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Against Fatalism and False Consolations

By *Hiram Crespo*, editor.

Against Fatalism

"It is written"

"Nothing is written!"

"Truly, for some men, nothing is written, unless they write it."

- From Lawrence of Arabia

Epicurean philosophy dismisses the Goddess of Fortune as a false idol and acts as a shield against fatalistic thinking: the belief that fate, Fortuna as Epicurus would personify her, has real power over us. Many religions also teach that there is a destiny, that there are inexorable oracles and prophecies, and that we are enslaved to almighty, eternal schemes. Ruling classes have always been fond of these types of teachings: they're useful when a nation goes to war (particularly if the country being attacked is mentioned somewhere in scripture), or to demonize the other, or to keep social classes resigned to their lot. Like other philosophical materialists, Epicurus firmly held that the human agent is free and that we are empowered as the authors of our own destinies.

Organized religions often steal the power of their adherents by immersing them in fatalistic belief systems, but there are also New Age movements that propose prophetic and fatalistic views, even if they partially give a nod to the realization that we are the change we seek to see. Not all folk wisdom is bad, however. Part of the role of true philosophy is to help us discern between genuine, rational self-help and empowerment versus superstition.

Accepting the Yes

Years ago, I visited a church affiliated to the Agape Church, which is a New Age ('ecumenical') church visited by celebrities in Los Angeles and heard them cite the following teaching: *"Let go of the how and accept the Yes!"*

I thought: how convenient! I attempted the exercise of surrender and, frankly, enjoyed how it felt. But is this a philosophically legitimate piece of advice? Can this remedy work within philosophy?

Epicurus did speak on the importance of feeling that we're safe in the world. In one of his teachings about friendship, Epicurus mentioned that by surrounding ourselves with friends, we feel safe. The safety felt by others when surrendering to a higher power, in Epicureanism is acquired by trusting philosophy, friends, community, and nature. It has a tangible context.

I am not fully against the Agape remedy. I was merely citing it as a sample of the type of New Age folk wisdom that we're surrounded by. The above advise on letting go of the how and accepting the yes might be recommended for things over which we have no control, and it may work effectively in producing a state of safety and trust in nature (which easily provides all the things we need), but for all else it might be a false consolation and probably should be used along with an action plan.

The danger of these types of teaching is that one may remain ineffective in tackling life's challenges. Without an action plan, wishful thinking is just wishful thinking. Tangible efforts must be given, a sacrifice of action, if we wish to penetrate the facticity and the reality of the world in which we are in effect free agents and co-creators. This world is our work, our project, and to a great extent our creation and our projection.

Having said this, I do believe we must accept the Yes, and do so without a second thought. Life, and the moment of Now, the only tangible reality into which we're woven, is to be affirmed and relished. Kierkegaard, the hesitant precursor of existentialism who was frequently preoccupied with issues of "yes or no", is one of the most depressing philosophers I've read. Philosophy should not demolish but build the human spirit. Studies show that people of conviction are much happier than people who hesitate.

While embracing the pragmatic importance of accepting our mortal limitations, Epicurus didn't hesitate or question whether we should say yes or no to life, to friendship, to happiness. He brought the world the true consolation of certainty, empowerment and freedom that all true and wholesome philosophy should provide.

Don't be fooled: a beautiful life is yours to conquer, if you want it. Nothing is written, unless you write it!