

George Santayana's Essay on Lucretius (1910)

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 2:49 PM

It may have been common sense (although I confess to disliking that term!), but consider that Frances Wright was the *only* writer whose work survives between antiquity and DeWitt—that is to say, for nearly 2,000 years—to have attempted publicly to redeem Epicurus' whole system and reputation, on his own genuine terms.

One other thing I should mention; Santayana's essay was one out of three in a book called *Three Philosophical Poets*. I haven't read the other two, but here is the description from the Doubleday edition published 1953;

Quote

One of the world's most renowned and provocative thinkers discusses Lucretius, the materialist; Dante, the supernaturalist; and Goethe, the romanticist; and thereby introduces the three dominant systems of Western philosophy--the sources of our major speculative traditions. This work serves the newcomer to the history of philosophy as an admirable introduction to the field, and for the more advanced reader it is a most concise and meaningful interpretation of these three great philosophical poets.

Santayana was himself a materialist, in spite of his Platonism, and is generally considered to have given Lucretius the most favorable review of the three. Lucretius was a supreme poet, and a materialist—but also an Epicurean. Santayana was an admirer of good poetry, as well as a materialist; but his other views were incompatible with Epicureanism. Cassius mentions 'something more extensive' going on, and I think it's partially this—the narcissism of small differences. Santayana exposes himself to this diagnosis explicitly, by suggesting that a materialist who was not an Epicurean would have opened up richer fields for poetic exploration than Lucretius was willing or able to pursue.

And the capstone of all this seeming paradox? A quote from one of Santayana's novels, from a character that critic's call his "alter-ego";

Quote

I have the Epicurean contentment, which is not far removed from asceticism.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was a great admirer of Santayana, but sums him up thus;

Quote

He has a patronizing tone—as of one who saw through himself but didn't expect others to.

He stands with Nietzsche in a place of eminence, in the Rogue's gallery of Epicurus' detractors—and for that reason alone is worth reading.