

Pagagiotopoulous - Thomas Jefferson “I too am an Epicurean”: His life and his inspiration from the Ancient Greeks

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2021 at 8:04 AM

I did not realize that Panagiotis Pagagiotopoulous, who is active with the Athenian Epicureans, had a personal interest in Thomas Jefferson's Epicurean influences, but I see he has prepared a book on the topic - in English - which I am glad to share news of to the group. The Jefferson connection was one of my own first introductions to the importance of Epicurus, and it appears from the table of contents that Pan has covered much of the important material. Jefferson's letters contain numerous references to his preference for Epicurus and his criticism of Platonism and other anti-Epicurean views, and for those (especially Americans) who have friends who they've wanted to introduce to Epicurus, this book could prove to be very useful. Once I am able to read it myself I am sure I will have more to say about it.



The purpose of this book is to highlight the enormous influence of the ancient Greek civilization and Epicurean philosophy on the great historical figure of Thomas Jefferson and, through him, on modern society as a whole. I hope you'll enjoy this journey into the thoughts and actions of Thomas Jefferson through his life and writings presented from a different aspect. Thomas Jefferson studied the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman civilization and the knowledge gained from that became the foundation for his inspiration and conduct. His excellent command of both Greek and Latin enabled him to read from the original texts; an ability that helped him discern which of the ancient writings led to the transition from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment. The most important result of his study was that, by utilizing this knowledge, he shaped himself into an enlightened person with the aim of establishing a free society that would offer everyone the possibility of personal happiness. In a letter, dated October 31, 1823, to the Greek scholar, Adamantios Korais, who was credited with

paving the way for Greek Independence, Jefferson wrote:«Nothing is more likely to forward this object than a study of the fine models of science left by their ancestors, to whom we also are all indebted for the lights which originally led ourselves out of Gothic darkness..». Jefferson delved deep into the study of antiquity by examining much of the history, poetry, architecture, and philosophy of that time. However, he clearly showed a preference for a particular philosophical school. In a letter to William Short, dated October 31, 1819, he states:“As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us”.Jefferson applied his philosophy, both on an individual and collective level, throughout his entire life. He supported the idea that the individual should enjoy a lifestyle through which his mind might be as fulfilled as his body. The pleasure of reading and contemplating upon universal truths through the study of texts was to be accompanied by necessary material goods and exercise to maintain the health of the body. These were the principles through which he aimed to lead humanity on an evolutionary course of exploration to identify the fundamental elements for the creation of a civilization that would ensure the happiness of people more than any other system of his time.To these ends, he was fortunate to be born in the New World, on a continent far away from the ideological chains that held Europe captive and prevented the application of the enlightened and progressive precepts of the time. Distance afforded him to be unaffected by the rivalries between the theocratic Middle Ages and the Renaissance which, despite the important role it played in history, did not manage to transcend its own biases. Jefferson was able to see the ancient world with a clear mind and thus managed to proceed "undefiled" and without hesitation to definitive conclusions concerning the happiness of the individual and that of society in the contemporary epoch. P.P.

<https://www.amazon.com/Thomas-Jeffers...15713935&sr=8-1>

Post by “Protonus” of March 19, 2021 at 11:11 PM

Does the book discuss Jefferson's participation/attitude toward slavery? I sometimes wonder if "cancel culture" will affect Epicurean philosophy due to its association with it.

Post by “Don” of March 19, 2021 at 11:44 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1917-pagagiotopoulous-thomas-jefferson-i-too-am-an-epicurean-his-life-and-his-inspira/>

The enslavement of other humans was widespread and accepted as "natural" in the ancient (and not so ancient world):

http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/slavery...sophers_1.shtml

At least Epicurus held out the idea that what was considered "just" in one place and era need not be considered just for all places and all time. Plus Epicurus accepted all people into the Garden when that kind of thing was unheard of: free, enslaved; men, women. That's one of the things that first attracted me to his philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of March 20, 2021 at 1:12 AM

I received my copy today and I'll let you know how "Pan" treats it. I'll hazard a guess that both Epicurus and Thomas Jefferson are remembered long after "cancel culture" leaves the scene, but that doesn't mean that it won't have a huge impact on us who are living through it!

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Just scanning, I see that there is a chapter or sub-chapter devoted to the question, and this part catches my eye "...on the controversial issue of slavery, his application of Epicurean philosophy fell somewhat short of the ideal."

That's probably a good way to put it, since he couldn't exactly write "...his application of Epicurean philosophy fell somewhat short of the example of Epicurus" ... since Epicurus held slaves too,

Slavery is an issue that will always be with us, but it's also a test of our willingness to set up our personal feelings (we abhor slavery in general and to the extent it affects us even today) against our knowledge that there are no absolute ethical values. Slavery can be (but probably is not always, depending on the details) one of the worst issues and rivals probably even genocide, but both have existed throughout human history, and indeed even today, and probably always will, in various forms, and its up to us to judge them and act on them according to our circumstances.

Post by “Cassius” of March 20, 2021 at 10:26 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1917-pagagiotopoulous-thomas-jefferson-i-too-am-an-epicurean-his-life-and-his-inspira/>

As to the issue of Epicurean philosophy and how Epicureans would/do deal with difficult ethical issues, a similar question [being discussed here](#) makes me think of [this recent post by Elli](#):



I don't know any of the details of this but [reading about it sounds pretty awful!](#) I guess that is one reason we in America don't get taught much about this today - it doesn't sound like Greece's allies in the west were much help to it.

So this is another example of something horrible people do to each other, but just like slavery, can we say that such actions are "condemned by god" or "condemned by nature" or "by nature evil" or similar formulations?

Can we say with absolute certainty that there could be no consistent Epicureans mixed in among the Turks behind the genocidal wars and population "exchange."?

Can we even say that such a thing could never find any justification under Epicurean philosophy?

If we really take to heart that there are no absolutes, then the issue of evaluating this, like every other question, comes down to the practical concerns that if the aggressor side decides to undertake this kind of project, then it better expect hard pushback from its neighbors, and it might well be in the situation referenced in the Epicurean texts about never being able to sleep well again in fear of retribution.

But if the retribution never comes? If the aggressors decide that any loss of sleep was well worth the result in clearing the countryside of hated enemies?

If we are going to be consistent (and I think Epicurus would expect us to be) we have to admit that there is no argument from "Natural sanction" or absolute virtue to sanction our condemnation of the aggressors in situations like this. And I admit also that it is frequently difficult even to determine who the "aggressors" really are!

So as I see it the practical result of thinking about issues like this is that everyone has to make up their own mind exactly how outraged by things like this that they are, because if outrages are going to be stopped, its going to be by real people taking real action (often by force) to

vindicate the point, because just talking about "gods" and "heaven" and "hell" and throwing around words like "evil" and "depraved" do nothing for the victims, and just expose those who do that as hopeless dreamers.

[Elli](#) I hope I did not take your post out of context but it seemed like a good illustration.