

Epicurus (341 – 270 BC)

Many people use the “Epicurean” label to represent a life of luxury and sensual pleasure. They couldn't be more wrong. Epicureanism actually represents moderation and avoidance of things that are painful, such as romantic love. What follows is a further exploration of the Epicurean doctrines.

Epicureanism began in 307 BC and flourished until 529, when Roman Emperor Justinian closed down what remained of the four Athenian philosophical schools, including the Epicurean Garden.

The main crux of Epicurus' philosophy is living to maximize pleasure, minimize pain (and have an attitude of gratitude!), and not doing something bad that would cause something bad to be done to you in return. (Love thy neighbor is the same concept, it just doesn't include the retaliation part). “Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure.” The main goal of Epicureanism is to achieve *ataraxia*, or a state of freedom from emotional disturbance and anxiety.

“...pleasure comes to be from pleasant things and pain from painful things.”

What about the case of those who cut or burn themselves to make tangible (pain) of the intangible (their feelings)? In this case, the relief of the pain from the pain seems to contradict what Epicurus said. Or is he just modifying the definition of painful things to a non-literal level? It could be painful to own a lot of money because people are always trying to get it from you, but on the other hand, money brings food to the starving, clothes to the needy, shelter to the homeless. What about murder? Pleasure for the murderer is derived from the act of murder, which is not a pleasant thing for the victim.

The Athenian Garden

At age 35, in 506 BC, Epicurus bought a house with a garden. It was here that his “school” was established.

An inscription at The Garden read, “Dear Guest, have you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.”

Support for Epicurus' life and that of his friends came from many sources, including, evidently, Epicurus' own family wealth and property and voluntary contributions.

Epicurus' last will and testament provides our best evidence of how, at the end of his life, he decided to transmit his property to assure the survival of the Epicurean community in Athens. Epicurus' last words to his disciples were “remember my doctrines.”

He provided for an annual gathering of the group to celebrate his birthday. Epicurus believed that it is the worshiper who benefits from his worship not the object of his worship. It is very likely that a statue

of him stood on the grounds of his Garden.

Epicurus' Garden was really not a school. It was more of a group who lived a shared life congruent with Epicurus' philosophy. There was no scientific or historical research conducted in Epicurus' Garden. More women are associated with Epicurus' than are recorded for any other "school". Children and a slave were also important members of his community. No diplomas were granted.

Epicurus was still, by the end of the Garden, remembered not only in portrait paintings but his image on cups and rings.

Important Epicurean Beliefs

Stay in the Present

Epicurus promoted staying in the present. This is of course a lofty goal that they speak of even today as if it were a new concept. *He does allow for some reflection on the past if it contributes to pleasure, such as the memory of a loved one.*

Anxiety is the Root of All Problems

Epicurus believed that anxiety is the root of our problems and should be avoided at all costs. So, he said that "pleasures and pains of the mind take their origin from the pleasures and pains of the body... the body [is their] point of reference... the pleasures and pains of the mind are much greater than those of the body. For with the body we can perceive nothing but what immediately affects it in the present, but with the mind we can also perceive past and future."

Seek Close Friendships

To Epicurus, friends were the most important thing in life, and they do provide some security that would otherwise be absent. But he cared only about his reputation if it is a bad one. Also, Epicurus believed that one should always eat a meal with a friend. What is eaten is not important, sharing the meal is. You should have people you depend on, for example, getting bailed out of jail. A win-win situation.

Epicurus' conception of friendship is much more demanding than the traditional ideal of "civic friendship". But from the start, critics charged the Epicureans in the community of friends with abandoning their principles, on the grounds that Epicurean hedonism cannot sustain genuinely demanding friendship. Epicurean hedonism requires that one use one's own pleasure and real friendship requires that one take pains on behalf of one's friends. The most important benefit that a friend provides is the confidence that he *will* help. Knowing that future pains will be assuaged by friends is like knowing that sharp pains will be short, long pains dull: it removes the disturbance caused by fear of future pain.

