

Thoughts On Alain de Botton

Post by "Cassius" of June 29, 2019 at 9:51 AM

The following comes from a recent discussion in which the work of [Alain de Botton](#). It started in the context of whether there were ever Epicurean communities in the ancient world outside the garden in Athens, but the main reason I am posting this is that I want to preserve Elayne's commentary (below, EC) with which I totally agree and think to be very important:

SG: I remember, Alain de Botton stated the same thing about Epicurean communities. He even added some of what we know as old monasteries, belonged to Epicureans before Christianity came to power and declared them as heretic and illegal cults. Well, he may not be a legit source. But do we have any?

Cassius: I don't consider Alain to be a legitimate source for this because I have never seen him (or anyone else) produce documentation / source material for these suggestions. No personal offense intended to him, but in general my observation is that Alain is a good example of someone who is basically an eclectic / humanist who has set out to adopt some, but by no means all, of Epicurus' views in support of his own political agenda.

The part of Alain's material that I have seen focuses so heavily on "anticommercialism" that I find his material to be detrimental some who might otherwise dig in and pursue he deeper points Epicurus was making. My experience is that Alain is one of many who immediately jump to "pleasure is the absence of pain" so they can write normal feelings of pleasure out of the playbook and then forget about it as they pursue a minimalist / ascetic lifestyle. That minimalist lifestyle, which he has selected for reasons of his own, appears to me to be the true goal of his work.

SG: Cassius, I agree with your criticism. I also think his project, if developed, can lead to a secular community which has a lifestyle of his own, as he briefly refers to, in his Atheism V. 2.0 lecture.

EC: SG, I liked Alain's book on "Religion for Atheists", which was focused not on a communal living arrangement but on groups which would meet regularly, as churches do, to develop and reinforce their understanding of what is important to them in life... and to enjoy the non religious benefits church members enjoy, such as singing together, friendship, etc.

Really, this is what a modern Epicurean Garden would do, in my opinion. Follow Epicurus' advice about studying nature together, with friends!

I was actually a member for a couple of years of a small secular group based on that atheism book. We met every Sunday night and took turns presenting a topic, then ate dinner together.

I did not know about Epicurean Philosophy at the time, but the one I was working out for myself was almost exactly the same, just not fully elaborated.

So I would talk about, for instance, the fact that our desires CAN be satisfied-- that we reach a point where we are happy with the amount of food or sleep we have had-- so desire is not insatiable. Or that just because a pleasure is transitory does not make it invalid. Or that one can directly seek happiness, pleasure, successfully-- that failures are not due to impossibility of seeking happiness but of ineffective methods. Or that there is no such thing as universal consciousness. Or that there is nothing wrong with having an ego, a self-- that part of our brain is what allows us to make decisions for our happiness! To get rid of it is an error, and it is biological, not an illusion.

And nobody in that group ever understood those ideas. ? I had no clue why I was always out of sync with them, on almost every point, until I learned about Epicurus.

That is when I realized how far off modern secular groups were from my philosophy and how much they had been affected by Stoics and Buddhists.

So anyway, I think that idea of the groups can work, but not unless it is explicitly Epicurean and the members are solidly supporting EP -- otherwise the current type of atheists will drag it in a direction we wouldn't want to go.

Post by “Joshua” of June 29, 2019 at 1:17 PM

Quote

It started in the context of whether there were ever Epicurean communities in the ancient world outside the garden in Athens,

And what was the conclusion of that line of questioning? I had thought the evidence was quite convincing in the affirmative--namely;

1. Far-flung sources. The wall at Oenoanda in the Near East, the Villa of the Papyri in the Bay of Naples, the story of Alexander burning his scrolls in Abonuteichus.
2. The writing of letters. DeWitt cites this as a precursor to the Epistles of Saint Paul; letters sent to groups of the 'faithful' in various localities.
3. The grave markers in Latin all over the Mediterranean. Non Fui, Fui, Non Sum, Non Curo.
4. The discovery of signet rings, marble busts, etc.

5. The favor displayed to Epicureans by the Empress Plotina.

6. The curse hurled by Cicero to Calpurnius Piso; "Send [Caesar] a pamphlet!" The Epicureans often couldn't teach publicly. They were notorious pamphleteers.

This all suggests rather strongly a grass-roots movement spread over three continents, nay? How else but by community? From a sidewalk in modern Turkey to the Senate-house itself in Rome, and as far again to the west.

