

A MOST ENGAGING STUDY OF A NEGLECTED THINKER

Letters on Happiness: An Epicurean Dialogue

by Peter Saint-Andre

(Monadnock Valley Press, Colorado, 2013)

This review appears on the Amazon UK website where the book is listed.

I must begin by apologising to Mr Saint-Andre for taking so long to read his book. I don't lack excuses: a stroke, recovery, writing my own stuff; but seven years is a very long time to get around to reading a book which was drawn to my attention not long after it was published.

To business: Peter Saint-Andre's *Letters on Happiness* is a most engaging study of the Ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, in the form of an exchange of twenty-four letters between two philosophically-minded friends, Paul and Schuyler. The author's commentaries on Epicurus are well-written and non-intrusive. He is in effect thinking out loud in order to clarify what are often, as he says, somewhat 'hazy', aphoristic sayings. The book is thus an invaluable 'go-to-first' source for anybody interested in finding out about this neglected thinker. Plato and Aristotle have dominated Western thought in a sort of see-saw, with stagnation when the former was in the ascendant, dramatic progress in all areas of life when Aristotle came to the fore. It is regrettable that Epicurus has never been given the same attention. Although greatly admired by many during the 'Age of Reason', Thomas Jefferson is one Mr Saint-Andre mentions, Epicurus deserves a much more thorough examination than he is usually given. Saint-Andre has done that for us.

The neglect was largely due to the Catholic Church. After becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church gradually achieved total dominance of European thought and culture – a situation which lasted for over a thousand years – and, like all officialdoms throughout history, suppressed or destroyed any and all ideas it disliked or disagreed with. However, ironically, a substantial amount of what remains of Epicurus's thought is preserved in the Vatican library! 'Know thine enemies' evidently.

And the Church had good reason for seeking to eradicate Epicurus's ideas. The Greek advocated a life of reason devoted to the study of nature and this world; to self-improvement, self-confidence and generosity; set a very high value on friendship, and thought personal happiness was the true goal of human life. Above all, to that end, he urged us to turn away completely from politics and public affairs, to eschew fame or public acclaim, and to live a quiet life out of the public eye, devoting oneself to one's friends and to achieving serenity in one's own life.

In particular, Epicurus taught that 'gods', being perfect, would have no troubles of their own and hence would have no interest in the troubles of anybody else – if gods existed of course, which on his thinking, quite plainly, they did not. He called them 'myths'. Epicurus also taught, in direct opposition to Christianity, that when we die our thoughts, emotions, and all our aches and pains die with us, there being no body to sustain them. Hence, death is nothing to us and should not be worried about in advance. Rather, we should focus on enjoying our lives to the maximum and, in achieving that goal, we will find that we lose any concerns over death.

Epicurus was often held up as advocating a life of pleasure-seeking and debauchery. That was malign misrepresentation by his enemies, the Church amongst them. When Epicurus espoused pleasure (Greek *hedone* hence 'hedonism') as the standard we should aim for, he meant *happiness*, not self-indulgence. In fact, he attacked debauchery as self-defeating and advised the very opposite course. His ideal was the classic, Ancient Greek virtue of *sophrosyne*, moderation in all things, making do with just enough, never indulging in excess of anything, but seeking a pain-free existence of serene philosophical thought and physical well-being. 'Mens sana in corpore sano', a

healthy mind in a healthy body – a Latin motto adopted by many British educators – might well have been derived from Epicurus.

The main problem with getting to grips with Epicurus's thought is that Church suppression was very effective and all that remains of his extensive writings are snippets gleaned from other ancient writers who quoted him. I have gone through these more than once but, because of their fragmentary nature, never really thought I had mastered what Epicurus propounded.

Which brings us back to the great service Peter Saint-Andre has performed for us. By choosing a series of identifying topics, then selecting the most relevant of existing Epicurean quotations to illustrate them, he has given us the essence of Epicurus's thought in a handy compendium. And the signal advantage of his approach is that he has quoted the fragments in the form in which they are preserved – and given us the source of each one – so that anybody who disagrees with Mr Saint-Andre's interpretation is free to go straight to the originals, all of which are readily available online. Mr Saint-Andre is also a scholar of Ancient Greek so we can safely assume that the translations which most English-speaking readers have to make do with are accurate. I'm sure he would have told us if they were not.

There is one quotation which struck me with especial force: "Speaking freely in my study of what is natural, [wrote Epicurus] I prefer to prophesize about what is good for all people, even if no one will understand me, rather than to accept common opinions and thereby reap the showers of praise that fall so freely from the great mass of men." (Letter Seventeen: The Elegance of Simplicity).

Today, when we are embroiled in a battle between those of us who wish to express ourselves freely, as is our natural right, and the swarms of 'politically correct' censors in government, long established publishing and broadcasting companies, and in modern 'social media' – who seek to eliminate any idea that does not fit into fashionable notions, no matter how ludicrous some of these might be – it is refreshing to be reminded across millennia that it is ten thousand times better to speak one's mind than to be welcomed by a gang of bullies who demand nothing but total conformity.

Any quibbles? Not really. I would have preferred the characters of Paul and Schuyler to be more developed, say by having a bit of a spat now and then, but since the focus is on Epicurus, not on the letter writers, that is perhaps asking too much.

Lastly, all of us must thank Peter Saint-Andre for his generosity in making *Letters on Happiness* available free on his website. However, since it is a book that can be dipped into, re-read, or used as bedside reading – perhaps to inspire some late-night reflection on what really matters in life – I would warmly recommend purchase of the paperback version.

September 2020