

Some notes on Plato's Republic (actually on the Cliffs Notes thereof)

Post by "Godfrey" of April 23, 2020 at 8:34 PM

https://www.academia.edu/28366049/Epicu...e_Enlightenment

The author of the article linked above is of the "absence of pain" persuasion, but otherwise I found the article of interest as a general overview of the titular subject. The only reason I'm posting it here, however, is because it aroused my curiosity regarding Plato's Republic, which has sat on my shelf unread for decades. We've discussed Plato's thoughts on pleasure as described in [Philebus](#) here on the forum, but this article pointed out other topics of divergence between Epicurus and Plato, particularly these two:

1) *"The purpose of the 37 volumes of his (Epicurus's) On Nature is to free us from the fear of death and therefore from the control of priests and from the internal fears of the religion that Plato and his followers had in mind."*

2) From the footnotes, regarding Plato's use of the noble lie: *"For a short and explicit statement of the 'noble lie', see Polybius: 'But the quality in which the Roman commonwealth is most distinctly superior is in my opinion the nature of their religious convictions. I believe that it is the very thing which among other peoples is an object of reproach, I mean superstition, which maintains the cohesion of the Roman State. These matters are clothed in such pomp and introduced to such an extent into their public and private life that nothing could exceed it, a fact which will surprise many. My own opinion at least is that they have adopted this course for the sake of the common people. It is a course which perhaps would not have been necessary had it been possible to form a state composed of wise men, but as every multitude is fickle, full of lawless desires, unreasoned passion, and violent anger, the multitude must be held in by invisible terrors and suchlike pageantry. For this reason I think, not that the ancients acted rashly and at haphazard in introducing among the people notions concerning the gods and beliefs in the terrors of hell, but that the moderns are most rash and foolish in banishing such beliefs.'"*

Could it be that Epicurus accepted the religious festivals in this civic sense? For those who hadn't the sense to accept his philosophy and to thereby act civilly, let there be myths? Just a thought.

What follows are just some notes on the Cliffs Notes of the Republic (which has also sat on my shelf for decades, unread; I chose to read it rather than subject myself to several hundred pages of dialectic). In the following, the text in italics is paraphrasing and/or quoting from the

Cliffs Notes (1963 edition). In general, I think the contrast with the thinking of Epicurus is pretty obvious and doesn't need comment from me other than to say that my representation of Plato's thought is grossly oversimplified. Also, I haven't addressed the big topic of the actual state that Plato is proposing. In defense of his proposal (which to me is repugnant), I assume that he's thinking of a city-state of 30,000 people or so. However the nature of his state certainly gave Epicurus much fuel for his contemplation of justice as an antidote to Plato's idea.

The gods:

In educating the future leaders, they must have proper ideas of the gods. The gods can't possibly do wrong if they are really gods, plus that would be a bad example. (Book II)

One noble lie, fear of death:

Future leaders must not be afraid of death in any way, for they must grow up to be brave enough to die for their country. Therefore they mustn't be told any frightening stories of the afterlife and the underworld. (Book II)

Another noble lie, the afterlife:

The chief rewards of living a just and good life come after death. To prove that the soul survives the body: each thing has its own particular evil, which is the only thing that can destroy it. The evil of the soul has previously been proven to be injustice. But injustice does not destroy the soul in the way that sickness destroys the body, so the soul cannot be destroyed by anything and must be immortal. (Book X) This is why I don't read dialectic.

The greatest rewards will come after the death of the body as the afterlife is described in the Myth of Er. Er is a brave soldier who died in battle, travels through the various realms of the afterlife, and returns to life to tell of what he has seen. This ranges from eternity in hell to rebirth in the form of one's choosing.

Another noble lie, the Myth of the Metals:

Justice is the most important virtue as it lies at the root of all other virtues. What makes a society just is that each citizen performs only the one role in life to which he is best suited. A state, as a person, is like a structure with particular parts. If the parts don't function well, the whole structure breaks down. (Book IV) This is the theory, not the lie.

Similar to a state, the mind of a person is made up of parts. The three parts of the mind are 1) reason, 2) emotion, 3) desire. These correspond to the three classes of the state: reason to rulers, emotions to auxiliaries, and desire to craftsmen. In a "well-ordered soul" the three parts must all perform their proper function, under the leadership of reason. (Book IV) More theory. I'm curious if the Canon of Epicurus is a direct response to this as well as to the theory of forms....

