

"Epicurus, Father of the Enlightenment" Article Review

Post by "Cassius" of December 19, 2022 at 6:59 PM

I will add a couple more disjointed comments on the article here:

1. I think it's a well written article-length summary that presents basic facts in very readable form.

2. Under the topic "The Pursuit of Happiness" I would say that this summary suffers from what I complain about ad nauseum as to excessive focus on "absence of pain" while leaving the issue of positive pleasure either floating ambiguously or in fact defined totally negatively. And so it ends up with a negative assessments of "We do not have any of the more detailed works in which Epicurus might have attempted what Jeremy Bentham later called a "felicific calculus". But, bearing in mind the difficulties that Bentham and the nineteenth century utilitarians found when they tried to move from principles to details, there is no reason to suppose he was more successful." That's probably why i didn't have more to say about the article when I first read it years ago.

3. I see under "Maintenance of Social Control" that he goes into the evaluation of the philosophy from the point of view of how well it helps to 'reconcile the great majority to distributions of property in which they are at a disadvantage.' While the writer may be a libertarian rather than a Marxist, i see that as actually way a Marxist way of looking at the question, evaluating everything by economics. That kind of perspective in my view obscures the central issue that I think Epicurus was pursuing: "What is the truth about our place in the universe?" And I think Epicurus was pursuing that question come hell or high water as to economics -- the answers to questions like chaos and life after death and supernatural religion isn't a matter of economics.

4 -- i think he's just simply wrong here, and that there is no need to ask the second question about "laws of nature beyond the existence and movement of atoms" because Epicurus plainly rejected that: "Then there is an apparent defect in his conception of the atomic movements. Does the universe exist by accident? Or are their laws of nature beyond the existence and movement of the atoms? The first is not impossible. An infinite number of atoms in an infinite void over infinite time will, every so often, come together in an apparently stable universe. They may also hold together, moving in clusters in ways that suggest regularity. But this chance combination might be dissolved at any moment—though, given every sort of infinity, some of these universes will continue for long periods. If Epicurus had this first in view, what point in trying to explain present phenomena in terms of cause and effect? Causality only makes sense on the assumption that the future will be like the past. If he had the second in

mind, it is worth asking what he thought to be nature of these laws? Might they not, for example, have had an Author? Since Newton, we have contented ourselves with trying to uncover regularities of motion and not going beyond these. But the Greeks had a much stronger teleological sense. Perhaps these matters were not discussed. Perhaps they were discussed, but we have no record of them in the surviving discussions. Or perhaps they have survived, but I have overlooked them. But it does seem to me that Epicurean physics do not fully discuss the nature of the laws that they assume."

5 - This is not optimally worded, as Lucretius does not suggest this possibility, he's clear that Epicureanism is not impious: "It may be, Lucretius says, that beating down religion is impious and the entry to a life of crime. Much rather, it is religion which has brought forth criminal and impious deeds. He lived before the most notable acts of religious mania. But he was poet enough to know the psychology of enthusiasm."

6 - I like his section on Social Contract pretty well but I would differ with this: "As said, we do not have much Epicurean writing on this point. As with the Benthamites, he does not seem to have found any imperative for these ethical teachings. We may ask, for example, what reason there is against my killing someone if I can thereby take possession of his property—or just enjoy the sensation of killing—and if there is no chance of my being caught. The only answers we have are: "Do nothing in your life that will cause you to fear if it is discovered by your neighbour.[xxviii] And: "The just man is most free from disturbance, while the unjust is full of the utmost disturbance.[xxix]" If these are attempts at answering the question, they are feeble attempts. That the unjust are invariably unhappy is plainly false. As for the threat of discovery, the opportunities for secret crime have always been everywhere." ----- I think the problem with that is that Epicurus would say that it is an error to look for an "imperative for these ethical teachings" because - and this is probably the same issue I have in point 4 above, I think Epicurus would say that "imperatives" don't exist and it is error to look for them. Yes in the end the writer is right that "Epicurus believed a stable and just social order could be sustained by the self-interest of individuals" but the emphasis is on the "could." I think Epicurus would say that there's no divine order in the universe and no fate and there's no force that guarantees a "just" result, and we just simply have to acknowledge that if we act rationally we will respect generally respect each others' interests, but that there are no guarantees and we simply do the best we can - because that's the way things are. Epicurus wasn't going to invent non-existent imperatives.

7 - A GREAT conclusion: "We have virtually everything that Plato wrote and almost nothing that Epicurus wrote. Plato, however, has had no discernable impact on the social sciences beyond providing legitimation to various cliques of demented and often murderous intellectuals. But, for all we have so few of his writings, the ideas of Epicurus have survived. And they have made the world a better place."