

The Seductiveness of Virtue

Post by "Cassius" of August 10, 2016 at 6:00 PM

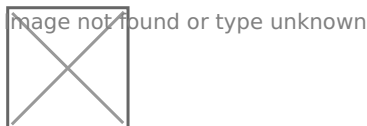
Torquatus, from "On Ends": "Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature."

The fact that Epicurean philosophy rejects' Stoicism's fascination with the seductiveness of "virtue" is a major theme of Francis Wright's "A Few Days in Athens." Sometimes I think it is helpful to look the monster directly in the face so we can see the threat can be seen directly and identify it. Art can be very helpful in doing that. I woke up this morning thinking of examples of the "Virtue" mindset that might be appealing on first glance, and for some reason this clip comes to mind. Beautiful, or deadly, or both?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urxk4mveLCw>

CA: I think that clip comes to mind as an illustration of this: "“True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrong-doing by its prohibitions. And it does not lay its commands or prohibitions upon good men in vain, although neither have any effect on the wicked. It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal a part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by Senate or People, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times, and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for He is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst penalties, even if he escapes what is commonly called punishment .” . .” — Marcus Tullius Cicero, Republic, The Laws, 59 - 47 B.C.

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CA: How best to respond to the seductiveness of virtue and reason and logic as ends in themselves? I certainly don't think reason alone is the key - that would be very close to losing the war without fighting. The power of pleasure is not in reason or logic. If pleasure, which entails emotion, is the end of life, then pleasure and emotion are surely necessary for the defeat of the error of Stoic/Platonic "virtue" and "logic." Here is the most explicit artistic musical debate between the power of pleasure and the power of "virtue" that I am know about.

Prevailing attitudes did not allow pleasure to win out in the story line, but I think pleasure clearly wins in the force of the performance, and the artist (Wagner) intended us to see that:

<https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%...amp;h=bAQEGANFI>

MC While like you I think it's incorrect, why does it necessarily entail being a Javert or other fanatic if you do believe it?"

CA: If one believes that there is only one truth, one way of life, one goal for all, then oppression and force and suppression of other points of view are baked in the cake. And ironically that will be pursued for the "best interest" of those who don't see it, just as Javert illustrates here, and just as Plato concluded with his elevation of the "golden" as Epicurus himself observed."}

MC Yet it seems the Epicureans too believe in universal truths (pleasure is the highest good, etc.) This does not mean they use force or oppression."}

CA: Yes but the nature of that truth makes all the difference, as not stemming from a single source, but from the properties of the innumerable atoms. Without a single source of universal logic and reason that applies at all times and all places and to all people (reference the Cicero quote for the opposite point of view) Epicurean philosophy leads to justice that is the same for all only to the extent that it is conducive to the happiness of those concerned, and it is not the same for all people at all times and all places."} class="UFILikeLink">Like · [Reply](#) · [9 hrs](#)

MC Yet it seems that the truths of Epicureanism apply universally as well, unless I am quite mistaken. I agree that Epicurean justice has great strength in encompassing many ways of existing. However it seems to me that many conceptions of natural law also allow for diversity. Forgive my ignorance if this is not the case here with the Stoic view."

CA: don't think we are in disagreement about Epicurean philosophy, but I think history shows that natural law which is based not on nature, but on some single prime mover/divine fire/jehovah brings with it a tendency toward absolutism while Epicurean views naturally lead toward freedom."}

MC: Well perhaps that is the problem then. So do you think in a way Epicureanism has it's "natural law"? In the sense that pleasure and so on are "laws of nature""

CA: Yes I do believe it is appropriate to talk about "laws of nature" in Epicurean terms. The essential difference is that Epicurean laws of nature derive from the properties of the elements, which most other concepts of natural law presuppose a deity or some kind putting things in motion, if not superintending it closely. But just because the two terms have dramatically different meanings does not mean that it is inappropriate to talk about laws of nature. Epicurus embraced reason and did not argue against it - he emphasized that the *basis* of reason has to be in reality, however, and not in abstraction. (And here's another good place to cite A A Long's

Article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism")
<http://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3...amp;h=2AQER2at9>

CA: Your points are excellent, Michael, for highlighting the issues for someone trying to scrutinize the difference between Epicurus and Plato/Aristotle/Zeno. I also think that there is an even bigger challenge and distinction that some people don't see at first - the distinction between Epicurus and the "random universe" crowd (for lack of a better term at the moment).

The AA Long article is excellent for pointing out what I think is a danger bigger than the Stoic argument:: the danger of thinking that there is no "natural law" in the universe at all, and that "anything" can happen at "any time." That's a view that often leads to nihilism.

Not everyone, but some seem to think that the Epicurean swerve leads in the same direction of concluding that the universe is essentially "random." Long emphasizes and shows that this is not the effect or logical conclusion of the "swerve" as such a conclusion would totally contradict the rest of Epicurean physics. This is obvious from the chain argument in Book 1 of Lucretius that deduces the existence of the elements in the first place from the reliability of the things we see arising from the elements. If the swerve were the type of mechanism that led to major random and unpredictable events at **any** moment or place, then Lucretius' argument here would be nonsense.

As further evidence, Long points out that the ancient attackers of Epicurus (especially Cicero) never argued that the Epicurean scheme of nature is based on randomness, and this would have been the logical obvious line of attack if Epicurus had really held such a view. Even the fragmentary texts we have left are enough to establish that the swerve is limited in effect, and that while we can see the effects of the existence of the swerve by observing free will in higher life forms, the theory of the swerve does not undercut the essential "natural law" basis on which the universe operates.

CA: As I rewatch the Tannahuaser music duel, and read the words of the transcript, I think I would nominate Wagner (at least in this clip) as being the most clear-sighted Epicurean philosopher in at least 1500 years. Every passage, every contrast, almost every word, is as if he has studied Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicurean philosophy and distilled their differences down to the very heart of the matter.