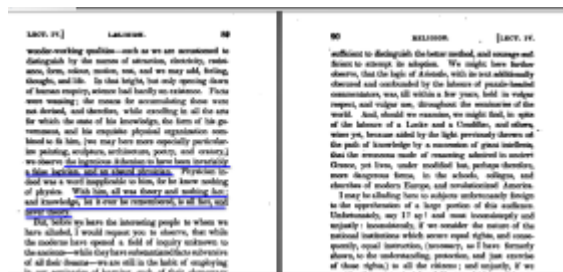


What Evidence Do We Have That Frances Wright Personally Was An Epicurean?

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2020 at 8:19 PM

I told Elayne that I would read some more into Frances Wright to see if I could pull out particularly interesting sections of her "Courses of Popular Lectures." References here are to [the PDF located here](#).

Here is a notation as to one such section, in Volume I -



I find this very strange. She has published an entire book praising Epicurus to the skies, and putting in his mouth exactly the words that science should be observation, and not theory, which IS consistent with Epicurus' viewpoint.

How then to explain these paragraphs, in which she slams Athenian philosophers without mentioning the exception of Epicurus, and she mentions only Aristotle (I think it is fair to say that that's a negative reference, but it's not clear to me)?

And as the text continues she then turns to praising Pestalozzi, the Christian. Hopefully by the end of this chapter on "religion" it will be clear why she is doing this.

Great line here, as to "Castles in the Air" on page 93:

Knowledge signifies *things known*. Where there are no *things known*, there is no *knowledge*. Where there are no *things to be known*, there can be no *knowledge*. We have observed that every science, that is, every branch of knowledge, is compounded of certain facts, of which our sensations furnish the evidence. Where no such evidence is supplied, we are without *data*; we are without first premises; and when, without these, we attempt to build up a *science*, we do as those who raise edifices without foundations. And what do such builders construct? *Castles in the air*.

OK this is important. As the chapter closes, it is clear what is going on -- she has decided that she is going to take the position simply that I DON'T KNOW - and she's not going to take a

position on anything other than what she can see in this world -- and in the absence of anything said here, she does not even seem to be taking a position on life after death.

Here then we may have the ultimate dividing line and where she decided to depart from Epicurus:

other words to express the same ideas. For myself, pretending to no insight into these mysteries, possessing no means of intercourse with the inhabitants of other worlds, confessing my absolute incapacity to see either as far back as a first cause, or as far forward as a last one, I am content to state to you, my fellow creatures, that all my studies, reading, reflection, and observation, have obtained for me no knowledge beyond the sphere of our planet, our earthly interests, and our earthly duties; and that I more than doubt, whether, should you expend all your time and all your treasure in the search, you will be able to acquire

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any better information respecting unseen worlds, and future events, than myself. Whenever you shall come to the same conclusion, you will probably think the many spacious edifices which rear their heads in your city, are somewhat misapplied, and the time of the individuals who minister therein somewhat misemployed: you will then doubtless perceive that they who wish to muse, or pray, had better do it after the manner designated by the good Jesus, namely, by entering their closet and shutting the door; and farther perceive, that the true bible is the book of nature, the wisest teacher he who most plainly expounds it, the best priest our own conscience, and the most orthodox church a hall of science. I look round doubtless upon men of many faiths, upon calvinists, unitarians, methodists, baptists, catholics, and I know not what beside, and yet, my friends, let us call ourselves by what names we will, are we not creatures occupying the same earth, and sharing the same nature? and can we not consider these as members of one family, apart from all our speculations respecting worlds, and existences, and states of being, for which, in ages past, men cut each other's throats, and for which they now murder each other's peace?

This exchange from Chapter 14 of *A Few Days In Athens* always bothered me, because it seemed that she was putting words in Epicurus' mouth that seemed clearly different from what we know about his positions from the ancient texts. I always wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt that somehow she thought there was a way to reconcile this with what he wrote, but now I see that she simply decided to write her own position in as his. Here is the text:

Quote

"On leaving you, last night," said Theon, "I encountered Cleanthes. He came from the perusal of your writings, and brought charges against them which I was unprepared to answer."

"Let us hear them, my Son; perhaps, until you shall have perused them yourself, we may assist your difficulty."

"First, that they deny the existence of the gods."

"I see but one other assertion that could equal that in folly," said Epicurus.

"I knew it," exclaimed Theon, triumphantly; "I knew it was impossible. But where will not prejudice lead men, when even the upright Cleanthes is capable of slander!"

