

Pagagiotopoulous - Thomas Jefferson “I too am an Epicurean”: His life and his inspiration from the Ancient Greeks

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2021 at 8:04 AM

I did not realize that Panagiotis Pagagiotopoulous, who is active with the Athenian Epicureans, had a personal interest in Thomas Jefferson's Epicurean influences, but I see he has prepared a book on the topic - in English - which I am glad to share news of to the group. The Jefferson connection was one of my own first introductions to the importance of Epicurus, and it appears from the table of contents that Pan has covered much of the important material. Jefferson's letters contain numerous references to his preference for Epicurus and his criticism of Platonism and other anti-Epicurean views, and for those (especially Americans) who have friends who they've wanted to introduce to Epicurus, this book could prove to be very useful. Once I am able to read it myself I am sure I will have more to say about it.



The purpose of this book is to highlight the enormous influence of the ancient Greek civilization and Epicurean philosophy on the great historical figure of Thomas Jefferson and, through him, on modern society as a whole. I hope you'll enjoy this journey into the thoughts and actions of Thomas Jefferson through his life and writings presented from a different aspect. Thomas Jefferson studied the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman civilization and the knowledge gained from that became the foundation for his inspiration and conduct. His excellent command of both Greek and Latin enabled him to read from the original texts; an ability that helped him discern which of the ancient writings led to the transition from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment. The most important result of his study was that, by utilizing this knowledge, he shaped himself into an enlightened person with the aim of establishing a free society that would offer everyone the possibility of personal happiness. In a letter, dated October 31, 1823, to the Greek scholar, Adamantios Korais, who was credited with paving the way for Greek Independence, Jefferson wrote: «Nothing is more likely to forward this

object than a study of the fine models of science left by their ancestors, to whom we also are all indebted for the lights which originally led ourselves out of Gothic darkness..». Jefferson delved deep into the study of antiquity by examining much of the history, poetry, architecture, and philosophy of that time. However, he clearly showed a preference for a particular philosophical school. In a letter to William Short, dated October 31, 1819, he states:“As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us”.Jefferson applied his philosophy, both on an individual and collective level, throughout his entire life. He supported the idea that the individual should enjoy a lifestyle through which his mind might be as fulfilled as his body. The pleasure of reading and contemplating upon universal truths through the study of texts was to be accompanied by necessary material goods and exercise to maintain the health of the body. These were the principles through which he aimed to lead humanity on an evolutionary course of exploration to identify the fundamental elements for the creation of a civilization that would ensure the happiness of people more than any other system of his time.To these ends, he was fortunate to be born in the New World, on a continent far away from the ideological chains that held Europe captive and prevented the application of the enlightened and progressive precepts of the time. Distance afforded him to be unaffected by the rivalries between the theocratic Middle Ages and the Renaissance which, despite the important role it played in history, did not manage to transcend its own biases. Jefferson was able to see the ancient world with a clear mind and thus managed to proceed "undefiled" and without hesitation to definitive conclusions concerning the happiness of the individual and that of society in the contemporary epoch. P.P.

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