Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19

Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2019 at 4:22 PM

> Quote from Hiram
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> if the people who adhere to a perspective of "friends of Epicurus, enemies of Plato" do not become proficient at employing the arts of historiography in the same manner as Platonists have become proficient (history is written by the winners, and they HAVE BEEN the winners so far), then we don't have a right to complain that our views are invisible and attacked and mis-represented.

OK there are at least two things going on here:

(1) I am in favor of engagement wherever possible and wherever it makes sense to do so. The primary problem I have is as you alluded to in a recent post -- the call of ordinary life limits our resources tremendously and we have to decided what is the best use of time. And that leads to (2) --

(2) I do not think the statement above logically follows. Your premise seems to be that in order to be effective we must constantly engage with people who are at best ambivalent toward us or worst are absolutely committed to some opposing position. That's the point raised by Frances Wright in A Few Days in Athens: Argument does NOT generally result in conversion of one side to the other. It often WIDENS the distance between the sides, because in fact many positions are not reconcilable.

The reason that you Hiram and I (and others) are able to make some progress in these discussions is that we are already starting with positions that are relatively close in many cases (though it may not seem like it sometimes.) It's my view that you do not recoil at the humanism and the "absence of pain" position of the Cambridge Epicureanism (I am brushing broadly, I know) because you do not personally have it in you to accept the nihilism and the suppression of emotion that is at the root of their version of Epicurus. I am paying you a compliment by saying that you shrug off the implications because you cannot accept that most people would accept the implications of the position that they are arguing, but I think you are wrong about that.

Our differences here are among people who are arguing about strategy toward pursuing pleasure / happiness. Outside this corner of the world, the suppression and historical sidelining of Epicurus has come at the hands of people who are absolutely outside that tent and know exactly what they are doing, and that's why I and others draw such a bright line and refuse to

make common cause with them.

IT seems as if in the ancient world Cicero and even Julian the Apostate remarked that it was primarily the Epicureans themselves who read Epicurean literature, and I think that relates to our strategy disagreements. I don't think that trying to storm the walls of Cambridge or the Humanist Alliance (a name I made up for the occasion) is likely to be the best way to reach more people with epicurean philosophy (if we want to define our goal that way.) I think that "normal" people outside of academia and outside of the hothouses of issue advocacy, many of whom are (or should be) totally turned off by the alternatives are the ones we we will find the most honest and open reception.

On the example of Michael Onfrey, you have convinced me that there is doubtless some material in his work that would be helpful. But it is not easily accessible in English, Onfrey did not thoroughly embrace Epicurus as far as I can tell, which limits his usefulness, and unless someone has a special interest in pursuing Onfrey I personally can't rank that high on the list of things I would urge everyone to read.

So that's an example of my analysis -- more power to you if you are able to find good things in Onfrey and bring them to the table, but we all have to do our best to make our best use of our own time. And that's why I do not at all consider anything I am doing as "censorship." I see it the opposite -- there are reams of material devoted to commentators on obscure topics which enhance their resumes in the academic world, but which don't do a think to bring Epicurus into sharper focus for the "everyday person" who most needs the help.