And now, the lie: *The three classes of society must not meddle in each other's business. To prevent this they should be taught to believe in a "grand and noble lie," the Myth of the Metals, in which all citizens are created by the gods and some citizens have gold in their veins, some silver, some bronze and some iron.* (Book III) These metals correspond to their place in society.

The Theory of Forms:

A Form, or quality, is something that is common to a number of different things. It does not just exist in the things which share the quality, but has an eternal and independent existence of its own. The everyday things that we perceive are merely "images;" to get to the truth we must look beyond the "images" to the things that they represent. One who is able to do that is a true philosopher. (Book V)

There are four types of "objects": 1) Goodness, which is a Form, 2) the other Forms, 3) ordinary things, 4) shadows and images. The first two of these are objects of knowledge, the second two are objects of belief. This is then developed in the "Allegory of the Cave." (Book VI) So reality is belief, and belief is reality....

To be a philosopher one must grasp the nature of Reality. To do this one must understand the Forms, and to do this one must learn the science of arguing logically: dialectic. (Book VII) Could this partly explain the academic bias against EP?

Pleasure:

There are three types of pleasure: 1) the pleasures of knowledge, the pleasures of success, 3) the pleasures of gain and satisfaction. Only the pleasures of the just man, the pleasures of knowledge, are real pleasures: all other pleasures are somehow unreal or "illusory." Some pleasures are not really and truly pleasant; they only seem to be by contrast with pain or uneasiness. For instance, if you are very hungry, then eating a piece of stale bread will seem to be a pleasure." (Book IX) This is part of a section describing the neutral state between pleasure and pain; it is specifically stated that the absence of pain is not pleasure and the absence of pleasure is not pain.

Most bodily pleasures are not truly pleasant, but the pleasures of knowledge are true pleasures. And the objects of knowledge are "real," the objects of desire are just "images." (Book IX)

Miscellany:

The science of astronomy did not exist in the time of Plato. For the purposes of astronomy Plato didn't consider it necessary to observe the stars very carefully: he considered calculation more important than observation. (Book VII)

When distilled, it's hard to believe this philosophy survived at all, let alone became dominant. It must come down to the power structure and the noble lie.

Post by “Charles” of April 23, 2020 at 8:55 PM

I don't deny Plato his reputation or influence, but I do despise him. My friends who like philosophy often call me out for "calling out Plato", but when I start quoting sentences from The Republic that are seemingly nonsensical but not cherry picked, they fall silent.

Post by “Cassius” of April 23, 2020 at 9:08 PM

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814: [Full version at founders.archives.gov](https://founders.archives.gov)

.... I am just returned from one of my long absences, having been at my other home for five weeks past. Having more leisure there than here for reading, I amused myself with reading seriously Plato's *Republic*. I am wrong, however, in calling it amusement, for it was the heaviest task-work I ever went through. I had occasionally before taken up some of his other works, but scarcely ever had patience to go through a whole dialogue. While wading through the whimsies, the puerilities, and unintelligible jargon of this work, I laid it down often to ask myself how it could have been, that the world should have so long consented to give reputation to such nonsense as this? How the *soi-disant* Christian world, indeed, should have done it, is a piece of historical curiosity. But how could the Roman good sense do it? And particularly, how could Cicero bestow such eulogies on Plato! Although Cicero did not wield the dense logic of Demosthenes, yet he was able, learned, laborious, practised in the business of the world, and honest. He could not be the dupe of mere style, of which he was himself the first master in the world. With the moderns, I think, it is rather a matter of fashion and authority. Education is chiefly in the hands of persons who, from their profession, have an interest in the reputation and the dreams of Plato. They give the tone while at school, and few in their after years have occasion to revise their college opinions. But fashion and authority apart, and bringing Plato to the test of reason, take from him his sophisms, futilities and incomprehensibilities, and what remains? In truth, he is one of the race of genuine sophists, who has escaped the oblivion of his brethren, first, by the elegance of his diction, but chiefly, by the adoption and incorporation of his whimsies into the body of artificial Christianity. His foggy mind is forever presenting the semblances of objects which, half seen through a mist, can be defined neither in form nor dimensions. Yet this, which should have consigned him to early oblivion, really procured him immortality of fame and reverence.

