



The Challenge of Epicureanism Frederick Meyer

THE SOURCES

The philosophy of Epicureanism was developed under the impact of a variety of sources. This statement does not imply that it was not an original movement and that it merely borrowed, for, on the contrary, Epicureanism represents one of the highlights of ancient philosophy.

Especially influential in the development of Epicureanism were the Atomists. In fact, the Atomic philosophy served as the foundation of Epicurus' writings. As we remember, Democritus had developed a system based on a mechanical interpretation of the universe. Refusing to accept any type of spiritual foundation, he did not accept the concepts of immortality, a spiritual soul, or divine Providence. To some extent he scandalized the Greek mind by the doctrine of the void and the reduction of everything in the universe to the movement of atoms.

The more we study the system of the Atomists, the more we realize how modern it is. It contains no trace of supernaturalism. It is not concerned with abstruse explanations; rather, it gives a simple and consistent explanation of the basic structure of the universe.

Ethically, also, the philosophy of Democritus is significant. It regards pleasure as the great goal, not a physical type of enjoyment but, rather, intellectual stimulation. It speaks of the wise man who sees through the shallow occupations of mankind and lives a truly meaningful life. Upholding the ideal of cheerfulness, it is a philosophy which abhors asceticism and mortification of the flesh.

Besides the system of the Atomists, the Sophist philosophy had an impact on Epicureanism, but the influence of the Sophists was more indirect and less pronounced than that of the Atomists. The Sophists believed in sensation as the standard of knowledge, and they turned against religious absolutism. So, too, did the Epicureans, but they were more interested in science than were the Sophists. Furthermore, the Epicureans placed less emphasis upon the relativity of knowledge. Still, it must be remembered that the Epicureans, like the Sophists, did not believe in rationalism and that their standard of truth was likewise severely empirical.

The most immediate influence on Epicurean philosophy came through the Cyrenaics, who were frank and consistent in their belief that pleasure is the goal of life. They deliberately ignored any philosophy which stresses virtue as an end in itself and regards life as a pilgrimage and a valley of tears. They taught that life is to be enjoyed to the utmost; and, as we have seen, they believed particularly in bodily pleasures. Good food, elegant clothing, luxurious homes, abundance of wealth—these were the Goods which were most desired by this group of thinkers.

Intellectually, however, the Cyrenaic movement was handicapped by its extreme nominalism and lack of scientific knowledge. It never worked out a complex system of

metaphysics which could substantiate its ethical system. In short, it was a rather superficial theory of life, which had little appeal to man's esthetic and spiritual capacities.

The irony is that Epicureanism has often been interpreted according to the tenets of Cyrenaicism. Constantly we hear charges that Epicureanism is a philosophy which degrades man and reduces him to his physiological drives. But we must be conscious of the enormous differences between the two movements. Epicureanism is far more intellectual, far more systematized, and far more complicated than the Cyrenaic philosophy. Its system of ethics is founded on scientific ideals; we can almost speak of a religion of science in Epicureanism.

To appreciate the sources of the Epicurean movement we must also understand the social currents responsible for its development. Representing a bitter opposition to the popular concepts of religion, it was a protest against all forms of superstition. We must remember that in Hellenistic times the purity of Greek religion had disintegrated. The Mediterranean world accepted all kinds of deities; revival preachers had huge audiences, and the ignorant were only too eager to believe in miracles.

To the Epicureans such an attitude was not worthy of the human being. They realized that if it triumphed there could be no rational philosophy, no naturalistic art, and no intellectual culture. Thus, they regarded themselves as emancipators and were vigorous in their struggle against obscurantism and intellectual regression.

EPICURUS

We have few facts regarding the career of Epicurus. He was born c. 341 B.C. on the island of Samos, where his father had gone as an Athenian colonist. His father was a schoolteacher, and from him he learned the rudiments of education. We are told that his mother was a seller of charms and holy relics and that Epicurus helped her in her profession. We do not know if the story is true, but if it is, it explains why Epicurus felt such hatred for popular religion.

In 323 we find Epicurus in Athens, where he obtained military training and took part in the political affairs of the community. In this period he met the poet Menander. This was probably a very formative stage in his philosophical development. Athenian philosophy was already experiencing a twilight, and only second-rate figures were teaching in the Lyceum. No wonder that Epicurus had contempt for many of the philosophers! He satirized both Plato and Aristotle, and he called Heraclitus a "confusion-maker."