"He is utterly incapable of it," said the Master ; "and the inaccuracy, in this case, I rather suspect to rest with you than with him. To *deny* the existence of the gods would indeed be presumption in a philosopher; a presumption equaled only by that of him who should *assert* their existence."

"How!" exclaimed the youth, with a countenance in which astonishment seemed to suspend every other expression.

"As I never saw the gods, my son," calmly continued the Sage, "I cannot *assert* their existence; and, that I never saw them, is no reason for my *denying* it."

"But do we believe nothing except that of which we have ocular demonstration?"

"Nothing, at least, for which we have not the evidence of one or more of our senses; that is, when we believe on just grounds, which, I grant, taking men collectively, is very seldom."

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Continuing on:

So she DOES mention Epicurus, at least once, and approvingly, however short;

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lives seem to have equalled all that we can show in modern generations of good and wise. Such appears to have been the modest and benevolent Socrates: such, more especially, appears to have been the mild, unassuming, reasonable Epicurus, in whose ethics, as imperfectly conveyed to us, we find the science first based upon its just foundation—the ascertained consequences of human actions.

The moderns, whether we look to the numerous family of Christian nations, or to the equally numerous family who have followed the standard of Mohammed, have un-

But oh my my -- can it really be true that she is going to base her morals on "good" and "beneficial" without further definition?

What then is MORALS?
 A rule of life.
 How formed? from what deduced?
 From the consequences of actions as ascertained through
 our sensations, and our observations of the sensations of
 others.
 Actions which produce good, we call moral actions; ac-
 tions which produce evil, immoral actions. Revolve the

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matter as we may, we can come to no other rational con-
 clusion. The word MORALS, then, is employed to design-
 ate a course of actions, whose effects are beneficial to
 ourselves and others. In other words, they constitute a
 rule of life drawn from the ascertained consequences of
 actions. The rule is simple. If we never look out of it, we
 can never go wrong in morals.

This is not directly related to investigating FW's thought process but it is too good not to include:

But let us here observe, that to secure for ourselves that
 seemly propriety which constitutes the rule of temperance,
we must as little incline to the extreme of fanatical self-
denial as to that of indulgence. We must govern and
 not crucify the appetites which, forming a part of our
 being, can as little be stifled as palled, without injury to
 our physical, moral, and mental health. It has been the
requiring the annihilation instead of the just government of
the human passions, which has nourished the belief, so
slanderous to our nature, that they were beyond the con-
trol of our reason. Oh! let but reason be appealed to,
 and we shall acknowledge, for we shall see and feel her
 power!

Well i did not expect THIS --- almost a precursor or shade of Ayn Rand in discussing self-interest, but stated in a much better way (Not sure if this comment is an aside or not, but i do personally think that this is the correct way to interpret Epicurus.)

In seeking that principle of our nature which leads the
 heart of man to sympathize with that of his fellow; or
 extend the hand in succor, or to drop the tear in sym-
 pathy, philosophers have strongly disagreed. Men, without
 adhering to the various arguments and speculations which
 have more frequently tended to confuse the intellect than
 to develop the fact, we may remark, that the man who
 has agreed in referring all our noblest actions and most
 beautiful feelings to the single desire of attaining our own
 individual good, cannot, at the best, so consistently bear
 of morals; since even self-love and self-interest, rightly
understood, would naturally lead to justice, beneficence, etc.
honour, truth, modesty, and independent independence. And such
 decisions is the truth. A simple but separate calculation

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of selfish considerations, would lead inevitably to the aban-
 donment of every sensible feeling, and practice of every
 action beneficial to society. For, as we have previously
 acquired, how come we at a knowledge of virtue? By our
 sensations. What constitutes moral good? A course of
 actions producing beneficial results. What moral evil?
 A course of actions whose results are injurious. Now most
 true it is, so I trust the experience of each and all of us
 can testify, that never does the human breast derive
 pure delight, than when man has been instrumental to
 the happiness of his fellow man. The pleasure derived
 from any selfish enjoyment does with the immediate sen-
 sation; but that shared with others, or that imparted to
 others, even with temporary loss or inconvenience to our-
 selves, will live in the memory to the latest period of ex-
 istence, and dwell in the bosom with a permanent glow.

Then she continues on to discuss what is essentially a feeling-based "moral sense" - very similar to Jefferson's formulation which i'll quote here from the Peter Carr letter:

:

He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a plowman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."