



## The Epicureans

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### 1. Life of Epicurus

Epicurus was born at Samos, in the year 341 B.C., of Athenian parents. He came to Athens in his eighteenth year. Xenocrates was then teaching at {212} the Academy, Aristotle at the Lyceum, but Epicurus heard neither the one nor the other. After some wanderings he returned to Athens and set up on his [366] own account as a teacher of philosophy. He made it a matter of boasting that he was a self-taught philosopher; and Cicero (*De Nat. Deor.* i. 26) sarcastically remarks that one could have guessed as much, even if Epicurus had not stated it himself; as one might of the proprietor of an ugly house, who should boast that he had employed no architect. The style of Epicurus was, in fact, plain and unadorned, but he seems all the same to have been able to say what he meant...

[During his life, Epicurus] had crowds of followers who loved him and who were proud to learn his words by heart. He seems indeed to have been a man of exceptional kindness and amiability, and the 'garden of Epicurus' became proverbial as a place of temperate pleasures and wise delights. Personally we may take it that Epicurus was a man of simple tastes and moderate desires; and indeed throughout its history Epicureanism as a rule of conduct has generally been associated with the finer forms of enjoyment, rather than the more sensual. The 'sensual sty' is a nickname, not a description.

### 2. Epicurean Philosophy

Philosophy Epicurus defined as a process of thought and reasoning tending to the realisation of happiness. Arts or sciences which had no such practical end he contemned; and, as will be observed in Lucretius' praises of him above, even physics had but one purpose or interest, to free the soul from terrors of the unseen. Thus philosophy was mainly concerned with conduct, *i.e.* with Ethics, but secondarily and negatively with Physics, to which was appended what Epicurus called *Canonics*, or the science of testing, that is, a kind of logic.

Beginning with *Canonics*, as the first part of philosophy in order of time, from the point of view of human knowledge, Epicurus laid it down that the only source of knowledge was the senses, which gave us an immediate and true perception of that which actually came into contact with them. Even the visions of madmen or of dreamers he considered were in themselves true, being produced by a physical cause of some kind, of which these visions were the direct and immediate report. Falsity came in with people's interpretations or imaginations with respect to these sensations.

Sensations leave a trace in the memory, and out of similarities or analogies among sensations there are developed in the mind general notions or types, such as 'man,' 'house,' which are also true, because they are reproductions of sensations. Thirdly, when a sensation occurs, it is brought into relation in the mind with one or more of these types or notions; this is

*predication*, true also in so far as its elements are true, but capable of falsehood, as subsequent or independent sensation may prove. If supported or not contradicted by sensation, it is or may be true; if contradicted or not supported by sensation, it is or may be false. The importance of this statement of the canon of truth or falsehood will be understood when we come to the physics of Epicurus, at the basis of which is his theory of Atoms, which by their very nature can never be directly testified to by sensation.

This and no more was what Epicurus had to teach on the subject of logic. He had no theory of definition, or division, or ratiocination, or refutation, or explication; on all these matters Epicurus was, as Cicero said, 'naked and unarmed.' Like most self-taught or ill-taught teachers, Epicurus trusted to his dogmas; he knew nothing and cared nothing for logical defence.

In his *Physics* Epicurus did little more than reproduce the doctrine of Democritus. He starts from the fundamental proposition that 'nothing can be produced from nothing, nothing can really perish.' The veritable existences in nature are the Atoms, which are too minute to be discernible by the senses, but which nevertheless have a definite size, and cannot further be divided. They have also a definite weight and form, but no qualities other than these. There is an infinity of empty space; this Epicurus proves on abstract grounds, practically because a limit to space is unthinkable. It follows that there must be an infinite number of the atoms, otherwise they would disperse throughout the infinite void and disappear. There is a limit, however, to the number of varieties among the atoms in respect of form, size, and weight. The existence of the void space is proved by the fact that motion takes place, to which he adds the argument that it necessarily exists also to separate the atoms one from another. So far Epicurus and Democritus are agreed.