Shortly after 323 B.C. Epicurus left Athens and traveled widely. He became a teacher of philosophy and in 310 established a school of philosophy at Mitylene. Yet he was homesick for Athens; hence, four years later, he moved back to that city, which then became the center of his activity.

In Athens Epicurus explained his philosophy in a garden which has become extremely famous in the history of philosophy. His teaching was informal, and not only free men but women and slaves were allowed to attend. Epicurus must have made an unusual impression on his hearers, for they all testify to his intellectual strength, sharp wit, and convincing arguments. He never married, since he thought that a wife would interfere with his philosophy. Besides, he had too much faith in friendship and too little faith in love. But he was a man with tender human feelings. The letters which have been preserved show his unflagging interest in the affairs of his students. When one of his disciples died and left a son and a daughter, Epicurus took care of their education and in his will provided for them.

Throughout his life he was an industrious writer. Over three hundred treatises are ascribed

to him. His great book *On nature* was written in thirty-seven volumes. Unfortunately we have only a few fragments of his work. In his style Epicurus was less elegant than Plato. While he lacked poetic imagination, his clarity is admirable. He expressed himself in a comprehensive and succinct manner.

In his later years Epicurus suffered greatly from ill health. He had never been strong; even as a young boy he had endured a variety of diseases. As he grew older, gout and indigestion plagued him; but he never lost his cheerfulness. On the last day of his life he wrote a letter to one of his disciples, in which he described his pain and the weariness of his tortured body, but his spirit was still the same as he recalled a past conversation they had enjoyed.

Thus, it can be seen, Epicurus was sincere in his beliefs, and his philosophy was not merely a theory of life but a way of action. Living frugally, he despised luxuries. He had no desire to reform the world, and he was not interested in creating social Utopias but was satisfied in searching for the meaning of existence, in teaching real wisdom, and in living a tranquil life.

EPICURUS' THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

The starting point of Epicurus' epistemology is his belief in sensation. Unlike Plato, he thought the senses trustworthy. Illusion is not derived from them, he wrote, but rather from our inability to interpret them correctly. But, it may be objected, the senses often present us with a false picture of reality. For example, the senses do not indicate that the earth moves nor do they tell us anything about the relativity of time and space. Epicurus, however, said we should not blame the senses but our own hasty interpretation of them. Since he believed in perception as a valid guide in intellectual knowledge, his system is thoroughly empirical. With this attitude he could not accept *a priori* truths and vague generalization. Knowledge, he taught does not depend so much on reason as on sense perception. Like modern scientists, he urged tentative evaluations and tentative conclusions.

The question arises, How do we know the external world exists? How can we be certain that Nature is not merely a realm of illusion? Epicurus answered, we can rely on sensations which tell us that phenomena exist. Furthermore, we can be certain that the feelings which we experience subjectively are not part of illusion but do have reality. Notice how the standpoint of Epicurus differs from that of Plato. There is no dualism between reason and sensation in Epicurus. Nor is there an opposition between the world of change and the world of the Forms. While Plato believed in reason as the standard of truth, Epicurus believed in sense experience. He felt that without sense knowledge there would be complete uncertainty and confusion. For the sake of argument let us state that sense knowledge is not trustworthy. What can we choose as a standard? Reason? But reason depends on sense experience, Epicurus would say. Intuition? This capacity likewise depends on perception.

If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those judgments which you pronounce false.

If you reject absolutely any single sensation without stopping to discriminate with respect to that which awaits confirmation between matter of opinion and that which is already present, whether in sensation or in feelings or in any presentative perception of the mind, you will throw into confusion even the rest of your sensations by your groundless belief and so you will be rejecting the standard of truth altogether. If in your ideas based upon opinion you hastily affirm as true all that awaits confirmation

as well as that which does not, you will not escape error, as you will be maintaining complete ambiguity whenever it is a case of judging between right and wrong opinion (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* II, Bk. x).

Another problem arises. How can we arrive at a general concept? How can we establish scientific knowledge? Epicurus answered that sense impressions are repeated, and this repetition develops general notions which are the foundations of our opinions. Truth then implies a correspondence between our opinion and the processes of the external world, while error stands for an invalid interpretation of phenomena.

Is reason autonomous? Can reason develop without sense perception? Epicurus answered in the negative, for he thought the tests of reason must be checked by experience and sense knowledge.

Another problem arises. The skeptic will say that the Epicurean system rests on facts which we do not perceive; for example, the atoms are invisible. How do we know they exist? Epicurus replied that in this case we must rely on analogy, on indirect verification, for sensation can establish *nothing* which would disprove the existence of the atoms.