An Epicurean can plausibly maintain that even his painstaking actions on behalf of friends are pleasant precisely because they sustain the trust of the friendship and thus his own confidence in the future and thus his own tranquility.

Practice Moderation

Epicurus seems to indicate that sex for the sake of sex is not wise, but o.k. In moderation, like other things. At the same time, he views sexual love as not being worth it because it could cause lust and undue displeasure.

He writes in his letters that he is content with just water and simple bread, but says “Send me a little pot of cheese so that I can indulge in extravagance when I wish.” So, he does say that we can be happy just having what we need and not what we want, but an occasional deference to luxury is o.k. The more we want, the more we want. And the wanting is painful. If you are not in pain, you don’t need “pleasure” – you already have it. We should live the simplest life possible.

Self-Sufficiency is of Paramount Importance

Self-sufficiency, self-preservation, and getting needs met is all a person requires. The more self-sufficient we are, the more freedom we have.

Gods

Epicurus stated that we need not fear the gods, because they are unconcerned with our affairs (similar to a deist approach). Besides, he said, “It is pointless to ask from the gods what one is fully able to supply for oneself.” Everything leads back to his belief that self-sufficiency with the least amount possible is the greatest path to a happy life. In addition, he believed that all things happen “by necessity, by choice, or by chance.”

These things must be considered, according to Epicurus:

In regards to bad things happening in the world God either:

- 1) Wants to change it/them but can't (He is weak);
- 2) Can but doesn't want to (He is spiteful);
- 3) Neither wants to nor can (He is weak and spiteful); or
- 4) Does not care (like all gods).

Death

He said, “Die as if you had never been born” and “Death is nothing to us.” In other words, you should die knowing that before you were born, you did not exist, and it is o.k. not to exist after death. Further, death is nothing to us because when we are alive, death is not present, and when we die, life is not present.

He claims that it is rare that someone dies with both chronic and intense pain.

What about cancer? I am confused by his statement “The feeling of pain does not linger continuously

in the flesh; rather, the sharpest is present for the shortest time, while what merely exceeds the feeling of pleasure in the flesh lasts only a few days. And diseases which last a long time involve feelings of pleasure which exceed feelings of pain.”

This is simply not the case, even with modern science and its ability to decrease pain with medications. Some people suffer continuously for long periods of time.

The “symmetry argument” asserts that we should think of post mortem time in just the same way that we think of the time before our birth. After the dissolution of the soul there is no perception of pain. After the dissolution of the soul there is no subject of harm; the individual ceases to exist. Death – rather than non-existence *per se* – is seen as somehow robbing us of goods we would otherwise have enjoyed. This would also be true: by dying at that point X missed out on various evils which he *would have experienced had he died later*. It is possible to fear not that life will come to an end but more specifically that it might come to an end *too soon*. It is plausible to think that the alternative, an everlasting life, would not itself be desirable. Nothing of good would be added to a good Epicurean life were it to last forever. The Epicureans seem to have generally frowned on suicide.

The Soul Does Not Exist Outside the Body

Epicurus did not believe that the soul exists outside the aggregate that is the body.

His theories of “fire, air, and breath-like stuff” and their function in being part of the soul is interesting too. So, for him, sense-perception also comes from the soul (and then resides in the mind). And sense-perception is what determines what is good (pleasurable) and bad (painful). That pleasure comes simply from the absence of pain.

Laws

“The laws exist for the sake of the wise, not so that they will not commit injustice but so that they will not suffer injustice.”

I like the idea that those who break the law do themselves more harm because of the fear of being found out is greater than the pain they would suffer by not doing the thing that would bring about punishment. Of course, some serial killers would probably argue with that. They are like juggernauts, waiting for the force to come down on them, uncaringly unstoppable until then.

Atomism

Epicurean physics is fundamentally atomistic. “All bodies are either indivisible small bodies or else are comprised of indivisible small bodies.” An outline is as follows:

1. Nothing comes from what is not or disappears into what is not.
But he thinks that we all arose from water and mud – how did they get here? They haven't always existed.
2. The all is made of bodies and void, which are the only complete natures.
3. Amongst bodies, some are composites, others are those from which composites are made.
4. The all is limited or infinite both in the number of atoms and the extent of void.

