consciousness. And man's freedom being given, he deduces from it the spontaneity of nature. But he doesn't think that only one of the following is true: either moral liberty is doubtful, and his system is enveloped in the same uncertainty, or it is certain and it is a new principle that must be taken into account.

If I am free I can found a morality on this and ignore the principle of interest. Duty can be deduced from the same idea of liberty without having to appeal to pleasure. It is understandable that a determinist could be a Utilitarian; but that a partisan of free will, who believes he feels in himself a certain amount of the absolute, a cause living and acting by itself, possessing intrinsic value and dignity should submit this to an external rule of action, turn it toward a foreign end and make of it an instrument of pleasure, this is a contradiction from which we were right to defend the modern Epicureans. On this point, in our time the Epicurean system has acquired new strength and homogeneity. Epicurus complained that the idea of universal determinism weighs on the human soul, for man suffers when he sacrifices to nature his full and complete independence. He forgot that morality, as much as any other science, can enter into this question of individual preferences. Science seeks, not what pleases intelligence or sensibility, but what is. It pursues not absolute happiness, that utopia of ancient Epicureanism, but relative happiness, compatible with reality, and it retreats before no truth, however difficult it might be."