



The Philosophy of Epicurus

Alfred Weber

Epicurus was born about 340, at Gargettos, of Athenian parents. Reflection on his mother's superstitious practices and the study of Democritus made him sceptical, and convinced him that our fear of the gods and the hereafter is the principal obstacle to the happiness of man; and it is the business of philosophy to make us happy by freeing us, through observation and reasoning, from the belief in the supernatural. In the society which he founded at Athens about 306, his personal influence seems to have been very great, and the maxims which he dictated to his disciples formed the permanent basis of the Epicurean teaching long after his death. But neither polytheism nor Christianity had any interest in preserving his numerous writings, nearly all of which have been lost, and this *Socrate doublè d'un Voltaire* has been more bitterly attacked than any other founder of a school.

Unlike Aristotle, who loves science for science's sake, and considers the first philosophy as the best and most divine science, "although others may be more useful, Epicurus makes science the servant of life, and is interested in theory only in so far as it is related to practice. The aim of philosophy, which he divides into the canonic logic), physics, and ethics, is, according to him, to make human life tranquil and peaceful and this aim he finds realized in the system of Democritus, with whom he agrees in almost every respect.

Matter is not non-being, as Plato holds, but the positive and only principle of things, the universal substratum of which soul, mind, and thought are mere accidents. Outside of it, there is nothing but the void, the condition of movement. Matter is composed of innumerable, uncreated, and indestructible atoms in perpetual motion. According to Democritus, these corpuscles naturally and necessarily move downward. But inasmuch as they are joined together and form bodies, it must be assumed, according to Epicurus, that they deviated from the perpendicular line. Such a deviation could only have been the result of chance. Epicurus is not, therefore, an absolute determinist, for he assumes chance, that is, the possibility of an effect without a cause. This view allows him to recognize in ethics the freedom of indifference, or causes without effects.

But though, by an inconsistency that does more credit to his imagination than to his logic, he differs from Democritus on the subject of causality, he agrees with him regarding the eternity of the universe. The absolute creation and absolute destruction of the world are out of the question. Creation in the proper sense of the term is impossible. In order to convince ourselves that the world is not the work of the gods, we have simply to consider the nature of its alleged creators, on the one hand, and its imperfections, on the other. Why should such perfect and supremely happy beings, who are self-sufficient and have no need of anything, burden themselves with creating the world? Why should they undertake the difficult task of governing the universe? Let us, however, suppose for a moment that the world is their product. If they have created it, they have created it either eternally or in time; in the former case, the world is eternal ; in the latter, we have two possibilities: Either creation is a condition of divine happiness, and then the gods

were not supremely happy for an entire eternity, inasmuch as they did not create the world until after the lapse of an eternity of inaction ; or, it is not, and in that case, they have acted contrary to their innermost essence. Moreover, what could have been their purpose in making it? Did they desire a habitation? That would be equivalent to saying that they had no dwelling-place for a whole eternity, or at least, none worthy of them. Did they create it for the sake of man? If they made it for the few sages whom this world contains, their work was not worth the trouble ; if they did it in order to create wicked men, then they are cruel beings. Hence it is absolutely impossible to hold that creation is the work of the gods.

Let us examine the matter from the standpoint of the world. How can we assume that a world full of evils is the creation of the gods? What have we? Barren deserts, arid mountains, deadly marshes, uninhabitable arctic zones, regions scorched by the southern sun, briars and thorns, tempests, hail-storms and hurricanes, ferocious beasts, diseases, premature deaths; do they not all abundantly prove that the Deity has no hand in the governance of things? Empty space, atoms, and weight, in short, mechanical causes, suffice to explain the world; and it is not necessary for metaphysics to have recourse to the theory of final causes. It is possible, no, it is certain that gods exist: all the nations of the earth agree to that. But these supremely happy beings who are free from passion, favoritism, and all human weaknesses, enjoy absolute repose. In their far-off home they are unmoved by the miseries of humanity; nor can they exert any influence on the life of man. There can be no magic, divination, or miracles, nor any kind of intercourse between them and us.

We should cease to fear the punishments of Tartarus. The soul is material, and shares the fate of the body. What proves it to be matter — exceedingly fine matter, of course — is the influence exercised upon it by the body in fainting, anaesthesia, and delirium, in cases of injury and disease, and above all, the fact that the advance and the decline of the soul correspond to analogous bodily conditions. The intellectual faculties are weak in the period of childhood; they grow strong in youth, and gradually decay in old age. Sickness causes a serious reaction upon the soul; without the body the soul has no power to manifest itself. No, more than that; the dying man does not feel his soul gradually withdrawing from one organ to another, and then finally making its escape with its powers unimpaired; he experiences a gradual diminution of his mental faculties. If the soul retained full consciousness at death, and if, as certain Platonists maintain, death were the transition of the soul to a higher life, then, instead of fearing death, man would rejoice at it, which is not the case. Moreover, our fear of death is not caused by our dread of non-existence; what makes us regard it with such terror is the fact that we involuntarily combine with the idea of nothingness an idea of life, that is, the notion of feeling this nothingness; we imagine that the dead man is conscious of his gradual destruction, that he feels himself burning, or devoured by the worms, that the soul continues to exist and to feel. If only we could succeed in wholly separating the idea of life from its opposite, and bravely relinquish all thought of immortality, death would lose its terrors. We should say to ourselves: Death is not an evil; neither for him who is dead, for he has no feeling; nor for the living, for him death does not yet exist. As long as we are alive, death does not exist for us, and when death appears we no longer exist. Hence we can never come in contact with death; we never feel its icy touch, which we dread so much.

Consequently, we should not be hindered by foolish fears from attaining the goal of our existence, happiness. Pleasure is the highest good; not the pleasure accompanying a passing sensation but pleasure as a permanent state — that state of deep peace and perfect contentment in which we feel secure against the storms of life. The pleasures of the mind are preferable to voluptuousness, for they endure; while sensations vanish away like the moment which procures them for us. We should avoid excess in everything, lest it engender its opposite, the permanent

pain resulting from exhaustion. On the other hand, we must consider such painful feelings as, for example, painful operations, as good, because they procure health and pleasure. Virtue is the tact which impels the wise man to do whatever contributes to his welfare, and makes him avoid the contrary. Virtue is not the highest good, but the true and only means of realizing it.

Owing to its simplicity, its anti-mystical character, and its easy application, the Epicurean system became a formidable rival of Platonism, Peripateticism, and Stoicism. Italy received it with especial favor, and reckoned among its disciples, the poet Lucretius, who wrote the *De rerum natura*, T. Cassius, L. Torquatus, T. Pomponius Atticus, Caesar, Horace, and Pliny the Younger. During the reign of the Caesars, Stoicism was represented by the republican opposition, while Epicureanism gathered around its standard the partisans of the new order of things, who were fortunate in being able to realize the ideals of the master under the auspices of a great and peaceful power. Protected as it was by the Emperors, the school destroyed what remained of the crumbling edifice of polytheism, and at the same time attacked the new religion and the supernatural Christian.

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