

To the Modern Leontium – (Ninon de l'Enclos)

Being the moral doctrine of the philosopher Epicurus as applicable to modern times, it is an elucidation of the principles advocated by that philosopher, by Charles de Saint-Evremond, Maréchal of France, a great philosopher, scholar, poet, warrior, and profound admirer of Mademoiselle de l'Enclos. He died in exile in England, and his tomb may be found in Westminster Abbey, in a conspicuous part of the nave, where his remains were deposited by Englishmen, who regarded him as illustrious for his virtues, learning and philosophy.

He gave the name "Leontium" to Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, and the letter was written to her under that sobriquet. The reasoning in it will enable the reader to understand the life and character of Ninon, inasmuch as it was the foundation of her education, and formed her character during an extraordinarily long career. It was intended to bring down to its date, the true philosophical principles of Epicurus, who appears to have been grossly misunderstood and his doctrines foully misinterpreted.

Leontium was an Athenian woman who became celebrated for her taste for philosophy, particularly for that of Epicurus, and for her close intimacy with the great men of Athens. She lived during the third century before the Christian era, and her mode of life was similar to that of Mademoiselle de l'Enclos. She added to great personal beauty, intellectual brilliancy of the highest degree, and dared to write a learned treatise against the eloquent Theophrastus, thereby incurring the dislike of Cicero, the distinguished orator, and Pliny, the philosopher, the latter intimating that it might be well for her "to select a tree upon which to hang herself." Pliny and other philosophers heaped abuse upon her for daring, as a woman, to do such an unheard of thing as to write a treatise on philosophy, and particularly for having the assurance to contradict Theophrastus.

THE LETTER

You wish to know whether I have fully considered the doctrines of Epicurus that are attributed to me?

I can claim the honor of having done so, but I do not care to claim a merit I do not possess, and which you will say, ingenuously, does not belong to me. I labor under a great disadvantage on account of the numerous spurious treatises, which are printed in my name, as though I were the author of them. Some, though well written, I do not claim, because they are not of my writing; moreover, among the things I have written, there are many stupidities. I do not care to take the trouble of repudiating such things, for the reason that at my age, one hour of well-regulated life is of more interest and benefit to me than a mediocre reputation. How difficult it is, you see, to rid one's self of amour propre! I quit it as an author, and reassume it as a philosopher, feeling a secret pleasure in manipulating what others are anxious about.

The word "pleasure" recalls to mind the name of Epicurus, and I confess, that of all the opinions of the philosophers concerning the supreme good, there are none which appear to me to be so reasonable as his.

It would be useless to urge reasons, a hundred times repeated by the Epicureans, that the love of pleasure and the extinction of pain, are the first and most natural inclinations remarked in all men, that riches, power, honor, and virtue, contribute to our happiness, but that the enjoyment of pleasure, let us say, voluptuousness, to include everything in a word, is the veritable aim and end whither tend all human acts. This is very clear to me, in fact, self-evident, and I am fully persuaded of its truth.

However, I do not know very well in what the pleasure, or voluptuousness of Epicurus consisted, for I never saw so many different opinions of any one, as those of the morals of this philosopher. Philosophers, and even his own disciples, have condemned him as sensual and

indolent; magistrates have regarded his doctrines as pernicious to the public; Cicero, so just, arid, so wise in his opinions, Plutarch, so much esteemed for his fair judgments, were not favorable to him, and so far as Christianity is concerned, the Fathers have represented him to be the greatest and the most dangerous of all impious men. So much for his enemies; now for his partisans: Metrodorus, Hermachus, Meneceus, and numerous others, who philosophize according to his school, have as much veneration as friendship for him personally. Diogenes Laertes could not have written his life to better advantage for his reputation. Lucretius adored him. Seneca, as much of an enemy of the sect as he was, spoke of him in the highest terms. If some cities held him in horror, others erected statues in his honor, and if, among the Christians, the Fathers have condemned him, Gasendi and Bernier approve his principles.

In view of all these contrary authorities, how can the question be decided? Shall I say that Epicurus was a corruptor of good morals, on the faith of a jealous philosopher, of a disgruntled disciple, who would have been delighted, in his resentment, to go to the length of inflicting a personal injury? Moreover, had Epicurus intended to destroy the idea of Providence and the immortality of the soul, is it not reasonable to suppose that the world would have revolted against so scandalous a doctrine, and that the life of the philosopher would have been attacked to discredit, his opinions more easily?

If, therefore, I find it difficult to believe what his enemies and the envious have published against him, I should also easily credit what his partisans have urged in his defense.

I do not believe that Epicurus desired to broach a voluptuousness harsher than the virtue of the Stoics. Such a jealousy of austerity would appear to me extraordinary in a voluptuary philosopher, from whatever point of view that word may be considered. A fine secret that, to declaim against a virtue that destroys sentiment in a sage, and establishes one that admits of no operation.

The sage, according to the Stoics, is a man of insensible virtue, that of the Epicureans, an immovable voluptuary. The former suffers pain without having any pain; the latter enjoys voluptuousness without being voluptuous – a pleasure without pleasure. With what object in view, could a philosopher who denied the immortality of the soul, mortify the senses? Why divorce the two parties composed of the same elements, whose sole advantage is in a concert of union for their mutual pleasure? I pardon our religious devotees, who diet on herbs, in the hope that they will obtain an eternal felicity, but that a philosopher, who knows no other good than that to be found in this world, that a doctor of voluptuousness should diet on bread and water, to reach sovereign happiness in this life, is something my intelligence refuses to contemplate.