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ levelled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticism of Plato, materials with which they might

build up an artificial system, which might, from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power and pre-eminence. The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for this obvious reason, that nonsense can never be explained. Their purposes, however, are answered. Plato is canonized; and it is now deemed as impious to question his merits as those of an Apostle of Jesus. He is peculiarly appealed to as an advocate of the immortality of the soul; and yet I will venture to say, that were there no better arguments than his in proof of it, not a man in the world would believe it. It is fortunate for us, that Platonic republicanism has not obtained the same favor as Platonic Christianity; or we should now have been all living, men, women and children, pell mell together, like beasts of the field or forest. Yet "Plato is a great philosopher," said La Fontaine. But, says Fontenelle, "Do you find his ideas very clear?" "Oh no! he is of an obscurity impenetrable." "Do you not find him full of contradictions?" "Certainly," replied La Fontaine, "he is but a sophist." Yet immediately after he exclaims again, "Oh, Plato was a great philosopher." Socrates had reason, indeed, to complain of the misrepresentations of Plato; for in truth, his dialogues are libels on Socrates.

Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2020 at 9:18 PM

That's a great list of important topics Godfrey. Some of the material like the noble lie and so forth seems to be pretty well known, but I don't think Plato's analysis of pleasure is nearly enough talked about in our Epicurean circles.

As I've said before I think it's key to look back at Plato to understand what Epicurus was talking about in "absence of pain" and other passages that seem "stilted" to us.

If we don't understand that Plato had taken these specific positions about there being true and false types of pleasure, then we don't understand the emphasis that Epicurus put on ALL pleasure being desirable, because it is pleasure.

If we don't understand that Plato took the position that there is a neutral state, and the implications of that, then we don't have a clue as to why Epicurus wrote PD3 the way he did, and took the position that there IS no neutral state, and that only the two feelings (pleasure and pain) exist, and that where one is, the other is not.

You made the comment about "Absence of pain" in your original post in this thread and this is why that subject is so maddening to me. "Absence of pain" does make perfect sense as a perfectly valid phrase once you understand the framework of the analysis, but until you see that framework as a response to plato it's pretty much hopefully confusing, and leads you right into Plato's hands because you presume that it has to mean something and you "know" it can't

mean pleasure, so you end up being a Platonist by default and think it means some higher type, or different kind, of pleasure, when that is explicitly ruled out in the part of Epicurean analysis that you've never been introduced to if you've only read the letter to Menoeceus!

But CLEARLY, or at least it seems clear to me, that this kind of analysis is the way forward.

Post by “Joshua” of April 24, 2020 at 1:33 PM

The relationship of Socrates to his biographer is as striking to me as the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and his creator. Arthur Conan Doyle believed literally in fairies, seances, and the occult, but devised in fiction a character whose law was logic. He was a fantasist who wrote about cold reason in the same way that reasonable people write about fantasy.

It's a shame Socrates didn't write.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 24, 2020 at 3:02 PM

That's a great quote from Jefferson! I haven't, thankfully, read much Plato, but every time that I do I'm appalled by his sophomoric thinking. Jefferson expressed exactly what I would say if I had his skills, and it's reassuring to hear it from a respected historical figure such as him.

I, too, wonder what Socrates would have written. Holmes/Doyle is an excellent comparison. Not analogous but perhaps equally relevant is how what remains of the words of Epicurus have been muddled over time.

Thinking back on the path that led me to Epicurus.... From very early adulthood, Eastern philosophy somehow seemed more relevant than that of the West. After engaging with the East for a time I became frustrated with the obfuscation involved, some of it cultural and some of it inherent in the philosophies. This, and the timely popularity of the Stoics, led me to the Greeks and then to Epicurus. It wasn't until discovering Epicurus and his forebears and descendents that I realized the West actually did have a relevant philosophy.

Referring back to the piece I linked to at the beginning of this thread (which wasn't actually the point of the thread), it's truly amazing that so many of the ideas of Epicurus are generally accepted parts of modern culture. *Except* for his ideas relating to personal freedom and the good life. Attempting to understand the reasons for the widespread acceptance of Plato and of religion is an illuminating but exceptionally frustrating exercise to come to grips with how

humanity wasted so much potential.

Post by “Cassius” of April 24, 2020 at 3:40 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Attempting to understand the reasons for the widespread acceptance of Plato and of religion is an illuminating but exceptionally frustrating exercise to come to grips with how humanity wasted so much potential.

Seems to have frustrated Jefferson too, especially in his question as to why Cicero would have accepted it. I don't have any ultimate answers but I do think this question is near the root of everything, and the best vehicle for getting to the bottom of that root, and "rooting it out" is through Epicurus. He's our primary connection to a chain of 2000 years of fighting back against this problem.