

Elayne Reviews Alan Reye's Editorial on Thomas Jefferson

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2020 at 3:27 PM

Elayne has undertaken an Augean Stables (not sure that is the correct analogy) of reviewing Alan Reyes' article on Thomas Jefferson. I don't personally share Elayne's feelings about Jefferson, but I think her thoughtful discussion of all the issues is well worth reading and does a great job of unwinding much confusion about Epicurus' views on virtue and justice.

I presume that at some point we will get a version of it here at Epicureanfriends.com, but I also see that it is unique exchange with Alan that probably would lose a lot by not following the details of the back and forth between Elayne and Alan.

[So for now here's a link to the thread at Facebook](#) and perhaps we can exchange commentary here without getting into the immediate fray with Alan, which probably is best handled at Facebook where the full context is available.

Just as at Facebook it would be best if this did not devolve into an "I like Jefferson" vs "I dislike Jefferson" thread, because Elayne's points are much deeper than that.

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2020 at 8:12 AM

I think as I post this that the back and forth with Alan is still going on, but I posted this as my summary of my perspective:

My general comment on this topic: While I do not have the same personal feelings about Jefferson that Elayne has, I think she does a great job of separating Epicurean philosophy from her own personal perspective, and in that respect her essay is one of the most valuable we have had in a long time. Ironically enough, I think that in most respects Jefferson would agree with her commentary and her responses to Alan.

It is very hard to do given the modern worldviews that prevail, but if we can't see that our own personal feelings - on any topic - cannot be justified by appeals to absolute universal standards, then we don't understand much of anything about Epicurean philosophy. In my view that is the point Elayne is driving home in this commentary.

No matter how we might try to dress our personal preferences up as "virtue" and say that Epicurus endorsed virtue, we're spinning in circles if we don't see that the "virtue" that Epicurus recommended is not the virtue of Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics or the religionists. Epicurean "virtue" is in no sense universal, but rather it is a purely pragmatic weighing of alternatives toward the goal of pleasurable living for ourselves and our friends. The line as to what affects us and what doesn't is not easy for us to draw, but there's no god or realm of universals that hands that answer to us.

We can "shout" along with Diogenes of Oinoanda that "pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end..." but shouting doesn't always help.

Unfortunately, some people are just not going to let go to their attachment to universal values. This is the same issue, dressed up in another name, as all the variants of "humanism," and it is why we moderate the group closely to be sure that we who really want to pursue Epicurean philosophy to its conclusions are not drowned out and driven away by those who want to use Epicurus for their own current political positions. That does not mean that we should not have political positions, and in fact I think the opposite is true -- we *must* engage with the world if we want to live safely and happily. But if we confuse our own preferences for those which we think are ordained by gods or universal in any way, then we're only fooling ourselves.

People who don't let go of their attachment to universalism and humanism generally end up being short-time Epicureans. That's because their attachment to universalism/humanism is what drives them, rather than getting all the way to the bottom of Epicurus' philosophy and understanding how the physics, epistemology, and ethics all work together to form a coherent whole. This is one of the biggest challenges we all face in studying Epicurus.

Post by "Cassius" of August 7, 2021 at 4:17 PM

Here is the text of that review referenced in the first post:

Opinion Piece: Thomas Jefferson, Despicable Racist and Epicurean

An essay was submitted to us last week by a member. I am posting it here with my own commentary, which represents my personal response and not a group admin response. To best understand my post, I recommend that you read the linked article first. I am not posting the article as a stand-alone because it violates our group rules against promoting neo-Epicurean perspectives. As you read it, see if you can notice the errors on your own before you come back and read my response, which I offer to the author and to you in the spirit of friendliness, hoping

that is how you will receive it. I think a friend would not let me persist in errors likely to cause me pain without speaking up, because my pain would be painful to my friend.

Before I proceed, I want to explain the description “despicable racist” in my title. This is my title for my response here, not the title of the essay I'm responding to. This is my personal feeling about Jefferson. I dislike him intensely—I find him vile. I want my friends to know how strongly I feel. I feel strongly enough that it is even an effort to be articulate in this post. I told the author I was tempted to write “Thomas Jefferson, You F***ing Racist A**hole!”, and that’s the more accurate translation of “despicable racist” here. I have undertaken a more detailed response only because I hope that some of you may gain pleasure because of it. Maybe it will help you find ways to develop responses to the Jeffersons you meet in life today.

The first problem I notice is that the author starts from saying Epicurean Philosophy is a philosophy not only of happiness but of liberty. This is not true. The single aim of Epicurean Ethics is pleasure. Liberty is included insofar as it produces pleasure. Indeed, for every human I’ve personally met, a subjectively sufficient liberty is essential for a pleasurable life. There may be exceptions, but I proceed on the basis that whoever is front of me likely finds liberty pleasurable until the person tells me otherwise. It seems to be a strong characteristic of our species.

It is also true that EP is not only about ethics. It is fundamentally about physics, about how we know what is real and what isn’t. It is a philosophy of material reality and not idealism. In brief, we know what is real through our senses (including reading instruments which examine the material world), our prolepses (which I personally interpret as innate pattern recognitions), and our feelings of pleasure and pain. Each of these ways of knowing about reality is different, and we use all three together. It is critically important to understand that each of these is subjective. I do not mean subjective as in opinion. I mean that we perceive reality as subjects, with our own particular bodies located in particular times and places. I do not know of any absolute, objective, completely outside of everything point of view.