I am surprised that the voluptuousness of such an Epicurean is not founded upon the idea of death, for, considering the miseries of life, his sovereign good must be at the end of it. Believe me, if Horace and Petronius had viewed it as painted, they would never have accepted Epicurus as their master in the science of pleasure. The piety for the gods attributed to him, is no less ridiculous than the mortification of the senses – these slothful gods, of whom there was nothing to be hoped or feared; these impotent gods who did not deserve the labor and fatigue attendant upon their worship!

Let no one say that worshipers went to the temple through fear of displeasing the magistrates, and of scandalizing the people, for they would have scandalized them less by refusing to assist in their worship, than shocked them by writings which destroyed the established gods, or at least ruined the confidence of the people in their protection.

But you ask me: What is your opinion of Epicurus? You believe neither his friends nor his enemies, neither his adversaries nor his partisans. What is the judgment you have formed?

I believe Epicurus was a very wise philosopher, who at times and on certain occasions loved the pleasure of repose or the pleasure of movement. From this difference in the grade

of voluptuousness has sprung all the reputation accorded him. Timocrates and his other opponents attacked him on account of his sensual pleasures; those who defended him did not go beyond his spiritual voluptuousness. When the former denounced him for the expense he was at in his repasts, I am persuaded that the accusation was well founded. When the latter expatiated upon the small quantity of cheese he required to have better cheer than usual, I believe they did not lack reason. When they say he philosophized with Leontium, they say well; when they say that Epicurus diverted himself with her, they do not lie. According to Solomon, there is a time to laugh and a time to weep; according to Epicurus, there is a time to be sober and a time to be sensual. To go still further than that, is a man uniformly voluptuous all his life?

Religiously speaking, the greatest libertine is sometimes the most devout; in the study of wisdom, the most indulgent in pleasures sometimes become the most austere. For my own part, I view Epicurus from a different standpoint in youth and health, than when old and infirm.

Ease and tranquility, these comforts of the infirm and slothful, cannot be better expressed than in his writings. Sensual voluptuousness is not less well explained by Cicero. I know that nothing is omitted either to destroy or elude it, but can conjecture be compared with the testimony of Cicero, who was intimately acquainted with the Greek philosophers and their philosophy? It would be better to reject the inequality of mind as an inconstancy of human nature.

Where exists the man so uniform of temperament, that he does not manifest contrarities in his conversation and actions? Solomon merits the name of sage, as much as Epicure for less, and he belied himself equally in his sentiments and conduct. Montaigne, when still young, believed it necessary to always think of death in order to be always ready for it. Approaching old age, however, he recanted, so he says, being willing to permit nature to gently guide him, and teach him how to die.

M. Bernier, the great partisan of Epicurus, avows today that, "After philosophizing for fifty years, I doubt things of which I was once most assured."

All objects have different phases, and the mind, which is in perpetual motion, views them from different aspects as they revolve before it. Hence, it may be said, that we see the same thing under different aspects, thinking at the same time that we have discovered something new. Moreover, age brings great changes in our inclinations, and with a change of inclination often comes a change of opinion. Add, that the pleasures of the senses sometimes give rise to contempt for mental gratifications as too dry and unproductive and that the delicate and refined pleasures of the mind, in their turn, scorn the voluptuousness of the senses as gross. So, no one should be surprised that in so great a diversity of aspects and movements, Epicurus, who wrote more than any other philosopher, should have treated the same subjects in a different manner according as he had perceived them from different points of view.

What avails this general reasoning to show that he might have been sensible to all kinds of pleasure? Let him be considered according to his relations with the other sex, and nobody will believe that he spent so much time with Leontium and with Themista for the sole purpose of philosophizing. But if he loved the enjoyment of voluptuousness, he conducted himself like a wise man. Indulgent to the movements of nature, opposed to its struggles, never mistaking chastity for a virtue, always considering luxury as a vice, he insisted upon sobriety as an economy of the appetite, and that the repasts in which one indulged should never injure him who partook. His motto was, "Sic praesentibus voluptatibus utaris ut futuris non noceas."

He disentangled pleasures from the anxieties that precede, and the disgust that follows them. When he became infirm and suffered pain, he placed the sovereign good in ease and rest, and wisely, to my notion, from the condition he was in, for the cessation of pain is the felicity of those who suffer it.

As to tranquility of mind, which constitutes another part of happiness, it is nothing but a simple exemption from anxiety or worry. But, whoso cannot enjoy agreeable movements is happy in being guaranteed from the sensations of pain.

After saying this much, I am of the opinion that ease and tranquility constituted the sovereign good for Epicurus when he was infirm and feeble. For a man who is in a condition to enjoy pleasures, I believe that health makes itself felt

by something more active than ease, or indolence, as a good disposition of the soul demands something more animated than will permit a state of tranquility. We are all living in the midst of an infinity of good and evil things, with senses capable of being agreeably affected by the former and injured by the latter. Without so much philosophy, a little reason will enable us to enjoy the good as deliciously as possible, and accommodate ourselves to the evil as patiently as we can.