New (October 1 2019) Catherine Wilson Speech Video on Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Joshua” of October 12, 2019 at 7:42 AM

> Quote
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> Around the 25 minute mark where she talks about the rise of civilization, and how according to Lucretius the primitive period was the happiest period in the human race: is that just his opinion; does she agree with it? Did Epicurus have the same view?
>
> It also sounds quite Marxist to point out the power dynamics, oppression and slavery as the evils of civilization. She does mention the good products of culture also, but it doesn't seem to outweigh the bad?
>
> And I have to disagree with this negative assessment of civilization. The primitive prehistory of mankind was not a paradise, but filled with violence and suffering in the struggle to survive. Civilization has progressively made things better for humankind.

There are several things going on here;

Lucretius did not accept the view, common though it was in his day, that there was an original paradisal state or a primitive golden age. This view is logical (although not reasonable) if we adopt a creation model of origins, since presumably a creator doesn't begin by creating a fallen world.

Lucretius did not adopt such a model; he was a materialist, and concluded rightly that man emerged from a nighttime of shivering ignorance little better than a beast. He slept in caves. He ate flesh raw. At length he tamed fire, wore skins, and built dwellings. Lucretius believed, like Thomas Hobbes, that primitive life was "nasty, brutish and short".

> Quote
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> They could not look to the common good, they
>
> did not know how to govern their intercourse by
>
> custom and law...
>
> ...and when night overtook them, like bristly

> hogs they just cast their savage bodies naked on the ground, rolling themselves in leaves and boughs...
>
> ...what troubled them was that the tribes of beasts
>
> often made their rest dangerous to the poor wretches:
>
> driven from their home, they would flee from their
>
> rocky shelters when a foaming boar appeared or a
>
> mighty lion, and at dead of night in terror would
>
> yield their leaf strewn beds to the savage guests...
>
> ...until cruel torments put an end to their life,
>
> with none to help, all ignorant what a wound wanted.
>
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Nor did Lucretius believe that civilization was a Grand March of History tending always toward greater wisdom and glory. After all, he repeatedly bemoans the poverty of the Latin language when compared with the 4th century BC literature of the Greeks. But in the century before that, Athens was beset by war and plague. In the centuries afterward, by the Macedonian conquest. And look where the Athenians were now; sacked by Sulla in the poet's own lifetime. This is again a materialist position—things come together, and things fall apart.

Indeed, if he seems to think little of civilization it is only because civilization hadn't got very far in his day. It seems probable that the majority in Italy couldn't read. Medicine hadn't advanced much beyond herbalism and bone-msetting. Mankind lay, as he puts it, "foully grovelling, crushed beneath the weight of grim religion".

Lucretius sums up the contrast between primitive and civilized man with delicious and wry irony;

> Quote
>
> In those days men often unwittingly poured poison for themselves; now they make away with themselves more skillfully.