

George Santayana's Essay on Lucretius (1910)

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2020 at 7:00 PM

I bet I will wish I had followed your suggestion, Godfrey. I will read a little further:

THIS is so much like I read in Nietzsche, and it is just utterly cynical, depressing, acidic - and infuriating:

Quote

There is another element in this polemic against immortality which, while highly interesting and characteristic of a decadent age, betrays a very one-sided and, at bottom, untenable ideal. This element is the fear of life. Epicurus had been a pure and tender moralist, but pusillanimous. He was so afraid of hurting and of being hurt, so afraid of running risks or tempting fortune, that he wished to prove that human life was a brief business, not subject to any great transformations, nor capable of any great achievements. He taught accordingly that the atoms had produced already all the animals they could produce, for though infinite in number the atoms were of few kinds. Consequently the possible sorts of being were finite and soon exhausted; this world, though on the eve of destruction, was of recent date. The worlds around it, or to be produced in future, could not afford anything essentially different. All the suns were much alike, and there was nothing new under them. We need not, then, fear the world; it is an explored and domestic scene, — a home, a little garden, six feet of earth for a man to stretch in. If people rage and make a great noise, it is not because there is much to win, or much to fear, but because people are mad. Let me not be mad, thought Epicurus; let me be reasonable, cultivating sentiments appropriate to a mortal who inhabits a world morally comfortable and small, and physically poor in its infinite monotony.

/aside -

OH - I also want to note that I just now realized that this transcript of Santayana is on [Peter St Andre's page](#). I have a lot of respect for him but I don't really know where, in the end, he comes down....

/ end of aside

OK - Every bit of this is just so clearly revealing that it is SANTAYANA's personality to be so "sensitive" that he cannot seem to think of humanity except for its "ghastly" and "ridiculous" aspects..... I remember a long time ago that [Elayne](#) made a comment about being overly "emotive" and that is exactly what comes to my mind now -- I will have to see if I can find her comment or ask her....

Quote

To all this, perhaps, Memmius, or some other recalcitrant reader, might retort that what he shrank from was not the metaphysical state of being dead, but the very real agony of dying. Dying is something ghastly, as being born is something ridiculous; and, even if no pain were involved in quitting or entering this world, we might still say what Dante's Francesca says of it: *Il modo ancor m' offende*, — "I shudder at the way of it." Lucretius, for his part, makes no attempt to show that everything is as it should be; and if our way of coming into this life is ignoble, and our way of leaving it pitiful, that is no fault of his nor of his philosophy.

So Santayana, the master of overemotive sappiness, says that EPICURUS is the one who "feared life" and "missed" the point? I suppose this is just the Nietzsche argument amplified by an eloquent voice:

Quote

But the radical fear of death, I venture to think, is something quite different. It is the love of life. Epicurus, who feared life, seems to have missed here the primordial and colossal force he was fighting against. Had he perceived that force, he would have been obliged to meet it in a more radical way, by an enveloping movement, as it were, and an attack from the rear. The love of life is not something rational, or founded on experience of life. It is something antecedent and spontaneous. It is that Venus Genetrix which covers the earth with its flora and fauna. It teaches every animal to seek its food and its mate, and to protect its offspring; as also to resist or fly from all injury to the body, and most of all from threatened death. It is the original impulse by which good is discriminated from evil, and hope from fear.

OK so THIS is the concluding paragraph?

Quote

The maxim of Lucretius, that nothing arises save by the death of something else, meets us still in our crawling immortality. And his art of accepting and enjoying what the conditions of our being afford also has a perennial application. Dante, the poet of faith, will tell us that we must find our peace in the will that gives us our limited portion. Goethe, the poet of romantic experience, will tell us that we must renounce, renounce perpetually. Thus wisdom clothes the same moral truths in many cosmic parables. The doctrines of philosophers disagree where they are literal and arbitrary, — mere guesses

about the unknown; but they agree or complete one another where they are expressive or symbolic, thoughts wrung by experience from the hearts of poets. Then all philosophies alike are ways of meeting and recording the same flux of images, the same vicissitudes of good and evil, which will visit all generations, while man is man.

There's so much that is important in dissecting and understanding this attitude of Santayana, but I find it so - i'll use the word "acidic" or "corrosive" this time. I'm concluding that what I referenced above as Elayne's over-emotiveness" is near the heart of the issue. It may be that what we're dealing with here is a deep emotional trait that is simply so foreign to the "love of life" attitude that it just can't be fully experienced, much less understood, but someone who doesn't have it. Maybe in the end there are "Epicurean" characters and "Stoic" characters, and all the communication and work to understand in the end cannot bridge them.

Temporarily I will summarize that maybe the issue here is "feeling emotion for the sake of feeling emotion" which I do not think is at all the same as "feeling for the sake of pleasure." Or maybe it is actually a kind of hyper-rationalization of emotion from someone who (in my view at least) doesn't even feel emotion in the same way as I am familiar with -- it is almost as if this is written by a computer that is trying to understand the point of emotion -- which knows that it "should" understand emotion, but at some point in the end just doesn't "connect" in the same way that I believe I do with mine.

I see a probably unbridgeable divide here, but I also think I see a subject that is hugely productive to explore, as it probably explains a great many things about why some people just in the end "can't get along."

Edit: In searching I can't find where Elayne used the word "emotive" here. Maybe it was on Facebook, or maybe it was as somewhat different word, but I am almost certain that was the sense that she was describing. Whether that applies here is another question, but for now that's the best way I can summarize what I am thinking..