

Elayne Reviews Alan Reye's Editorial on Thomas Jefferson

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2020 at 8:12 AM

I think as I post this that the back and forth with Alan is still going on, but I posted this as my summary of my perspective:

My general comment on this topic: While I do not have the same personal feelings about Jefferson that Elayne has, I think she does a great job of separating Epicurean philosophy from her own personal perspective, and in that respect her essay is one of the most valuable we have had in a long time. Ironically enough, I think that in most respects Jefferson would agree with her commentary and her responses to Alan.

It is very hard to do given the modern worldviews that prevail, but if we can't see that our own personal feelings - on any topic - cannot be justified by appeals to absolute universal standards, then we don't understand much of anything about Epicurean philosophy. In my view that is the point Elayne is driving home in this commentary.

No matter how we might try to dress our personal preferences up as "virtue" and say that Epicurus endorsed virtue, we're spinning in circles if we don't see that the "virtue" that Epicurus recommended is not the virtue of Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics or the religionists. Epicurean "virtue" is in no sense universal, but rather it is a purely pragmatic weighing of alternatives toward the goal of pleasurable living for ourselves and our friends. The line as to what affects us and what doesn't is not easy for us to draw, but there's no god or realm of universals that hands that answer to us.

We can "shout" along with Diogenes of Oinoanda that "pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end..." but shouting doesn't always help.

Unfortunately, some people are just not going to let go to their attachment to universal values. This is the same issue, dressed up in another name, as all the variants of "humanism," and it is why we moderate the group closely to be sure that we who really want to pursue Epicurean philosophy to its conclusions are not drowned out and driven away by those who want to use Epicurus for their own current political positions. That does not mean that we should not have political positions, and in fact I think the opposite is true -- we *must* engage with the world if we want to live safely and happily. But if we confuse our own preferences for those which we think are ordained by gods or universal in any way, then we're only fooling ourselves.

People who don't let go of their attachment to universalism and humanism generally end up being short-time Epicureans. That's because their attachment to universalism/humanism is

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what drives them, rather than getting all the way to the bottom of Epicurus' philosophy and understanding how the physics, epistemology, and ethics all work together to form a coherent whole. This is one of the biggest challenges we all face in studying Epicurus.