

# A New Angle of Attack? Thomas Jefferson Hogg

Post by “Joshua” of November 28, 2019 at 3:28 PM

Quote

The world is deeply indebted also to epicureans and materialists; it is a great benefit to mankind, that in every generation a small body of innocent, estimable, and apathetical men should be found ready to demonstrate practically, that their narrow sect cannot possibly flourish; that we cannot live upon this world alone.

Plato and Aristotle have fed thousands, but to whom did Epicurus ever give a morsel of bread?

I wasn't sure where to put this one, but I found it interesting. This is Thomas Jefferson Hogg, an English barrister, writing in his biography of lifelong friend Percy Bysshe Shelley. He had mentioned Shelley's reading of materialist authors, and then tossed out this gem.

The really interesting thing is that Shelley and Hogg were both expelled from Oxford for their joint authorship of a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*, a text that argued against special creation while at the same time allowing Spinozoan Pantheism.

There's a book out by Michael Vicario on *Shelley's Intellectual System and its Epicurean Background*. I don't have it, but I think I'll try to get a copy.

[I should just note that Shelley's family were outraged by Hogg's biography, so we should keep that in mind. The above quote appears to be all Hogg.]

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Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2019 at 5:43 PM

How do you interpret that Joshua? I am not sure I understand the meaning.

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Post by “Joshua” of November 28, 2019 at 9:52 PM

Mr. Hogg was lifelong friends with one of the pre-eminent English poets of the Romantic Period, and must have moved in circles that included Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) and Lord Byron. We know for certain that Percy Shelley read Lucretius, and that may be the materialist author Hogg is referring to.

I think it's clear from the broader context of the passage that he regards materialists, atheists, and Epicureans as ultimately benign, but also selfish, insensible, and out of touch. The last sentence is meant to be read as a summation of legacy; Plato and Aristotle didn't literally feed thousands, but their intellectual legacy was taken up by Christians, Deists, Spinozoans, etc. And the idea is that while adherents of these sects held charity to be a virtue and a duty, the heirs of Epicurus cared only for themselves.

#### Quote

Their narrow sect cannot possibly flourish; we cannot live upon this world alone.

But this is the stand-out sentiment for me. What does the second "cannot" mean? Does it mean that it cannot be possible that we live alone? Or that we cannot possibly tolerate the truth of living alone, and that's why we need comforting lies about Providence or Godhead? Hard to say.

Later in the book he has this (and much else) to say about medical doctors of his time;

#### Quote

[They are] too frequently epicureans, obtruding and thrusting in men's faces a low, offensive, and shallow materialism.

These excursions are amazingly common in the text. It's as if he wrote a biography about his more-famous friend just so that he could fill up the pages by getting his own ideas into circulation under the name.

I've had rather enough of Mr. T. J. Hogg, and will be happy to leave this selection here and never revisit his book! What Epicurus taught was never shallow; but it was clear, so that you could see right down to the bottom. Plato by contrast is so muddled and murky you can't see an inch into him. They see this obscurantism, and foolishly call it depth.

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**Post by “Cassius” of November 29, 2019 at 12:04 PM**

Thanks again Joshua. I set up a new subforum "Notable Opponents of Epicurean Philosophy" and moved this thread there.

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**Post by "Sid" of October 10, 2022 at 5:27 AM**

[Joshua](#) my reading of this is that Jefferson was being sarcastic, essentially claiming the only benefit of Epicureanism and other materialist philosophies is that it shows they cannot possibly succeed. It's curious though that he should characterise Epicureanism as a narrow sect in which people lived alone?! Wasn't it actually the opposite? Plato and Aristotle may have fed thousands figuratively, but only Epicurus actually broke bread with his fellow men in friendship. It really greatly saddens me to see such purposeful misrepresentation of Epicurus and his message throughout history.

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**Post by "Joshua" of October 10, 2022 at 9:05 AM**

A very good point. Cicero's complaint about the Epicureans was that there were too many of them in his day! And it was noted elsewhere that many were seen defecting to Epicurus' camp, but few from it.