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Jeffersonian Epicureanism

By *Hiram Crespo*, editor.

I Too Am An Epicurean - Jefferson, in his epistle to William Short.

Epicureanism evolved shortly after Alexander the Great's conquests and death. Alexander's short-lived empire had been divided into four kingdoms and there was much intrigue and struggle for power in those days, so that when Epicurus warned against involvement in politics and life in the polis, he was criticizing a particularly rabid form of politics. To this day, the adage *Live Unknown* is still followed by many Epicureans who would rather avoid drama and greed for power in order to protect their ataraxia, and the philosophy retains much of its original anarchic spirit. This is perfectly legitimate.

But Thomas Jefferson, the politician, embodied a distinct expression of the philosophy. What characterizes Jeffersonian Epicureanism, versus the Epicureanism of any other philosopher? What makes it distinct?

Firstly, it's engaged and does not shy away from politics, and it therefore represents an evolution, or maybe even a reform of the original. Epicurus perceived the desire for fame as a vain desire. But what if fame happens? What if fame is acquired in the pursuit of other, maybe higher or nobler, values and desires? What if one can manage to live a life of imperturbability while engaging in the world?

Whatever failures or successes may have been accomplished through this, this was Jefferson's experiment. What he gave us, in the process of being true to his conscience, was his own Epicureanism as part of our American national legacy.

As he wrote the natural right to the pursuit of happiness into the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson left the fingerprints of an Epicurean in the document and articulated his American Dream as an attempt at establishing a national sort of Epicurean Garden, an experiment where a whole society during an entire era of humanity would now be given the opportunity to seek happiness as the most obvious, natural of human rights.

Furthermore, his commentary on the life of Jesus, where he took the Gospels and cut off all the supernatural claims, keeping only the ethical teachings, was also an expression of Epicurean naturalist conviction. He was a philosophical materialist and had no need for the supernatural claims.

The Jefferson Bible is a commentary, and not just an editorial process –which, on its face, it seems to be– because, in cutting off the supernatural (and ergo UN-natural) portions, Jefferson was adding valuable, naturalist commentary to the life and ethics of Jesus, and fundamentally engaging in philosophical discourse. The Jefferson Bible is an expression of the founding father’s secular humanist philosophy.

And so we find three unique attributes in Jeffersonian Epicureanism: it’s engaged and political, it’s anchored within the facticity, the narrative, and the context of our national history, and it’s influenced by altruistic Christian ethics, which he believed counterbalanced the philosophy of Epicurus.

Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves, Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others. – Jefferson

Not all of us feel the need to balance hedonism with an altruistic ethical teaching, particularly because many of us see the Epicurean teaching mission as a philanthropic one: we are giving humanity a science of happiness and liberation from ignorance. In spite of its peculiarities, Jefferson’s Epicurean faith was no less sincere. In his letter to Short, Jefferson hints at his commitment to doing the introspective tasks assigned by Epicurus by discerning between different types of desires, and insisted on defending “the true, not the imputed teachings” of Epicurus, whom he calls his *Master*. He also cultivated his own Garden, which has today evolved into a type of national museum. Thomas Jefferson was as devoted an Epicurean as one gets.

By naming these facts, I am not saying that the Society of Friends seeks to practice a specifically Jeffersonian, or Christian-Humanist, form of Epicureanism. But we acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate his legacy and his place in our history, and we amiably welcome Christian-influenced Epicureans who look to Jefferson, Epicurus, and Jesus as culture heroes.

[Thomas Jefferson: Pro Epicurus / Contra Plato](#); a compendium on Jeffersonian Epicurean thought by Cassius Amicus

[Atheists for Jesus](#), a movement to rescue Jesus from superstition which was championed by biologist Richard Dawkins

Articles from [The Smithsonian Magazine](#), [The Humanist](#), and [Frontline](#) on *Jefferson’s Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*