5. The number of different atomic shapes cannot be conceived.
6. The atoms move more constantly and endlessly because of the existence of void.

Epicurus invokes the evidence of sensory experience which prevents us from seeing atoms so big that they might be perceptible. Epicurean void plays the role of an empty space. It is the empty space in which atoms move.

The basic constituents of the world are atoms and void. They are eternal and unchanging in their intrinsic qualities. Atoms cluster together to form aggregates, which are subject to change and temporary. These compound bodies, which include all of the macroscopic bodies we see and our minds, are real. These aggregates have properties and powers that individual atoms do not.

Empiricism

Empiricism is the theory of knowledge that states that knowledge is based on evidence gained by sensory experience. The Epicureans held that the perceptions serve as a foundation of scientific inference and further, that all perceptions are true.

Epicurus proposed to anchor his theory in the clarity or “evidence” of sensory observations. What distinguishes the clarity or “evidence” is the immediate presence of an object of awareness, stripped of any additional beliefs.

All perceptions are true in that they correspond to something from the outside; in addition, we are able to perceive enduring external objects. By relying on perceptions that are common to all, we obtain theories that are based on a recognition of objective reality.

Descartes would not agree – wax argument. The senses deceive.

As his first rule, Epicurus demands standards by which we judge our beliefs and inquiries. This standard is the “first concept”, and it is something that is “seen” - preconception. This perception signifies that the concept has been “grasped prior” to the pursuit of an inquiry. Without such a grasp, we would keep demonstrating to infinity. All perceptions are the result of “preceding perceptions”.

By starting out with concepts given directly by perception, Epicurus aims to remove anything doubtful or conjectural from the foundation of our investigation.

There are various levels of preconceptions, and they require evaluative judgment. Epicurus believed that a preconception is an outline.

But is an outline a good perception? Preconceptions are often skewed. Think about our upbringing. We may have grown up in a racist area and thereby have a preconception that African Americans are “less than” their white counterparts and treat them accordingly. This is an erroneous preconception and a bad outline.

I. Appearances from outside are of two kinds:

- 1) What appears to the five senses;

2) What appears to the mind.

The only attested preconception of the latter kind is the preconception of God. Epicurus alone saw that there are gods since nature itself imprinted a conception of them in the minds of all.

Suppose I have never seen oars except as partially submerged in water. What is to prevent me from developing a preconception of oars as being objects that are bent?

II. Preconceptions are either common – that is, held by all humans – or only held by some. For example, Epicurus indicates that humans who did not make compacts not to hurt each other did not develop a preconception of justice.

Preconceptions are “inborn” in the sense of “having grown in” us from the beginning of their development, thus developing entirely within us, as opposed to being imposed on us by others and so being imposed on us by others and so being accepted by convention.

But how did they get there? From others telling us that x is x.

Rule 1:

Suppose that Epicurus or anyone else uses preconceptions that others do not share. Some will have a standard by which to settle an inquiry; others will not. Having no standard of their own, the latter would need to rely on the authority of others, and this would be an arbitrary starting point. The investigation can command assent only on the basis of shared assumptions. Subsequently, the theory reveals the reason why the consent of all provides a guarantee of objective existence.

Suppose we are all wrong? Everyone thought the world was flat.

Rule 2:

It is necessary to use perceptions and feelings, just as they are present to one's awareness without any added element of interpretation, as signs of what is not yet observed and what cannot be observed at all. There are two kinds of signs: perceptions, consisting of acts of attention by either the mind or the five senses; and feelings. There are two kinds of inferences: inferences about what is “waiting” (expected) to be observed, and inferences about what cannot be observed.

Epicurus recognized three “criteria of truth”: preconceptions, perceptions, and feelings – and that his followers added the “presentational applications of the mind” as a fourth.

Feelings are no criteria of truth. Many people have their own truth, which may not be based on reality as we know it.

Epicurus believed there is no error in sense perception. In other words, the senses never lie; all perceptions and all presentations are “true”, and all perceptibles are “true and existent”.

