



Epicurus, Ecclesiastes and Me

Stefan M. Jonasson

Unitarian Church of Underwood

Sunday, January 26, 1997

The Duchess of York may seem to some an unlikely source of spiritual insight, but in a broadcast interview during her recent book tour, I was somewhat surprised and certainly pleased to hear her speak of spiritual matters in the down-to-earth manner for which she has become known when speaking about other subjects. Offering a frank response to a question about her spiritual life, Sarah Ferguson observed that what we commonly call the spirit, in reference to human beings, is nothing more and nothing less than the essence of who we are. The spirit, she observed, is an essence akin to petroleum. It is what “we run on” — the energy, the values, the relationships, the commitments that make us truly human. Not one word did she utter about traditional theology or doctrine, on the one hand, or crystals and auras, on the other. The Duchess left me with the impression that she understood spirituality in earthly, even earthy terms, and that what we call spirit is simply the essence of each one of us, not a separate being that inhabits a body for a time before moving on to some alternative accommodation.

In his last book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, which is something of a personal testament, the late Carl Sagan invoked the words “spirit” and “spirituality” when writing of his sense of curiosity and wonder. He wrote:

“Spirit” comes from the Latin word “to breathe.” What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word “spiritual” that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. On occasion, I will feel free to use the word. Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. ... The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.¹

Carl Sagan was obviously a man in love with the cosmos, which he brought to life in his world-renowned public television series and book. He obviously had a deep sense of awe and wonder, a spirituality of a distinctly scientific variety. Yet Carl Sagan is not one we would normally associate with spirituality and religion, although I have looked

to his books as a source of spiritual inspiration since I first read *The Dragons of Eden* in high school!

What I most appreciate about the idea of spirit advanced by both Carl Sagan and the Duchess of York is that it spurns the tendency to separate the spiritual from the material, the intangible from the tangible. Since I am not given to belief in disembodied spirits, I am not inclined to embrace a disembodied spirituality, either.

This brings me to the materialist philosophers and what might be called, for lack of a more poetic term, “materialistic spirituality.” Like humanism, materialism is one of those words which has seemingly evolved, in our society, from a description to an accusation. Like humanism, materialism is often supposed to be incompatible with spirituality. This is a mistaken notion, borne of an age which has confused materialism with consumerism and hedonism. There is no necessary connection.

In fact, the so-called materialistic philosophers—from Epicurus to Ecclesiastes, on down to the Unitarian theologian Joseph Priestley and the astronomer Carl Sagan—have shunned such cheap and fleeting pleasures while arguing for a material understanding of reality. In short, they have argued that matter matters—that all things, including what we describe as spiritual—are rooted in, or emanate from, the physical nature of the universe. Theirs is not a disembodied spirituality but a distinctly bodily one. At its heart, this view postulates an organic understanding of the universe—including matters of the spirit.

In an 1876 sermon, “Interests: Material and Spiritual,” the New York Unitarian minister Octavius Brooks Frothingham, having quoted Emerson’s advice to “hitch your wagon to a star,” went on to say, “He could have added hitch your star to a wagon and make material things spiritual by pursuing humanity in this life rather than hope for spiritual life later.”² Thomas Jefferson had expressed a similar sentiment much earlier. “I am an Epicurean,” wrote Jefferson to William Short in 1819. “I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greek and Roman leave to us.”³ I share in this tradition—of Epicurus and Ecclesiastes, of Joseph Priestley and Thomas Jefferson. It is a misunderstood philosophy, this materialistic spirituality, rooted as it is in the ancient Greek world and rediscovered in the Renaissance. Yet its values speak to us today. The humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont observed that “Epicurus remains perhaps the outstanding example of a great philosopher who has been perpetually misunderstood.”⁴

Even Frothingham, who was something of an Epicurean himself, parodied the Epicurean tendencies of his own day. He wrote:

