

"The Philosophical Mind" enters the skull of Epicurus (Benjamin de Casseres)

Post by "Joshua" of July 25, 2023 at 6:37 PM

Quote

I wonder what you think about the next sentence--all is permitted.

You mean the one I was trying to avoid? ☐☐

Of course it too deserves a response. In a [letter](#) of Horace Smith to Cyrus Redding, dated 1822, the author has this to say in reference to the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley;

Quote

Though Shelley is my most particular friend, I regret the imprudence of his early publications on more points than one, but as I know him to possess the most exalted virtues, and find in others who promulgate the most startling theories, most amiable traits, I learn to be liberal towards abstract speculations, which not exercising any baneful influence on their author's lives, are still less likely to corrupt others. Truth is great, and will prevail—that is my motto, and I would, therefore, leave everything unshackled—what is true will stand, and what is false ought to fall, whatever be the consequences. Ought we not to feel ashamed that Lucretius could publish his book in the teeth of an established religion, while martyrs are groaning in perpetual imprisonment, for expressing a conscientious dissent from Christianity?

If by "all is permitted" we mean something like "leave everything unshackled" in its above usage, then I am fully on board. St. Augustine wrote that the church permitting the spread of heresy was like the state allowing the sale of poison bread. Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* preferred the metaphor of counterfeit money, and in either case the result is the same--the punishment for counterfeiting was mutilation or death, and Dante has King Philip IV of France tortured in hell for adulterating the coinage.

By contrast, what I find in Epicurus is a thinker for whom questions of justice and morality are approached with measure and care, as in Vatican Saying 51:

Quote

I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will, provided only that you neither violate the

laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbors, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by one or more of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm.

Set aside Epicurus' final advice here; the point is that in lieu of a stark prohibition, and without any threat of torture or death, he simply leads the coorespondant to examine carefully the consequences of a given course of action, in the particular context in which he finds himself. In another time and place, law and custom might be different. The crime of Onan in the book of Genesis was failing to impregnate his widowed sister-in-law; such a proscription would be unthinkable and grotesque in our age.

Of the 10 commandments, only three are current law; prohibitions against murder, theft, and perjury.

Should literally everything be permitted by law? No, I don't think so. I can't imagine Epicurus did either. But the sope and compass of personal liberty should far exceed the scope of what is forbidden.

The following scene from Robert Bolt's play "A Man for All Seasons" catches the flavor of what I mean to convey;

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=WMqReTJkjjg>