The eyes deceive – think about an oasis.

Epicurus would have had two basic arguments:

- 1) Unless one accepts all the perceptions, stripped of any added opinion, as a basis of judgement, there is no way of settling or conducting an inquiry.
- 2) Whatever appears in perception corresponds to something that enters us from outside; in every case we therefore perceive something from the outside as it really is.

The key to escaping the dilemma is to distinguish between a present object of awareness and an added opinion, so as to accept every sensory presentation as free from error and test every opinion by reference to this standard.

On the Epicurean view, no presentation or perception is more “evident” than another. Still, there is an important problem: how sound is a foundation that consists of all perception alike, whether or not they show some objective reality?

Epicurus believed that only subsequent testing in the light of our theory can tell us whether or not our initial assumptions correspond to objective reality.

Exactly, but testing can have its own preconceptions. Some factor might be omitted that might point to the “real” truth.

Epicurus held that opinions “become” true if there is “witnessing” and false if there is no “witnessing”. On the other hand, opinions about what is non-apparent “become” true if there is “no counterwitnessing” and false if there is “counterwitnessing”.

We must give explanations about the events in the heavens and everything that is non-apparent by comparing in how many ways a similar thing happens in our experience.

Perception can not reveal by itself whether or not an object exists objectively. For this, we must make a rational examination of the phenomena, inferring by the use of reason what is unobserved.

True, but “rational” is in itself a preconception. And our reason can be false.

Psychology

Epicurus diagnoses mental disturbance, anxiety, and fear as the result of ignorance and false opinion. Although “psychology” does not constitute a distinct sub-division of Epicurean theory, the term can be used to refer to a number of well-marked topics in their philosophical framework. These include 1) the bodily nature of the psyche, 2) the atomic composition of the psyche, and 3) links between psychological functions and the structure of the body. According to Epicurus, there are only two types of independently existing things, body and void. Epicurus assumes that the psyche falls into the class of things that exist in themselves, and argues that the psyche must be a body, since it is capable of acting and being acted upon, causal properties which belong only to bodies. Epicurus maintains that knowledge must be based on the evidence of the senses.

Epicurus said that the psyche is a blend consisting of four things, of which one is fire-like, one air-like, one wind-like, while the fourth is something which lacks a name...The wind...produces movement in us, the air produces rest, the hot one produces the evident heat of the body, and the unnamed one

produces sensation in us.

The Epicurean account of the relations between psychological functions and the structure of the body assume a single place of thoughts and emotions, located in the region of the heart. Both theories also see this place as the organizing centre of a series of functions, including sensation, operating throughout the body as a whole.

The Epicurean theory assumes a close linkage between beliefs or reasoning and emotions or desires, a feature that is also important in Epicurean thinking about psychology in ethical contexts.

I agree. I believe that I should get what I want so I desire things.

The mind is capable of voluntary action and it exercises an active role in its thought processes and in activating the “spirit” to move the body. Human beings are properly held responsible for their actions because of the way that they develop, by contrast with (at least wild) non-human animals.

The psyche (more precisely, the “mind-spirit complex”) forms a coherent system that is integrated with bodily structure and functions. Adult human beings, in addition, are conceived as beings with relatively complex physical and psychological structures, in which advance capacities such as that for reasoning and responsible action represent “developments” from the original “constitution”. Epicurus aims to show how an understanding of human development supports the claim that we are ethically responsible agents.

The Epicurean approach to the therapy of emotions presupposes that emotions such as fear can be fundamentally changed by changes in belief (such as recognizing that “death is nothing to us”).

Yes, the mind can override emotions.

Cosmology & Meteorology

Epicurean cosmology and meteorology were motivated by the desire to alleviate fear of gods. While Epicurus recognized the existence of gods, he denied the possibility that they have any cosmic influence. He developed a strict materialist philosophy, designed to offer natural explanations of phenomena that were often seen as due to the activities of gods. If such phenomena are not due to gods, there is no reason to fear the gods' involvement in our world.