To the Democritean doctrine, however, Epicurus made a curious addition, to which he himself is said to have attached much importance. The natural course (he said) for all bodies having weight is downwards in a straight line. It struck Epicurus that this being so, the atoms would all travel for ever in parallel lines, and those 'clashings and interminglings' of atoms out of which he conceived all visible forms to be produced, could never occur. He therefore laid it down that the atoms *deviated* the least little bit from the straight, thus making a world possible. And Epicurus considered that this supposed deviation of the atoms not only made a world possible, but human freedom also. In the deviation, without apparent cause, of the descending atoms, the law of necessity was broken, and there was room on the one hand for man's free will, on the other, for prayer to the gods, and for hope of their interference on our behalf.

It may be worth while summarising the proofs which Lucretius in his great poem, professedly following in the footsteps of Epicurus, adduces for these various doctrines.

Epicurus' first dogma is, 'Nothing proceeds from nothing,' that is, every material object has some matter previously existing exactly equal in quantity to it, out of which it was made. To prove this Lucretius appeals to the *order of nature* as seen in the seasons, in the phenomena of growth, in the fixed relations which exist between life and its environment as regards what is helpful or harmful, in the limitation of size and of faculties in the several species and the fixity of the characteristics generally in each, in the possibilities of cultivation and improvement of species within certain limits and under certain conditions.

To prove his second position, 'Nothing passes into nothing,' Lucretius points out to begin with that there is a law even in destruction; *force* is required to dissolve or dismember anything; were it otherwise the world would have disappeared long ago. Moreover, he points out that it is from the elements set free by decay and death that new things are built up; there is no waste, no visible lessening of the resources of nature, whether in the generations of living things, in the flow of streams and the fulness of ocean, or in the eternal stars. Were it not so, infinite time past would have exhausted all the matter in the universe, but Nature is clearly immortal.

Moreover, there is a correspondence between the structure of bodies and the forces necessary to their destruction. Finally, apparent violations of the law, when carefully examined, only tend to confirm it. The rains no doubt disappear, but it is that their particles may reappear in the juices of the crops and the trees and the beasts which feed on them.

Nor need we be surprised at the doctrine that the atoms, so all-powerful in the formation of things, are themselves invisible. The same is true of the forest-rending blasts, the 'viewless winds' which lash the waves and overwhelm great fleets. There are odours also that float unseen upon the air; there are heat, and cold, and voices. There is the process of evaporation, whereby we know that the water has gone, yet cannot see its vapour departing. There is the gradual invisible detrition of rings upon the finger, of stones hollowed out by dripping water, of the ploughshare in the field, and the flags upon the streets, and the brazen statues of the gods whose fingers men kiss as they pass the gates, and the rocks that the salt sea-brine eats into along the shore.

That there is Empty Space or Void he proves by all the varied motions on land and sea which we behold; by the porosity even of hardest things, as we see in dripping caves. There is the food also which disperses itself throughout the body, in trees and cattle. Voices pass through closed doors, frost can pierce even to the bones. Things equal in size vary in weight; a lump of wool has more of void in it than a lump of lead. So much for Lucretius.

For abstract theories on physics, except as an adjunct and support to his moral conceptions, Epicurus seems to have had very little inclination. He thus speaks of the visible universe or Cosmos. The Cosmos is a sort of skyeey enclosure, which holds within it the stars, the earth, and all visible things. It is cut off from the infinite by a wall of division which may be either rare or dense, in motion or at rest, round or three-cornered or any other form. That there is such a wall of division is quite admissible, for no object of which we have observation is without its limit. Were this wall of division to break, everything contained within it would tumble out. We may conceive that there are an infinite number of such Cosmic systems, with inter-cosmic intervals throughout the infinity of space.

He is very disinclined to assume that similar phenomena, *e.g.* eclipses of the sun or moon, always have the same cause. The various accidental implications and interminglings of the atoms may produce the same effect in various ways. In fact Epicurus has the same impatience of theoretical physics as of theoretical philosophy. He is a 'practical man.'

