

Did Epicurus Create a Finished Product?

Post by "Joshua" of August 4, 2019 at 1:31 PM

I've been listening to Isaac Asimov's *Second Foundation*, and am nearly at the end of the trilogy. I came across an interesting idea;

Quote

So he created his Foundations according to the laws of psychohistory, but who knew better than he that even those laws were relative? **He** never created a finished product. Finished products are for decadent minds. His was an evolving mechanism, and the Second Foundation was the instrument of that evolution.

This got me thinking about something that has bothered me since high school; if ideology is nearly always a problem in societies (and the ideology could be nearly anything; religion, nationalism, fascism, communism, scientism, etc.), then is it any good to select ideology as the antidote?

I suspect that it was this paradox that drove me initially to Thoreau (who positively delights in paradox), and through him to the East, where men like Lao Tzu have been speaking in ironic contradictions for millennia. Christopher Hitchens encountered the same problem; he was a Trotskyist agitator at Oxford, and much later an ally of the Bush Administration. He eventually concluded that

Quote

The synthesis for which one aimed was the Orwellian one of evolving a consistent and integral anti-totalitarianism.

Did Epicurus create a "finished product," and we are merely "decadent minds" rifling the dry scrolls of the past? Did he create an "evolving mechanism," and we are the means of its modern evolution?

NB; both Asimov and Hitchens were anti-religious; thought well of pleasure; and wrote reverently of Lucretius. It's an intriguing cluster of men and ideas.

Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2019 at 5:13 PM

That's a good question but my answer to that would be along the lines that whether you consider it finished or evolving, the key ethical insight of Epicurus was that the faculty of feeling - pleasure and pain - is the end point of the analysis (or the starting point). Epicurus doesn't give a set of rules to follow and he would be the first to say that one size doesn't fit all, and that circumstances change. But I think he would also say that the ultimate guide remains the faculty of feeling, so that's what we look to, even while acknowledging that it isn't a rule that is set in stone and unchanging.

I see this as closely related to skepticism and the limits of skepticism. Epicurus was looking for (and I think found) the proper perspective on the issue of certainty vs skepticism. We aren't ever going to find absolute truth, but we have good reason to be content with the "truth" that is available to us, and we don't have to / shouldn't agonize ourselves over standards of certainty that are unattainable.

Post by “Joshua” of August 4, 2019 at 6:05 PM

I think you're on the right track there, Cassius. It speaks well of the Epicurean tradition that it produced a biting satirist like Lucian, and attracted a self-styled pamphleteer like Hitchens and a revolutionary like Jefferson. Hitchens identified *irony* as the redeeming quality of literature as opposed to scripture ("the gin in the campari," he called it, "and the cream in the coffee"), and *irony* was with Epicureanism from the beginning, as in Vatican Maxim #40.

Quote

He who asserts that everything happens by necessity can hardly find fault with one who denies that everything happens by necessity; by his own theory this very argument is voiced by necessity.

Hard to read that without imagining the wry, sardonic smile that must have accompanied its writing.

Post by “Hiram” of August 4, 2019 at 7:39 PM

this reminds me of On Moral Development, where Epicurus refers to the fully mature character as "finished product", and a character in the process of moral development as a "developing

product"

<http://societyofepicurus.com/synopsis-of-ep...al-development/>

Also Epicurus did give instructions on innovation so presumably the founders considered EP as an evolving phenomenon, inevitably (and the assignation of authority to the CANON also seems to indicate this: the five senses, pleasure-pain faculty and anticipations are the ultimate arbiters of reality and of values, not Epicurus).

<http://societyofepicurus.com/epicurus-instr...-on-innovation/>

Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2019 at 7:54 PM

I would think certainly in the realm of scientific observation he would have understood that better data would mean choosing from options that at that time seemed possible. So no doubt he would have expected the scientific understanding to advance.

In ethics he really did not derive final "rules" anyway - that would have violated the underlying premise that there aren't any absolute rules.

In epistemology also he described how to use faculties without reaching conclusions on what the faculties would reveal, since circumstances change. This area seems to be the one where according to DL and maybe Cicero the later Epicureans did improvise, but I think as best I can tell the improvisations were harmful and maybe disastrous.

The two areas of divergence I remember as best documented are where Cicero says some Epicureans tried to defend pleasure be "abstruse reasoning" or some such, plus in DL where he says that the "Epicureans generally" accepted a fourth leg of the canon. Both of those seem to me to be attempts to compromise with dialectical logic, which is a road to ruin because you give up the original high ground that logic is dependant on the senses.