Epicurus believed that in order to be happy, it is necessary to have the right kind of explanations. For the Epicureans, there is only one explanation of the nature of the universe: it is composed of atoms (bodies) and the void (space). The acceptance of atomic theory contributes to happiness. In order to alleviate anxiety, it is sufficient to be able to offer a number of possible explanations for these phenomena. Epicurus rejected divine agency as a possible cause. The Epicurean worldview argues against any notion of divine providence or teleology: the idea that things occur for a particular purpose or goal. He believed that the gods are too busy being blissful to bother with human concerns, including the weather.

In attempting to understand the world, our ordinary, everyday experiences can serve us well.

As part of developing an explanation, reliance on sense experience – to help determine what requires confirmation and what is unclear – is crucial. Information obtained through observation is vital, and analogies to common, everyday experiences can also be useful to understand things that are far away, including meteorological phenomena such as clouds. In fact, Epicurus warns against gaining excessively detailed knowledge about phenomena: such knowledge may lead to further anxiety and contribute little to peace of mind.

Astronomical knowledge, in Epicurus' view, cannot contribute to one's happiness, accordingly, he does not advocate the detailed mathematical study of the motions of the heavenly bodies.

Epicurus is concerned with epistemology, and how we gain what we consider to be knowledge. He recognizes limits to our ability to know. He cautions against becoming too attached to one dogmatic explanation which, he claims, is a superstitious trap into which others have fallen. For Epicurus, a single conclusive explanation of a given phenomenon is not necessary for the achievement of *ataraxia*.

The Epicureans' aim was to demonstrate that the universe and various distant phenomena can be explained without reference to anything outside of nature, or extraordinary. It was the elimination of fear and anxiety (particularly about the intervention of gods in the world) that motivated Epicurus to present his views on cosmology and meteorology, and to argue that ordinary experience is invaluable in helping us to understand the universe as natural.

Action & Responsibility

Human agency exists within a world whose ultimate constituents are simply extended and indivisible bits of matter (atoms) whizzing around in empty space (the void). Epicurus wishes to defend free will against the threat of determinism.

There are three different sorts of freedom:

- a) Our ability to act as we wish to in order to get what we desire.
- b) Our ability to modify our desires, hopefully in a way that allows us to attain happiness.
- c) Moral responsibility, our ability to be justifiably subject to praise and blame for what we do.

Atoms naturally fall straight downwards, and they also move because of collisions and entanglements with other atoms. There is a third cause of atomic motion, a random swerve to the side by one spatial minimum, which saves us from the decrees of fate. Nowadays many hail the swerve as part of the first libertarian theory of free will. Free volition is what allows creatures throughout the earth to do what they want to do and to advance wherever pleasure leads them. Free volition exists because the body follows the mind's desire.

We live in a sick society that teaches us we need wealth and social status so that we can engage in continuous drinking bouts, enjoy sexual favors, and consume an extravagant table. If our actions were controlled by such desires, this enslavement would lead to misery. But, Epicurus thinks, we can modify such desires, by using our reason. We can ask, of every desire we have, “what will happen if I do not? Reason allows us to do this by showing us that certain desires, temperaments and ways of life are not effective for getting us what we ultimately desire for its own sake, pleasure.

Pleasure and Desire

Pleasure represents lack of pain in body and lack of distress in soul. Epicurus does not recognize a neutral state of neither pleasure nor pain; for a percipient subject, being without pain is already pleasant. Equally, however, Epicurus does not hold that the only pleasure to be had is freedom from pain. The pleasures of the profligate, which he tells us do not represent the Epicurean goal, certainly are pleasures as far as Epicurus is concerned, since he calls them that, though he adds that such pleasures do not generate a pleasant life.

Luxury, according to Epicurus, is in fact to be welcomed, just so long as its possession does not detract from the maintenance or attainment of a pain and trouble-free state; and it need not do this, he holds, so long as one has the right attitude towards luxury: namely, that it is to be enjoyed if present, but not missed if absent.

Epicurus does not say that we cannot *get* pleasure when free from pain, just that we do not need it in such circumstances. That we do not need it does not in turn suggest that it is unreasonable for one to avail oneself of opportunities for pleasure nonetheless.