The modern Epicurus, in his ordinary estate, is a well-bred man of the world, with some amiable common-sense, and an unsounded capacity for enjoyment. ... If an American, he is probably a New Yorker ... You can meet Epicurus, out of business

hours, on Broadway, in a print-shop or a bookstore; in the evening, in his opera box or at the club. ... To all appearance, his style of living is moderate and elegant; evidently arranged with a view to securing all the luxury that is consistent with agreeable physical sensations. ... Epicurus is seen occasionally at the church where the best soprano in town is to be heard, and the pink of the fashion is to be seen, and he is quite sure that the preacher will say nothing to create an unpleasant sensation. No one, indeed, ever suspected him of excessive piety. Some of his friends have frankly confessed that his attachment to the forms of worship perhaps exceeded his love of religion. ... He disapproves, in the abstract, of grave social wrongs, even when they do not affect himself. ... He is a kind, pleasant, patronizing, gracious gentleman, with the softest voice and blindest manner and handsomest words you ever knew, and it is a shame to call him a materialist and an atheist, a man of such affability and delicacy.⁵

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher, three centuries before Jesus, who argued first and foremost that all reality is material; that even the realm we attribute to the spirit—the substance of the soul, if you will—is material. It was a viewpoint shared in many ways by Ecclesiastes, the most widely known and popular biblical writer among Unitarian Universalists. It was Ecclesiastes who inspired Pete Seeger to compose the folk song “Turn, Turn, Turn,” reminding us all that “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” The philosophies of Epicurus and Ecclesiastes are material or organic at heart and this fact led Epicurus and those who followed to a particular view about how we ought to live and order our lives.

In recent times, it has been pretty much an accusation to call someone an Epicure or an Epicurean. I have been accused, on more than one occasion, of being an Epicurean myself. At seminary, when I would question the cherished truths or assumptions of my fellow students, the vast majority of whom were mainline or conservative Christians, oftentimes I would hear the comment, “Oh, well—Stefan is an Epicurean, after all! He wouldn’t understand these things—these matters of the spirit.” My own suspicion, of course, was that I understood them all too well. After a while, I decided to embrace the label proudly. After all, the names “Unitarian” and “Universalist” were not originally proposed by those who came to wear them; rather, they were thrown at us by our antagonists, and only became badges of honor over the course of time. At first, these treasured names, too, were accusations. So, I would be perfectly happy, when called upon to wear a nametag, to be identified as an Epicurean—although I’m quite certain I would often need to explain what it means!

This Greek influence, which sees life as essentially organic, stands apart from those philosophies which might be described as idealistic—not in the popular modern sense but in the Platonic sense, seeing everything real as somehow related to the realm of ideas or ideals. This organic sense of reality is distinct from dualism, a philosophy

which has often gripped our Western society. This organic view of reality resonates with modern Unitarian Universalists. We, too, celebrate reality and nature as somehow organic. What is real, for us, is related to our understanding and experience of the physical universe.

A material understanding of reality, as advanced by Epicurus and Ecclesiastes, has consequences for the way we live our lives. It is commonly supposed that those of us who hold to a materialistic understanding of the universe must be amoral, at best, and utterly immoral, at our worst. It is often supposed that there is nothing that moves us to do good, to seek justice in the world; that there is no larger understanding or principles which command our devotion and active respect. But this is simply not the case. In fact, its nonsense!

Epicureans have been so criticized and disdained for holding that “pleasure is the first and kindred good.” This attitude is a natural outgrowth of the belief that reality is essentially physical. Pleasure—by which Epicurus meant seeking to be free of pain in the body and trouble in the soul—is the end after which we seek in religion. Indeed, we see this approach to religion echoed, in large measure, in the self-help movement in modern American psychology. One of the things, perhaps the most important thing that we look to religious communities and religious traditions for, is some manner of spiritual pleasure. We seek after that pleasure which liberates us from the pain of the body and the trouble of the soul.

Now, it may be supposed that seeking refuge from such pain and trouble is selfish. Many religious thinkers through the ages have been quick to point to that in dismissing the Epicurean point of view. But as I reflect upon my own life, on the things that motivate me, upon my virtues and better qualities as well as upon my failings and idiosyncrasies, it seems to me that Epicurus has described well what it is that I seek—not just in religion, but in my whole life. One of the gifts bequeathed to us by the religious community and the wise teachers of both yesterday and today, in book and song throughout the generations, is that we can achieve some measure of pleasure in this life—that a pleasant life is worth striving for, and, as Ecclesiastes would point out to us, worth savoring. (Ecc. 3:9-15) After all, what is “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” but the elevation of the Epicurean philosophy in the secular realm.