Using feelings to know what is real is counter to much popular ideology, but it is science-based. It is not that we use pleasure to know whether a pepper is red, anymore than we use our ears to hear the color of the pepper. Our feelings tell us what is happening in our bodies. If we eat a hot pepper, the capsaicin is in the pepper, but the pain is in our bodies, along with (at least for some of us) the pleasures of the taste and of the endorphins produced in response to the pain. Feelings are part of reality because our bodies and the processes of our bodies are real.

“Justice” is one of the Epicurean prolepses. The essay makes a serious error in understanding justice—he frames it as something that can be measured “from the outside”. Justice is not so much a concept, although we do build concepts around it, as it is an innate sense. There is research suggesting we and other species have an inborn “tit for tat” system, a neurologic pattern recognition, by which we keep track of symmetry in social interactions. I suspect this is the basis for the prolepsis “justice”—but even if you think of prolepses differently from me, a material reality-based philosophy means that justice is subjective. We are not imagining the

possibility of an absolute pattern or thing “justice” which can be objectively measured. Whether an interaction is just or not will depend on individual perception. We will have a broad similarity in our perceptions because we are in the same species, especially if we have been exposed to the same cultural rules.

Here is Principal Doctrine #36: **In its general aspect, justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country, or any other circumstances, the same thing does not turn out to be just for all.”**

The sensation of “mutual advantage” is felt by the subject. It has no universal definition—it is a sensation in the mind. The universality of justice is similar to the universality of pain and pleasure—not universal in what produces the sense of justice, pain, or pleasure, but in the type of sensation we label as justice, pain, or pleasure.

One person in a two-person interaction may passionately sense the advantage is symmetric and just, even if the other person finds it asymmetric and unjust. For each person perceiving just or unjust interactions, a just situation seems to be linked tightly to the pleasure pathways in the brain and unjust to pain pathways. I have not met a human for which this wasn’t the case and suspect it is typical enough to be treated as a species characteristic. This tight linkage of pleasure with subjective justice is actually the only reason I care about justice. The pleasure of others in feeling justly treated causes me significant empathetic pleasure. If justice were primarily painful, why would anyone seek it out? It has no inherent value apart from pleasure, nor does anything else.

The essay proceeds as if it is possible to define “natural justice” in a way which will give the same answer for every observer. This is counter to physics, counter to biology (which depends on physics), and thus counter to Epicurean Philosophy. All perceptions occurring in reality are by definition “natural”—the alternative is something unreal, something that can’t exist. Ironically, what is conceived as “natural justice” here is actually idealized justice, a concept without existence in reality.

The author calls Jefferson not Epicurean because he does not seek [idealized] justice. He also points out that slavery caused Jefferson pain yet he owned other humans anyway. What the author omits is that we have no evidence Jefferson experienced more pain than pleasure in treating other people so. In fact, Jefferson called himself an Epicurean and appeared to understand how to make life decisions in order to have more pleasure than pain. For such an important decision, whether or not to own other humans, I doubt he failed to apply this decision-making process. The same is true of his household economic decisions. The author assumes this was not Epicurean because going into debt can cause more pain than pleasure. But was that Jefferson’s assessment of his particular decisions? Only Jefferson would be able to tell us.

The author says that Jefferson ignoring sense evidence about Black people is non-Epicurean. I put it to you that all of us cherry pick what we are going to pay attention to and what we will exclude from our thoughts—I don't know of a human who doesn't do that, and it is usually not done in a conscious way. This isn't non-Epicurean, or if it is, there have never been Epicureans. A non-Epicurean would assert that we can't use our senses to know what is real, and I don't know of Jefferson ever doing that.

However, I am not convinced that Jefferson was actually ignoring sense data. I suspect he was writing this way as a persuasive tactic, to get himself off the hook interpersonally and possibly intrapersonally. I can't prove that, but it seems likely considering that he was strategic in other ways about expressing his opinions to different groups of people. He deliberately did not express his lack of a belief in supernatural gods to the general public, for instance.

Thinking that Jefferson understood and practiced Epicurean Philosophy is part of what leads me to call him despicable—because I believe that he knew exactly what he was doing to other humans and found his decision to be more pleasurable than painful! This causes me pain.

I use the term despicable in the only way it can be used—as an expression of my own strong feeling. There is no universal standard of despicable. Jefferson and the humans he enslaved certainly had their own prolepses and feelings about justice. And I, along with other readers of today, will naturally experience feelings about justice from learning about what he did. Although I have said justice is subjective, I am also a subject, and my prolepsis of justice is valid even if it is different from yours. It tells me about the reality of my brain's pattern recognitions. My sense knowledge tells me that humans generally dislike being coerced; I also have read what enslaved humans have said about slavery. It's not surprising to me that when I read Jefferson's words, I am angry at him and find him despicable—not a person I would want as a friend but someone I would be pleased to oppose.

This brings me to one of the most important points I want you to understand. Whether someone is an Epicurean or not has nothing to do with whether you or I will find them admirable. Jefferson may have used our philosophy very skillfully to obtain pleasure for himself. That does not mean any of us have to like him. There is not a single absolute standard we can point to that will tell us who is likable and who is not, because liking someone is a feeling of pleasure produced by the character and actions of another person.

You, reading this, may have entirely different feelings about Thomas Jefferson. Your politics could completely be opposed to mine. I could feel a strong desire to persuade you to change your mind about your positions. Yet if you understand that reality is material, that we know what is real by our senses, prolepses, and feelings, and if you have chosen to use pleasure as your guide and goal, then we are both Epicureans. Within that same philosophy, we may find each other to be beloved friends or despised enemies.

When you understand this point, it will help you choose your friends and understand your own political positions and feelings. It will help you recognize when you are being misled into using idealistic philosophies and keep you on the path of pleasure.