To explain the process of sensation Epicurus spoke of films which are emitted by the objects of sense:

Again, there are outlines or films, which are of the same shape as solid bodies, but of a thinness far exceeding that of any object we see. For it is not impossible that there should be found in the surrounding air combinations of this kind, materials adapted for expressing the hollowness and thinness of surfaces, and efluxes preserving the same relative position and motion which they had in the solid objects from which they come. To these films we give the name of 'images' or 'idols.' Furthermore, so long as nothing comes in the way to offer resistance, motion through the void accomplishes any imaginable distance in an inconceivably short time. For resistance encountered is the equivalent of slowness, its absence the equivalent of speed.

. . . The exceeding thinness of the images is contradicted by none of the facts under our observation. Hence also their velocities are enormous, since they always find a void passage to fit them. Besides, their incessant effluence meets with no resistance, or very little, although many atoms, not to say an unlimited number, do at once encounter resistance (*Lives* II, Bk. x).

Epicurus also discussed the production of these images. Apparently they are formed with great rapidity:

For particles are continually streaming off from the surface of bodies, though no diminution of the bodies is observed, because other particles take their place. And those given off for a long time retain the position and arrangement which their atoms had when they formed part of the solid bodies, although occasionally they are thrown into confusion. Sometimes such films are formed very rapidly in the air, because they need not have any solid content; and there are other modes in which they may be formed. For there is nothing in all this which is contradicted by sensation, if we in some sort look at the clear evidence of sense, to which we should also refer the continuity of particles in the objects external to ourselves (*Lives* II, Bk. x).

As is clear, we do not see the object directly, but only its images. The optical process thus is

indirect. We are not in immediate contact with the objects of the external world, for we see only reflections of them. Still, our knowledge is reliable, just as we can trust that a portrait is a copy of the original man which it is designed to describe:

We must also consider that it is by the entrance of something coming from external objects that we see their shapes and think of them. For external things would not stamp on us their own nature of color and form through the medium of the air which is between them and us, or by means of rays of light or currents of any sort going from us to them, so well as by the entrance into our eyes or minds, to whichever their size is suitable, of certain films coming from the things themselves, these films or outlines being of the same color and shape as the external things themselves. They move with rapid motion; and this again explains why they present the appearance of the single continuous object, and retain the mutual interconnection which they had in the object, when they impinge upon the sense, such impact being due to the oscillation of the atoms in the interior of the solid object from which they come (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

Epicurus made it clear that falsehood and error depend upon hasty opinion. In the process of inference we must not jump to conclusions, and we must be patient in trying to confirm facts. Furthermore, we must understand the exact nature of the original perception. Very often we arrive at false conclusions because we do not interpret this original perception correctly. Also, feelings within ourselves tend to distort the picture of reality. In a word, the wise man will be careful in reducing his knowledge to the original sense perception and in constantly checking the inferences by which he has arrived at a certain conclusion.

THE FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHY

It is interesting to note that Epicurus rejected the training which was offered in the schools of philosophy. The Platonic Academy, we remember, recommended especially mathematics, but Epicurus had little use for this subject. Logic, which had been cherished by Aristotle, he likewise disregarded. In fact, for deductive logic Epicurus had profound contempt. He thought that too much preoccupation with logic would lead to false pretensions and give the mind an exaggerated power of its own range. Thought, he asserted, should be applied; and its object must be the external world, not abstruse propositions.

Thus Epicurus demanded less of his students than did either Plato or Aristotle. He was satisfied if his disciples knew the fundamentals of their letters and had open and acquisitive minds.

As for rhetoric, which the Sophists had emphasized, Epicurus said this might be excellent training for politicians but is of little value for philosophers. The study of literature, which was part of the standard Athenian curriculum, he likewise viewed lightly. It only clutters up the mind with useless details, he decided, and leads to a pedantic attitude which worries more about the grammar of Homer than the correct way of life.

Thus it can be seen that Epicurus thought philosophy mainly an ethical study. He included physical science in it, not because he had an overwhelming curiosity regarding the nature of the universe but because physical science is a valuable aid in emancipating us from ancient superstitions and fears.

The study of philosophy was an immensely practical matter to Epicurus. It is not to be delayed until a man is very old, for it is worthwhile both for the young and for those

advanced in age:

Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search thereof when he is grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not come, or that it is past and gone, is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is now no more. Therefore, both old and young ought to seek wisdom, the former in order that, as age comes over him, he may be young in good things because of the grace of what has been, and the latter in order that, while he is young, he may at the same time be old, because he has no fear of the things which are to come. So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and if that be absent, all our actions are directed toward attaining it (*Lives* II, Bk. x).