He is getting nearer his object when he comes to the nature of the soul. The soul, like everything else, is composed of atoms, extremely delicate and fine. It very much resembles the breath, with a mixture of heat thrown in, sometimes coming nearer in nature to the first, sometimes to the second. Owing to the delicacy of its composition it is extremely subject to variation, as we see in its passions and liability to emotion, its phases of thought and the varied experiences without which we cannot live. It is, moreover, the chief cause of sensation being possible for us. Not that it could of itself have had sensation, without the enwrapping support of the rest of the structure. The rest of the structure, in fact, having prepared this chief cause, gets from it a share of what comes to it, but not a share of all which the soul has.

The soul being of material composition equally with the other portions of the bodily structure, dies of course with it, that is, its particles like the rest are dispersed, to form new bodies. There is nothing dreadful therefore about death, for there is nothing left to know or feel anything about it.

As regards the process of sensation, Epicurus, like Democritus, conceived bodies as having a power of emitting from their surface extremely delicate images of themselves. These are composed of very fine atoms, but, in spite of their tenuity, they are able to maintain for a considerable time their relative form and order, though liable after a time to distortion. They fly with great celerity through the void, and find their way through the windows of the senses to

the soul, which by its delicacy of nature is in sympathy with them, and apprehends their form.

The gods are indestructible, being composed of the very finest and subtlest atoms, so as to have not a body, but *as it were* a body. Their life is one of perfect blessedness and peace. They are in number countless; but the conceptions of the vulgar are erroneous respecting them. They are not subject to the passions of humanity. Anger and joy are alike alien to their nature; for all such feelings imply a lack of strength. They dwell apart in the inter-cosmic spaces. As Cicero jestingly remarks: "Epicurus by way of a joke introduced his gods so pure that you could see through them, so delicate that the wind could blow through them, having their dwelling-place outside between two worlds, for fear of breakage."

### 3. Epicurean Ethics

Coming finally to Epicurus' theory of Ethics, we find a general resemblance to the doctrine of Democritus and Aristippus. The end of life is pleasure or the absence of pain. He differs, however, from the Cyrenaics in maintaining that not the pleasure of the moment is the end, but pleasure throughout the whole of life, and that therefore we ought in our conduct to have regard to the future. Further he denies that pleasure exists only in activity, it exists equally in rest and quiet; in short, he places more emphasis in his definition on the absence of pain or disturbance, than on the presence of positive pleasure. And thirdly, while the Cyrenaics maintained that bodily pleasures and pains were the keenest, Epicurus claimed these characteristics for the pleasures of the mind, which intensified the present feeling by anticipations of the future and recollections of the past. And thus the wise man might be happy, even on the rack. Better indeed was it to be unlucky and wise, than lucky and foolish. In a similar temper Epicurus on his death-bed wrote thus to a friend: "In the enjoyment of blessedness and peace, on this the last day of my life I write this letter to you. Strangury has supervened, and the extremest agony of internal pains, yet resisting these has been my joy of soul, as I recalled the thoughts which I have had in the past."

We must note, however, that while mental pleasures counted for much with the Epicureans, these mental pleasures consisted not in thought for thought's sake in any form; they had nothing to do with contemplation. They were essentially connected with bodily experiences; they were the memory of past, the anticipation of future, bodily pleasures. For it is to be remembered that thoughts were with Epicurus only converted sensations, and sensations were bodily processes. Thus every joy of the mind was conditioned by a bodily experience preceding it. Or as Metrodorus, Epicurus' disciple, defined the matter: "A man is happy when his body is in good case, and he has good hope that it will continue so." Directly or indirectly, therefore, every happiness came back, in the rough phrase of Epicurus, to one's belly at last.

This theory did not, however, reduce morality to bestial self-indulgence. If profligate pleasures could be had free from mental apprehensions of another world and of death and pain and disease in this, and if they brought with them guidance as to their own proper restriction, there would be no reason whatever to blame a man for filling himself to the full of pleasures, which brought no pain or sorrow, that is, no evil, in their train. But (Epicurus argues) this is far from being the case. Moreover there are many pleasures keen enough at the time, which are by no means pleasant in the remembering. And even when we have them they bring no enjoyment to the highest parts of our nature. What those 'highest parts' are, and by what standard their relative importance is determined, Epicurus does not say. He probably meant those parts of our nature which had the widest range in space and time, our faculties, namely, of memory and hope, of conception, of sight and hearing.

