

Thomas Jefferson's Religious Beliefs

Post by "Cassius" of February 1, 2022 at 1:34 PM

I thought I remembered a line in "A Few Days In Athens" where Epicurus said that there was no good but pleasure, and no evil but pain, but so far the nearest I can find is this in chapter three in regard to virtue. This is related, but not quite as direct. Of course Frances Wright is not really to be accepted as an authority on Epicurus' position, but her views are always interesting:

Quote

"Yes, in a great measure, yet not all together: we are all the wooers of virtue, but we are wooers of a different character."

"And may she not then favor one more than another?"

"That is a question," replied the Gargettian, playfully, " that each will answer in his own favor. If you ask me, he continued, - with one of his sweetest tones and smiles, "I shall say, that I feel myself virtuous, because my soul is at rest."

"If this be your criterion, you should with the stoics deny that pain is an evil."

"By no means: so much the contrary, I hold it the greatest of all evils, and the whole aim of my life, and of my philosophy, is to escape from it. To deny that pain is an evil is such another quibble as the Elean's denial of motion: that must exist to man which exists to his senses; and as to existence or non existence abstracted from them, though it may afford an idle argument for an idle hour, it can never enter as a truth, from which to draw conclusions, in the practical lessons of a master. To deny that pain is an evil seems more absurd than to deny its existence, which has also been done, for its existence is only apparent from its effect upon our senses; how then shall we admit the existence, and deny the effect, which alone forces that admittance? But we will leave these matters to the dialecticians of the Portico. I feel myself virtuous because my soul is at rest. With evil passions I should be disturbed and uneasy; with uncontrolled appetites I should be disordered in body as well as mind — for this reason, and for this reason only, I avoid both."

"Only!"

"Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it."

Theon was about to break forth in indignant astonishment: the sage softly laid a hand upon his arm, and, with a smile and bend of the head demanding attention, proceeded; "The masters who would have us to follow virtue for her own sake, independent of any

pleasure or advantage that we may find in the pursuit, are sublime visionaries, who build a theory without examining the ground on which they build it, who advance doctrines without examining principles. Why do I gaze on the Cupid of Praxiteles? because it is beautiful; because it gives me pleasurable sensations. If it gave me no pleasurable sensations, should I find it beautiful? should I gaze upon it? or would you call me wise if then I gave a drachma for its possession? What other means have we of judging of things than by the effect they produce upon our senses? Our senses then being the judges of all things, the aim of all men is to gratify their senses; in other words, their aim is pleasure or happiness: and if virtue were not found to conduce to this, men would do well to shun her, as they now do well to shun vice.”

“You own then no pleasure but virtue, and no misery but vice?”

“Not at all: I think virtue only the highest pleasure, and vice, or ungoverned passions and appetites, the worst misery. Other pleasures are requisite to form a state of perfect ease, which is happiness; and other miseries are capable of troubling, perhaps destroying, the peace of the most virtuous and the wisest man.”

“I begin to see more reason in your doctrine,” said the youth, looking up with a timid blush in the face of the philosopher.

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