The more we advance in philosophy, Epicurus taught, the more we are able to confront life with tranquillity. True knowledge liberates, widens our perspective, and leads to a genuine appreciation of the universe. True knowledge, however, cannot be gained merely through quantitative studies and pedantic scholarship; rather, it depends upon the cultivation of a serene attitude through which the pains of life and the reverses of our existence can be overcome.

EPICURUS' THEORY OF REALITY

The foundation of the metaphysical system of Epicurus was the system of Democritus but, unlike the latter, Epicurus used the Atomic theory to bolster up his ethics. His scientific proclivities thus were subordinated to his moral interests. The starting point of Epicurus is materialistic. Nothing is created out of the non-existent; this theory denies spontaneous generation. He affirmed that matter always exists and we can understand phenomena only by learning their natural causes.

Did Epicurus teach that matter can decrease? The answer is in the negative. We cannot speak of destruction in the universe, said he; elements merely change their composition. Thus the content of the world remains the same; it is a self-existent and autonomous whole. This view invalidates any belief in a spiritual creator. Epicurus thought that we need no external force to account for the structure of the universe, for it is not subject to generation or decay and its processes can be understood through science, not through theological ideals.

The two basic realities of Epicurus' system are atoms and motion. Atoms he described as being indivisible, unchangeable, and completely compact. They have three qualities—size, shape, and weight.

Note that Epicurus did not consider the secondary qualities of the atoms to be real; hence they do not possess color or taste. These qualities we attribute to them because of our own interpretation.

Moreover, we must hold that the atoms in fact possess none of the qualities belonging to things which come under our observation, except shape, weight, and size, and the properties necessarily conjoined with shape. For every quality changes, but the atoms do not change, since, when the composite bodies are dissolved, there must needs be a permanent something, solid and indissoluble, left behind, which makes change

possible; not changes into or from the non-existent, but often through differences of arrangement, and sometimes through additions and subtractions of the atoms. Hence these somethings capable of being diversely arranged must be indestructible, exempt from change, but possessed each of its own distinctive mass and configuration. This must remain.

For in the case of changes of configuration within our experience the figure is supposed to be inherent when other qualities are stripped off, but the qualities are not supposed, like the shape which is left behind, to inhere in the subject of change, but to vanish altogether from the body. Thus then, what is left behind is sufficient to account for the differences in composite bodies, since something at least must necessarily be left remaining and be immune from annihilation (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

It is important to note that Epicurus emphasized the existence of the void. Each atom, he thought, is separated from the rest by empty space, and both atoms and space always exist. He maintained that the sum of things in the universe is infinite.

Again, the sum of things is infinite. For what is finite has an extremity, and the extremity of anything is discerned only by comparison with something else. (Now the sum of things is not discerned by comparison with anything else:) hence, since it has no extremity it has no limit, it must be unlimited or infinite.

Moreover, the sum of things is unlimited both by reason of the multitude of the atoms and the extent of the void. For if the void were infinite and bodies finite, the bodies would not have stayed anywhere but would have been dispersed in their course through the infinite void, not having any supports or counterchecks to send them back on their upward rebound. Again, if the void were finite, the infinity of bodies would not have anywhere to be (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

All changes in the universe are due to the atoms, which are in continual motion.

Furthermore, the atoms, which have no void in them— out of which composite bodies arise and into which they are dissolved— vary indefinitely in their shapes; for so many varieties of things as we see could never have arisen out of a recurrence of a definite number of the same shapes.

. . . The atoms are in continual motion through all eternity. . . Some of them rebound to a considerable distance from each other, while others merely oscillate in one place when they chance to have got entangled or to be enclosed by a mass of other atoms shaped for entangling (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

The important feature of the metaphysical system of Epicurus is his belief that the atoms have free will. As they are moving around in the world, they swerve from their paths. Their motion causes a collision. As a result of this collision compounds arise, and definite world systems are born. In this theory Epicurus differed markedly from Democritus, who believed everything to be governed by necessity. At first glance it makes the Epicurean system inconsistent. In fact, many ancient commentators, especially Cicero, thought it almost invalidated its basic presuppositions.

But, it must be remembered, Epicurus did not believe in absolute necessity, for if we accept such determinism there can be no place for moral teachings. To make the matter clear let us imagine that a predetermined path governs all our actions. Would this not result

in fatalism and in passive resignation to nature?