Post by "Cassius" of June 29, 2019 at 6:03 PM

A grass root movement of individuals yes, but as far as I have seen no evidence of organized communities. The Villa in Herculaneum *might* possibly qualify but even that may be a stretch. I think the issue is whether there were *organized* communities outside in the garden in Athens, and I have never seen any reliable evidence of any at all.

Had there been organization it might have been possible for Epicurean philosophy to survive longer than it did.

Post by "Joshua" of June 29, 2019 at 7:46 PM

The third Oration of Himerius against Epicurus, delivered during the reign of Julian the Apostate in the 4th century, gives us a late period during which it was still "current" to argue the case. Six hundred years isn't a bad run for a materialist school!

One of the ways that archaeology finds Jewish settlements in the ancient world is to rule out the presence of pig-bones in midden heaps. Probably a similarly obscure data point is what we're missing with regard to ancient Epicureans. Except that biblical archaeology has been well funded for centuries, and so they find more sites of interest.

The subject interests me..I'll report back if I turn up anything curious!

Post by "Cassius" of June 30, 2019 at 11:47 AM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

The third Oration of Himerius against Epicurus

I will google but do you have a good link for that? Thanks!

Post by “Joshua” of June 30, 2019 at 7:36 PM

Quote

I will google but do you have a good link for that? Thanks!

I can't find any full text in English in an html website format. His orations weren't even translated into English until 2007 by Robert Penella under the title of *Man and the Word--* Himerius is a minor figure, and Julian's pagan renaissance was stillborn. If I ever settle down and buy a house, I mean to assemble a proper library and archive!

Post by “Hiram” of July 1, 2019 at 11:25 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

My experience is that Alain is one of many who immediately jump to "pleasure is the absence of pain" so they can write normal feelings of pleasure out of the playbook and then forget about it as they pursue a minimalist / ascetic lifestyle. That minimalist lifestyle, which he has selected for reasons of his own, appears to me to be the true goal of his work.

I do think EP calls for a curriculum of control of desires and that consumerism is a very important target that is problematized by Epicurean ethical doctrine. More specifically the "runaway desires" that are encouraged by instant gratification and consumerism, which breed a constant anxiety and insatiable sense of wanting more. A solution to this need not lead to asceticism or minimalism as lifestyles, but to a sense of satiated gratitude and pleasure.

Uruguayan ex-president José Mujica also cites this as one of the important aspects of the Epicurean Gospel that is important to elevate now that Christianity has failed the West.

Do you remember this from Diogenes' Wall?

Quote

Well, what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears —of the gods, of death, and of [pains]— and, besides [these], desires that [outrun] the limits fixed by nature. These are the roots of all evils, and, [unless] we cut them off, [a multitude] of evils will grow [upon] us.

It was clear to Diogenes that "desires that outrun the limits fixed by nature" was one of the major roots of all evil that needed to be cut off at its root.

Post by “Hiram” of July 1, 2019 at 11:30 AM

As for monasteries having originally been Gardens, this is not as far fetched. The Church was thirsty for power and to own property and estate from early on, and the Caesars had proven to be very generous for many decades when, in the sixth century, Justinian closed all the philosophy schools that competed with Christianity. So while the source remains unclear and I'd be curious to find a specific source, it's not difficult to imagine that the Gardens that were closed were handed over to the Church as political favors, as it was the main institution that was consolidating power and wealth at the time. This would fit the political reality of what was happening in the Roman Empire then.

Post by “Cassius” of July 1, 2019 at 12:22 PM

Yes I completely agree that what is currently labeled today as "consumerism" fits under the category of unnatural desires that can't be satisfied. My main issue is not that this is invalid, but that it's pretty far removed from the heart of Epicurean philosophy and shouldn't be focused on as the exclusive target. Other issues such as the nature of the universe, the nature of true divinity, pleasure as the goal, the nothingness of death, etc are all much more significant, and I rarely if ever see those issues discussed by de Botton.

As to monasteries originally being gardens I agree that is not nearly as far fetched. If we were looking for possible Epicurean communities that would be a place to consider. On the other hand there is direct teaching about Epicurus not advising "communism" to his students, so

aside from setting up "schools" (which certainly don't have to be based on common property) I'm just not aware of any evidence that would point to communal living. In fact of course the Garden itself was not common property at the time (Epicurus disposed of it in his will). As to teaching as a profession I think there are passages which you quote (Hiram) about accepting money for teaching, so again it seems to me that doesn't really point to "communal living" as much as it points to what we would see as a private school or college.