If you read on in the Book of Ecclesiastes, just beyond the passage that has been “immortalized anew” by Pete Seeger, you will find that he asks the question, “What gain have the workers from their toil?” (Ecc. 3:9), responding,

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should

stand in awe before him (Ecc. 3:12-14).

This stands in sharp contrast to much of the religious teaching of the Western world which has been passed on across the generations. Ecclesiastes argued that the world—the physical universe—is here for us to enjoy ... not to exploit, or destroy, mind you, but to savor and enjoy. This notion is as ancient as the one which would encourage us to engage in denial or asceticism. It seems to me that the appreciation of pleasure which was cultivated by Epicurus and Ecclesiastes is a healthy one—a healthy and balanced response in the face of a truly awesome universe, pregnant as it is with the possibilities of pleasure.

Seeking our pleasure is not, as Epicurus pointed out, a succession of drinking and revels, not gluttony, but rather “sober reasoning” which searches out the grounds of every choice and avoidance ... and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul. This notion is not unlike the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way, which encourages human beings to seek balance or equilibrium in their lives, to enjoy the pleasures of life in moderation. We are talking of nothing less than maturity.

When we come to view our lives as the holiest of all vessels, when we seek after pleasure in a mature and responsible way, then the sense of empathy which may grow out of that may yet lead us to help in healing a broken world. You see, so much of what happens in this world, so much of the tragedy and violence which grips it, is born out of mistaken notions of the ideal; it emerges out of mistaken concepts or principles which guide peoples lives, leading them to believe that having their way, that standing for God or country or some other abstract principle is more important than simply being good neighbors and caring for one another. Most of the atrocities of human history have been committed in the name of some great principle or idea. But when we seek after that which is pleasant for ourselves, and mature in doing so, then it is a natural outgrowth for us to be concerned with others having their share of the pleasure. Hosea Ballou, the early Universalist thinker, argued that no true Christian could ever find joy in heaven knowing that his family and friends were enduring the sufferings of hell. So, too, the modern Epicurus knows that we cannot enjoy the pleasures of this life, knowing that there are others who do without, who suffer from a lack of resources, who do without food and shelter, and that there are others who suffer through troubled minds and souls. The modern Epicurus knows that in seeking pleasure for ourselves, we are ultimately called to seek pleasure for the whole world, because we “cannot live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly.”

And so, today, we can embrace this ancient philosophy, a philosophy which calls us to use our senses but, more importantly, to enjoy that which we sense; that calls upon us to live with prudence and wisdom; that charges us to seek to live pleasantly,

with honor and a sense of justice for all. These were sound principles in the time of Epicurus and Ecclesiastes and it seems to me that they remain healthy and wholesome principles for today. As Ecclesiastes admonished us, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved that you do. Life is sweet, and it is pleasant for your eyes to see the sun. Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all." Let us seek, then, to make the lives of our neighbors more pleasant and to render our own lives pleasant, celebrating the days of our years and rejoicing in them all.



Reading: From *Letter to Menoeceus* by Epicurus⁶

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which we judge every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose *every* pleasure, but at times we pass over many pleasures when difficulty is likely to ensue from them; and we think many pains better than pleasures, when a greater pleasure follows them, if we endure the pain for a time. ...

When we say that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality ... By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking and revels, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul. Now, the beginning and the greatest good of all these things is prudence. For this reason prudence is something more valuable even than philosophy, inasmuch as all the other virtues spring from it, teaching us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly; and that one cannot live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly; for the virtues are by nature bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.

References

¹Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1996), 29-30.

²O.B. Frothingham quoted in J. Wade Caruthers, 88.

³Thomas Jefferson quoted in *The Great Thoughts*, ed. George Seldes (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 131.

⁴Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, seventh edition (New York, Continuum, 1990), 40.

⁵O.B. Frothingham, "Epicurus and Epicurians," *The Christian Examiner* (July 1861), 23-25, as transcribed in J. Wade Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Gentle Radical* (The University of Alabama Press, 1977), 61-63.

⁶Composite