From a scientific standpoint, the swerving of the atoms proved to be useful to Epicurus. He thought that the heavier atoms naturally would fall at a more rapid rate than the lighter atoms. Now there could be no contact between the two if we accept absolute determinism; and no world system could arise. However, the swerving of the atoms, undetermined by external necessity, shows why the planets arose in the universe.

This stress on indeterminism has important implications. It indicates that Epicurus refused to believe in an absolute system of science. Not being willing to be bound by religious orthodoxy, he likewise refused to accept a fatalistic physical science. Freedom to him was real both in the cosmic structure and in the acts of the individual. This view, strangely enough, has been verified by modern science. Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy has almost an Epicurean flavor, and it shows that mechanical causality is not valid in the study of nuclear physics.

Epicurus also suggested by his doctrine that an infinite number of worlds exist. In this view he was quite consistent, for it was based on his belief in the infinity of atoms and the infinity of space. Some of the worlds, he held, are unlike our own, while others resemble our universe rather closely.

It is a mistake to think of Epicurus as an atheist, for he maintained that the gods exist but live far away and are unconcerned with human destiny. In short, they are quite different from the orthodox concept, which pictured them as being in constant contact with man. He asserted that their form is everlasting but their material contents transitory and composed of atoms which move in the void. These atoms unite for a moment and then enter into other combinations. They give off certain films or "idols" which are perceived by human beings and which can be trusted when they tell us that gods exist.

Epicurus made it clear that the gods live a completely peaceful life. They have no desires which cannot be fulfilled; they are not exposed to the vicissitudes of suffering. In short, they exemplify the aspirations and ideals of Epicureanism. His concept of religion, he indicated, was quite different from that of the multitude.

For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshiped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious. For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions; hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, seeing that they are always favorable to their own good qualities and take pleasure in men like unto themselves, but reject as alien whatever is not of their kind (*Lives* II, Bk. x).

How then are we to conceive of the gods? Epicurus believed we must first of all get away from the view that the gods know emotion. They are not touched by anger or wrath. They are completely unlike Jehovah, for Epicurus thought emotion a sign of weakness which certainly would disturb the peace of mind of the gods. In his opinion, those who believe then that the gods will reward the virtuous and punish the wicked are mistaken, for gods are not concerned with human actions. They do not take part in human affairs; such activity would detract from their majesty and self-sufficiency. Hence it is useless to pray to the gods; they will not respond. In other words, they are complete isolationists; but their lack

of response is not to be interpreted as a sign of their weakness but rather as a sign of their perfection.

What happens, then, to orthodox religion? The answer of Epicurus is: It is usually based on fraud and deception, for it pictures a universe in which the gods intervene and men try to please the gods. The philosopher, however, will overcome this illusion and order his actions, not according to vain beliefs but according to the precepts of wisdom.

Epicurus felt that in replacing orthodoxy by this new concept of life he actually had achieved a more pious perspective. Was this not a faith based on freedom rather than on spiritual slavery? Was this not worthy of a rational human being rather than a savage?

He was so deeply impressed by the evils of conventional religion that he constantly dwelt on them. So, too, did Lucretius, his great Roman follower. If most prayers were answered, Epicurus noted, they would only result in evil, for men constantly pray for their neighbors to be punished. He reminded us that orthodox religion is frequently based on barbarian rites which are cruel and sadistic in their inhumanity.

The view of the gods which we find in Epicurus and Lucretius makes teleology untenable. Lucretius, like Epicurus, showed that this world is not perfect and that everywhere we can find weaknesses and flaws. Nature is forever our enemy. We struggle against ferocious beasts, and frequently we are exposed to storms, earthquakes, and pestilences. Certainly these vicissitudes do not indicate divine care. Furthermore, Lucretius demonstrated, the gods are perfectly happy. Why then should they create a world which can contribute nothing to perfection? Incidentally, he thought it impossible for them to have created a world out of nothing, because matter cannot be created out of the non-existent.

Following their naturalistic assumptions, the Epicureans taught that the soul is material. It is made up of four elements—heat, air, vapor, and a fourth element which they called nameless. The last is responsible for the intellectual functions of the soul. This distinction between the rational and the irrational part of the soul is especially marked in Lucretius. The rational part, he claimed, is located in the breast while the irrational part, which is lower and less important, is diffused throughout the body.

The question arises. How does the soul differ from other material things? Is it a spiritual entity? Is it independent of the body? Epicurus did not think so. While he conceded that the soul is made up of very fine and smooth atomic particles and lighter than the body, it nevertheless perishes with the body.

Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an illimitable time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. . . . Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer. But in the world, at one time men shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

What matters then is not how long we live but how pleasant our existence is. If we keep this idea in mind, death has no terrors. Those who state that life has no value at all, that it is better not to be born, are hypocrites. If they truly believe this, why do they not commit suicide? If they say it without sincerity, their words are not to be taken seriously.

ETHICS

In Epicurus' system of ethics, as in his scientific concepts, naturalism prevails. Thus the basis of his ethical concept is not an absolute ideal but concrete observation. He called pleasure the beginning and end of life: it becomes the standard for the good and the criterion for men's actions. This concept, however, does not include bodily pleasures, for we observe that frequently they cause only pain. For example, if we eat too much, indigestion results. If we seek too much sensual pleasure, we are in a state of weakness and fatigue and ultimately experience satiation. Furthermore, if we seek bodily pleasures too intently, we will constantly be agitated. Our minds will be restless, forever seeking more stimulations without being able to achieve contentment. But this is not the way of the wise man who cherishes tranquillity, repose, and serenity—a condition which Epicurus called *ataraxia*.

The end of our actions is freedom from pain and fear. Such freedom indicates the end of our moral search. No longer are we exposed to emotional tempests and to the changing moods of fortune.

It must be realized that Epicurus based his conclusions on his study of the psychology of desires. The more we multiply our desires, he thought, the less likely we are to find repose and tranquillity. We must concentrate on those desires which are necessary and essential for our well-being. As for those which are admired by the crowd, they are purely superfluous and we can neglect them. In other words, not all pleasure is to be chosen just as not all pain is to be averted:

It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good. Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win. Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips. To habituate one's self, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

Epicurus was succinct in describing the meaning of pleasure. It is not to be thought of as prodigality or as wild dissipation.

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-bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not

the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life, it is a sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul. Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor, and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor, and justice, which is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

To accomplish the goal of his moral ideals, Epicurus attacked the values of the multitude; he especially condemned avarice. Great wealth, he showed, frequently brings about not tranquillity but restlessness. We believe that money will solve our problems only to find out that they have been multiplied. The same holds true of honor and power. We think we are secure when we achieve a high position in life; but the opposite is true, for power is unstable. We are admired one day and hated the next. We have friends if we can give them something they want, and we are friendless if we lose our hold on power. Moreover, such power creates envy, which is the cause of much anxiety.

Above all, Epicurus taught, we must not be guided by our fears; if we are, we will be completely unstable. We will forever worry and fret and wait for imaginary disasters. We must neither be afraid of the gods nor worry about what happens to us when we die, for science teaches us that death is the extinction of consciousness and that the gods do not concern themselves with human destiny.

In his view that anxiety is the cause of most of our troubles, Epicurus sounds strikingly modern. To overcome anxiety, he believed, education is necessary. Hence it is the task of philosophy to counteract the ills of the mind and to give us a sense of intellectual stability. Such stability, Epicurus maintained, cannot be found in an active social life. The wise man thus will not take part in political affairs; he will not try to reform the existing governments. Rather, he will cultivate his own capacities and cherish his own happiness.

To achieve this painless existence Epicurus advocated, above all, friendship. Marriage, he thought, involves too many tempests, too many storms, and too many uncertainties; it creates ties and leads to emotional serfdom. Friendship, on the other hand, being less possessive and less intimate, in his opinion leads to true tranquillity. Evidently Epicurus followed his own precepts for the good life, for he never married.

His discussion of the various virtues is extremely realistic. He did not idealize justice; rather, he found its source in expediency. The state, he held, is the result of a compact between subjects and rulers whereby both profit. Right and wrong are determined by laws, not by ideal standards, as Plato had imagined. We cannot speak, accordingly, of an ideal Utopia or of ideal beauty or ideal justice or ideal truth. Rather, in evaluating moral acts we must look at the consequences.

Why does the wise man obey the laws? Why does he subordinate himself to political authority? The Epicureans believed that he does so because of self-interest, for he will then have more intellectual tranquility. He will sleep well at night, while those who evade the laws and commit acts of injustice will suffer in fear of being detected.

It is true that this is not an idealistic view when measured by Platonic standards, but, it must be remembered, the Epicureans were interested in describing society as they saw it, not in picturing ideal standards. Like the Sophists, they noted that there are no absolute institutions— all are relative. They applied this concept to international law, in which field

they showed that various types of justice prevail. For example, there is one type of justice which prevails between equally strong nations and another type of justice which exists between a strong and a weak nation. This theory almost anticipates Hobbes, who likewise stressed realism in international politics.

