

George Santayana's Essay on Lucretius (1910)

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2020 at 1:47 PM

What an amazing coincidence that you would post this today. I woke up at 5:00 am today thinking about the phrase "those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it" and of wikipedia took me to Santayana. I really knew next to nothing about him but his name before this morning. I did not get time to track down the Lucretius article so that link saved me a lot of time. I am less than half way through reading it now but I see the general direction.

OK Joshua -- I know what we are up against. It is very unflattering to look at a Nietzsche or a Santayana and say that we / Cassius / Joshua are "smarter" than they are, or that "they got Epicurus wrong and we get him right" --- but on the latter point that is exactly what I conclude. We're certainly not as "smart" or as "artistic" as they were, but there was something about them that caused them to look at Epicurus and arrive at SUCH a different conclusion than did a THomas Jefferson or a Frances Wright, and while I don't hold my own abilities up to theirs, I do hold up Jefferson and Wright as being as intelligent as a Nietzsche or a Santayana.

Because this is just totally wrong-headed (from Santayana):

Quote

Now Epicurus, for the most part, hated life. His moral system, called hedonism, recommends that sort of pleasure which has no excitement and no risk about it. This ideal is modest, and even chaste, but it is not vital.

Epicurus was remarkable for his mercy, his friendliness, his utter horror of war, of sacrifice, of suffering. These are not sentiments that a genuine naturalist would be apt to share. Pity and repentance, Spinoza said, were vain and evil; what increased a man's power and his joy increased his goodness also. The naturalist will believe in a certain hardness, as Nietzsche did; he will incline to a certain scorn, as the laughter of Democritus was scornful. He will not count too scrupulously the cost of what he achieves; he will be an imperialist, rapt in the joy of achieving something. In a word, the moral hue of materialism in a formative age, or in an aggressive mind, would be aristocratic and imaginative; but in a decadent age, or in a soul that is renouncing everything, it would be, as in Epicurus, humanitarian and timidly sensual.

I am going out of order, but this is basically the Nietszschean critique, calling Epicurus a philosopher of "bereavement," of "abstinence," of "withdrawal" -

Quote

Retired in his private garden, with a few friends and disciples, he sought the ways of peace; he lived abstemiously; he spoke gently; he gave alms to the poor; he preached against wealth, against ambition, against passion. He defended free-will because he wished to exercise it in withdrawing from the world, and in not swimming with the current. He denied the supernatural, since belief in it would have a disquieting influence on the mind, and render too many things compulsory and momentous. There was no future life: the art of living wisely must not be distorted by such wild imaginings.

All things happened in due course of nature; the gods were too remote and too happy, secluded like good Epicureans, to meddle with earthly things. Nothing ruffled what Wordsworth calls their "voluptuous unconcern." Nevertheless, it was pleasant to frequent their temples. There, as in the spaces where they dwelt between the worlds, the gods were silent and beautiful, and wore the human form. Their statues, when an unhappy man gazed at them, reminded him of happiness; he was refreshed and weaned for a moment from the senseless tumult of human affairs. From those groves and hallowed sanctuaries the philosopher returned to his garden strengthened in his wisdom, happier in his isolation, more friendly and more indifferent to all the world. Thus the life of Epicurus, as St. Jerome bears witness, was "full of herbs, fruits, and abstinences." There was a hush in it, as of bereavement. His was a philosophy of the decadence, a philosophy of negation, and of flight from the world.

And the clear drift is that Santayana is accusing Epicurus of starting with his own defeated attitude toward life and simply gravitating toward atomism because that was the theory easiest to mold to his fore-chosen conclusion of the worthlessness of life.

Quote

Although science for its own sake could not interest so monkish a nature, yet science might be useful in buttressing the faith, or in removing objections to it. Epicurus therefore departed from the reserve of Socrates, and looked for a natural philosophy that might support his ethics.

All of this is just SO wrong-headed, and says a lot more about Santayana than it does about anything else.

But Joshua this is great material to wrestle with because these ARE the central issues that determine whether Epicurus should be considered as invaluable or the height of worthlessness.