

Michel de Montaigne on pleasure

Post by "Godfrey" of April 30, 2020 at 6:19 PM

From Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays, Book 1.20. Screech translation:

Quote

All the opinions in the world reach the same point, that pleasure is our target even though they may get there by different means; otherwise we would throw them out immediately, for who would listen to anyone whose goal was to achieve for us pain and suffering?

I assume he's referring to PD 5 here:

Quote

Even in virtue our ultimate aim - no matter what they say - is pleasure. I enjoy bashing people's ears with that word which runs so strongly counter to their minds. When pleasure is taken to mean the most profound delight and an exceeding happiness it is a better companion to virtue than anything else; and rightly so. Such pleasure is no less seriously pleasurable for being more lively, taut, robust and virile. We ought to have given virtue the more favourable, noble and natural name of pleasure not (as we have done) a name derived from vis (vigour).

This seems like a rather judgmental view of PD 8 as well as natural and necessary v vain pleasures:

Quote

There is that lower voluptuous pleasure which can only be said to have a disputed claim to the name not a privileged right to it. I find it less pure of lets and hindrances than virtue. Apart from having a savour which is fleeting, fluid and perishable, it has its vigils, fasts and travails, its blood and its sweat; it also has its own peculiar sufferings, which are sharp in so many different ways and accompanied by a satiety of such weight that it amounts to repentance.

The rest of Book 1.20 is a meditation on death. I'm restricting this post to pleasure!

Post by “Cassius” of April 30, 2020 at 8:14 PM

Those are very interesting quotes, Godfrey, thank you! He certainly is pretty far along the road of seeing pleasure very broadly, which I think is essential to interpreting Epicurus correctly. I just don't think he's on the right path however by trying to segment it into "lower" and "higher," and he ought to see that because he himself is talking about the consequences.

Post by “Charles” of April 30, 2020 at 8:37 PM

Montaigne is always one of those names that keeps popping up during the Enlightenment era, especially among the French Materialists. I've always wondered what some of his writings on pleasure and on Epicurus/Lucretius were.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 30, 2020 at 8:40 PM

I'm not sure what path he's on; every few months I read a few pages. From what I've seen he's been labeled a Skeptic, a Stoic and an Epicurean. He may have changed throughout his life. Apparently he revised his writings from time to time: the book has passages marked A, B, and C depending on when he revised them. Interesting reading, in reasonable doses.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 30, 2020 at 8:45 PM

His writing is full of quotations; I've already seen a few from Lucretius. His writing also seems to be all over the map, jumping from one topic to another in the midst of a page.

Post by “Charles” of April 30, 2020 at 9:01 PM

I knew he quoted Lucretius quite frequently, and he even owned a copy that he annotated, though more importantly I wonder how influential he was in France's Philosophical History concerning Lucretius and Epicurus. Almost all signs point to Gassendi for "reviving" Epicurean Philosophy, though I've come across figures who came shortly after Gassendi who sought to bring back atomism into its original materialist origins. (Lamy & La Mettrie for example)

I'm still convinced of the rich history of French Materialism and its result in the complete revival of Epicurean Philosophy.

Post by "Godfrey" of April 30, 2020 at 11:14 PM

Montaigne died the year Gassendi was born, did he influence him? I'm ignorant of Gassendi's sources. It does seem like a rich lineage.

Post by "Cassius" of May 1, 2020 at 5:24 AM

[Quote from Charles](#)

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Unless there are British writers we just don't seem to know about, the French experience - though far from totally faithful to Epicurus - seems much more faithful than the British.

Post by "Charles" of May 1, 2020 at 12:11 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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than the British.

The British were very keen on writing about Epicurus in the mid 17th century, though it was mostly about physics and chemistry with a focus on atoms. There was a woman who translated Lucretius into English but I think she was extremely hostile to begin with.

Post by “Don” of May 1, 2020 at 5:20 PM

I haven't read much of Montaigne but I'm intrigued by what I've read about him. I sent looking for the essay when [Godfrey](#) mentioned that the remainder of it was "a meditation on death". [Wikisource has all of his essays](#) and I went looking for [Book I.XIX. That to study philosophy is to learn to die.](#)

I found all the Lucretius references interesting and the section that begins:

Quote

Young and old die upon the same terms; no one departs out of life otherwise than if he had but just before entered into it; neither is any man so old and decrepit, who, having heard of Methuselah, does not think he has yet twenty good years to come. Fool that thou art! who has assured unto thee the term of life?

reminded me of *De Rerum Natura* III.1026-1052 that begins talking about Ancus the Good dying.

Thanks for the reminder about Montaigne. Color me intrigued.