The climax of the moral system of Epicurus is his belief that the most important pleasures are those of the mind. The mind has the power of reflection and can contemplate life as a whole. It can reflect upon the pleasant occurrences of the past as well as the happy things which it may expect in the future. Furthermore, it can triumph over bodily infirmity. Even when sick and plagued by disease, we can have a cheerful perspective on life through mental concentration.

At the same time, Epicurus taught, the mind can suffer more intense pains than can the body. Modern psychology with its concept of neuroses and psychoses verifies his viewpoint. We must cultivate the resources of our mind so that we may not suffer from pain but lead a tranquil existence.

Life, it may be said in objection, often presents us with situations in which the pleasure element is not dominant. Imagine that we are suffering from cancer and are in great pain. Can we still accept Epicurean standards? Epicurus would answer in the affirmative, for pain, he felt, cannot last very long and, at any rate, acute suffering persists for only a short period. We can always endure it by the thought of the happiness which is still obtainable. To revert to our case of cancer, even under the suffering it imposes we can use our intellectual resources. And if the pain lasts very long, we will be released by death, which should not be dreaded but regarded as a natural event.

The teaching of Epicurus may appear rather impractical, yet he lived up to his own ideals. Throughout his life he disregarded his frail condition and never let pain conquer him. It takes a vast amount of endurance and strength to cherish such a philosophy, and certainly Epicurus possessed these virtues.

Epicurus spoke about the ideal man, who follows these teachings. Such a man understands the nature of the universe:

He has diligently considered the end fixed by nature, and understands how easily the limit of good things can be reached and attained, and how either the duration or the intensity of evils is but slight. Destiny, which some introduce as sovereign over all things, he laughs to scorn, affirming rather that some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency. For he sees that necessity destroys responsibility and that chance or fortune is inconstant; whereas our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach. It were better, indeed, to accept the legends of the gods than to bow beneath that yoke of destiny which the natural philosophers have imposed. The one holds out some faint hope that we may escape if we honor the gods, while the necessity of the naturalists is deaf to all entreaties. Nor does he hold chance to be a god, as the world in general does, for in the acts of a god there is no disorder. . . . He believes that the misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool" (*Lives II, Bk. x*).

Such a way of life is not out of our reach. Although occasionally we may be overcome by certain pains, we can still attain a tranquil existence. This is a philosophy not just for the professional thinker but for the multitude. It is not a Utopia for the future but a theory which can be followed in the present.

Thus it can be understood why the Epicureans were so vigorous in their beliefs and

why they had a strong sense of mission. They wanted to lighten the burden of humanity, to remove the evils of supernaturalism and blind faith, and instead preach a way of life leading to true peace of mind.

LUCRETIVS

We know almost nothing about the life of Lucretius (c. 98-55 b.c), who gave the most poetic expression to Epicureanism. We are told that he suffered from periodic fits of insanity and finally committed suicide. Still, he cherished the ideal of reason which Epicurus regarded as the main source of happiness.

The period in which Lucretius lived was extremely stormy. The civil war between Marius and Sulla, Spartacus' insurrection, and the rise to power of Julius Caesar— all these events showed how completely unstable the political life was. Fortune could not be relied upon. This fact explains why Lucretius sought refuge in a philosophy of tranquility and serenity.

The thoughts of Lucretius are expressed in the *De rerum natura*, which almost rivals the *Divine comedy* in philosophic insight and imaginativeness. But Lucretius, unlike Dante, took science as his guide and had no patience with the explanations of religion. Even in the first book of the poem he tells us about the many misdeeds of religion. He resurrected the account of Iphigenia, who, according to tradition, was sacrificed by her father to placate the gods so that the Greeks would have favorable winds in their war against the Trojans:

This terror, this darkness of mind, is dispersed by no radiant sunrise.
Or by the bright shafts of day, but only by Nature's revealing
A knowledge of her own law, which this first principle teaches:
That nothing from nothing is born, even by power divine.
Mankind is held in dominion by fear but for this one reason:
That seeing on land and in sky so much of whose cause they are witness
Men think the divinities there are at work. But when we are certain
That naught is created from naught, what we seek we divine more clearly:
Both the source from which things can be made and the way in which all is accomplished
Without divine intervention....(*De rerum natura*, Bk 1)

Lucretius preached the joy of contemplation. He realized how futile most men's lives are.