Moreover there are distinctions among desires; some are both natural and compulsory, such as thirst; some are natural but not compulsory, as the desire for dainties; some are neither

natural nor compulsory, such as the desire for crowns or statues. The last of these the wise man will reject, the second he will admit, but so as to retain his freedom. For independence of such things is desirable, not necessarily that we may reduce our wants to a minimum, but in order that if we cannot enjoy many things, we may be content with few. "For I am convinced," Epicurus continues, "that they have the greatest enjoyment of wealth, who are least dependent upon it for enjoyment."

Thus if Epicurus did not absolutely teach simplicity of living, he taught his disciples the necessity of being capable of such simplicity, which they could hardly be without practice. So that in reality the doctrine of Epicurus came very near that of his opponents. As Seneca the Stoic observed, "Pleasure with him comes to be something very thin and pale. In fact that law which we declare for virtue, the same law he lays down for pleasure."

One of the chief and highest pleasures of life Epicurus found in the possession of friends, who provided for each other not only help and protection, but a lifelong joy. For the 'larger friendship' of the civic community, Epicurus seems to have had only a very neutral regard. Justice, he says, is a convention of interests, with a view of neither hurting or being hurt. The wise man will have nothing to do with politics, if he can help it.

In spite of much that may offend in the doctrines of Epicurus, there is much at least in the man which is sympathetic and attractive. What one observes, however, when we compare such a philosophy with that of Plato or Aristotle, is first, a total loss of constructive imagination. The parts of the 'philosophy,' if we are so to call it, of Epicurus hang badly together, and neither the Canonics nor the Physics show any real faculty of serious thinking at all. The Ethics has a wider scope and a more real relation to experience if not to reason. But it can never satisfy the deeper apprehension of mankind.

The truest and most permanently valid revelations of life come not to the many but to the one or the few, who communicate the truth to the many, sometimes at the cost of their own lives, always at the cost of antagonism and ridicule. A philosophy therefore which only represents in theoretical form the average practice of the average man, comes into the world still-born. It has nothing to say; its hearers know it all, and the exact value of it all, already. And in their heart of hearts, many even of those who have stooped to a lower ideal, and sold their birthright of hopes beyond the passing hour, for a mess of pottage in the form of material success and easy enjoyment, have a lurking contempt for the preachers of what they practise; as many a slaveholder in America probably had for the clerical defenders of the 'divine institution.'

There is a wasting sense of inadequacy in this 'hand-to-mouth' theory of living, which compels most of those who follow it to tread softly and speak moderately. They are generally a little weary if not cynical; they don't think much of themselves or of their success; but they prefer to hold on as they have begun, rather than launch out into new courses, which they feel they have not the moral force to continue. "May I die," said the Cynic, "rather than lead a life of pleasure." "May I die," says the Epicurean, "rather than make a fool of myself." The Idealist is to them, if not a hypocrite, at least a visionary,—if not a Tartuffe, at least a Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Yet even for poor Don Quixote, with all his blindness and his follies, the world retains a sneaking admiration. It can spare a few or a good many of its worldly-wisdoms, rather than lose altogether its enthusiasms and its dreams. And the one thing which saves Epicureanism from utter extinction as a theory, is invariably the idealism which like a 'purple patch' adorns it here and there. No man and no theory is wholly self-centred. Pleasure is supplanted by Utility, and Utility becomes the greatest Happiness of the greatest Number, and so, as Horace says (*Ep.* I. x. 24)—

Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret,

Nature (like Love) thrust out of the door, will come back by the window; and the Idealism which is not allowed to make pain a pleasure, is required at last to translate pleasure into pains.

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John Marshall. *A Short History of Greek Philosophy*. Chapter 21. London: Percival and Co., 1891.

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