It is pleasant when over the ocean winds are troubling the waters.
To gaze from the shore at another's laboring tribulation.
Not because any man's troubles are cause for your joyous delight,
But because it is sweet to perceive what evils yourself have been spared.
Pleasant also it is to behold the great encounters of warfare
Arrayed on a distant plain, with nothing of yours in peril.
But there can be nothing more goodly than holding serene, high plateaus,
Well fortified by the teachings of the wise, from which you may look
Down from your height upon others and see them wandering astray
In their lonely search for the pathway of life, co-rivals in genius
Fighting for precedence, working, day and night, with surpassing toil
To mount the summits of power and the mastery of the world (ibid, Bk. 2).

Lucretius held that design does not explain anything. To some extent he anticipated Darwin in his theory of evolution, which tried to give a naturalistic account of life. There is no essential difference, he held, between the higher and the lower parts of nature. Man evolves slowly and is subject to the laws of nature. His actions cannot be explained according to metaphysical principles.

In his moral system Lucretius warned us against materialism. We are not to trust externals, for our salvation does not lie in the possession of wealth or honor. We must strive for peace of mind rather than an accumulation of worldly goods.

In Lucretius, furthermore, we find a systematized philosophy of civilization. He did not idealize primitive life. It is true that men were stronger in ancient days, he wrote, but they lived a crude and unsatisfactory existence and were exposed to all kinds of terrors which have been removed through science and civilization. Lucretius, following Epicurus, showed how technology advances civilization. Most important to him were the discovery of fire, the building of huts, and the domestication of animals. Inventions which aid in our control of nature are always due to man himself, he claimed, not to the intervention of the gods. Yet, civilization is hindered by two great evils, one is religion, the other the love for money. Both must be conquered if man is to have a meaningful and painless life.

Lucretius reminds us somewhat of Spencer in his theory that the universe obeys a cycle—that it grows and decays. This theory does not imply, however, that death is to be dreaded, for it comes as a gentle liberator.

The man to whom pain is decreed hereafter, must live when it comes;
But death, by withholding life from him for whom pain might occur,
All pain precludes. So we know that naught's to be dreaded in death;
There can no wretchedness come to one who no longer exists.
Any more than if he'd not been born, when death claims his mortal life....(ibid, Bk 2)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EPICUREANISM

In Epicureanism we find one of the perennial philosophies of life. It is a theory which does not depend on national or religious barriers. Thus we find Epicureanism in a Catholic like Gassendi, in a pantheist like Whitman, and in a mathematician like Bertrand Russell. In some ways the spirit of Lucretius in his great poem reminds us of Russell's *A free man's worship*.

It may be asked why this philosophy is so attractive and why it has such a constant appeal. In the first place, it is based on individualism. Its starting point is not society but the individual. It is an acknowledged fact that most artists and thinkers are introspective, interested primarily in their own emotions, sensations, and needs rather than in the salvation of society. Thus, frequently they are attracted by Epicureanism.

In the second place, it is a philosophy which gives us hope in times of chaos and anarchy. While empires may collapse and wars ravish the earth, we can still cultivate our own garden and find peace of mind.

In the third place, Epicureanism is a scientific philosophy, and to many modern thinkers science appears as an absolute Good and as the only hope for man's survival. To accept science presupposes a process of intellectual and emotional reconstruction such as Epicurus had made in his period. Such a reconstruction shatters many of our fond biases and illusions, but it makes

us truly emancipated.

Yet, in spite of all its advantages, there is a note of sadness in Epicureanism, just as there is a strain of melancholy in Lucretius. For it is difficult to live according to the resources of science. It is painful to get away from our childhood myths. It is disillusioning to think of the universe as being unconcerned with man's desires and ideals. Furthermore, the ideal life of the Epicurean, which is dedicated to a painless existence, appears to be rather inert and static.

It contains a note of futility and negation— almost an approximation of the Buddhist Nirvana. It is not surprising that many moralists have rebelled against this standard and have emphasized, instead, a more active and dynamic approach to the problems of existence.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What influences were mainly responsible for Epicureanism?
2. What is the function of philosophy, according to Epicurus?
3. How did Epicurus view scientific determinism?
4. Describe the cosmological doctrines of Epicurus.
5. How did Epicurus describe the gods?
6. What did Epicurus say about death?
7. How did Epicurus live up to his teachings?
8. What was Epicurus' attitude toward marriage and friendship?
9. What contributions did Lucretius make to philosophy?
10. Why is Epicureanism so attractive to the 20th century?

Frederick Mayer. *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. New York: American Book Company, 1950.
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