It might still be the case that luxuries are items that will be treated, under Epicurus' classification of desires, as objects of "empty" or "vain" desires. Desires, he says, are either natural or empty. Natural desires are in turn subdivided into the necessary and the merely natural. Necessary desires are further subdivided into those necessary for happiness, for lack of trouble in the body, and for survival itself. Luxurious food counts as an object of natural but not necessary desires, honors are objects of desires that are neither necessary nor natural. Pleasure in the flesh will not increase, but is only varied once the pain of want is removed. The more involved point about the limit of mental pleasure is in harmony with the basic idea that beyond the removal of pain or distress there is no increase in pleasure.

One's happiness may indeed be embellished by the addition of other good things, but not increased.

He distinguished "static" pleasures (freedom from pain and distress) from "kinetic" pleasures (joy and delight). One might thus talk of static pleasure as consisting in a state of mental and bodily satisfaction. Once one is without pain in the body or distress in the mind, then static pleasure has reached its limit and cannot be increased. One might then contrast static pleasure with pleasure obtained in processes (kinetic pleasure) or activities (such as drinking or watching the sunset), as behaving differently from happiness.

Politics & Society

It would be a mistake to infer that Epicureanism is apolitical. Epicureans do not absolutely reject ordinary politics and do not think that justice is whatever a society decides it is. The Epicureans pursuit of pleasure requires that they cultivate their own community of friends. The Epicurean insists that those who seeks security from political power and honor are mistaken about how best to achieve freedom from fear. There are exceptions, however. The Epicurean prefers to live outside of traditional political entanglements, to "live unnoticed". The Epicurean does not, however, prefer to live alone. He prefers to live in a community of fellow pursuers of painlessness.

The community of friends *requires* the presence of a favorably disposed, traditional political

community nearby, to guarantee security against potentially powerful enemies. Epicureans who seek an ideal political community apart from the traditional city, cannot be entirely apart from traditional politics.

Epicureans on the Arts

A widely publicized trait of ancient Epicureanism was its opposition to the set of disciplines or subjects of instruction which instilled culture and bestowed prestige on the Greek elite and included the so-called “liberal” arts. Epicureans believed that the arts “contributed nothing to the perfection of wisdom”.

On poetry. It is too much trouble and distracts from philosophy to learn and to practice it, but it is fine to listen to it with enjoyment. If one discusses music and poetry, there must be a properly philosophical way of doing so. Poets are of little or even no use for life, since they aim at entertainment and are false to that end, while philosophers aim to instruct us in useful things. Poetry strengthens and exacerbates human passions. Poetry says many things which are morally good or bad and can incite the listener to good or bad actions, emotions and character. The Epicureans did not think that a philosopher should give speeches at public festivals.

Therapeutic Strategies

The Epicureans assume that the principle goal of philosophy is to secure one's happiness and that that result can be achieved only by removing the principal causes of human suffering, namely the vices and certain emotions or passions. These are diseases of the soul that philosophy must cure and thus restore the soul to its healthy natural state. The Epicureans perceived the philosopher as a kind of doctor who cures disturbance and anxiety and helps us achieve the supreme good, pleasure or the absence of pain. The important thing is to live the philosophical life, not merely engage in theoretical discourse.

The goal of therapy can be pursued in many different ways. The Epicureans realized that psychic diseases require a plurality of methods because they can be complex and hard to cure. Epicurus' concept of therapy consisted of arguments. It relies on a concrete methodology. His arguments principally aim at removing ignorance or false beliefs lying at the source of much of our anxiety and disturbance.

He believed in repetition and memorization. What we commit to memory tends to get associated with a number of thoughts, some true and some false. If we assess them in the light of the Epicurean criteria of truth, we end up having true beliefs or knowledge. We are very disturbed by our fears. We can be cured only by making use of our reason.

But what if our reason isn't reasonable? Do we then rely on others who concur with each others opinions?

Ethics/Morals

“You ought to do nothing in your life that will make you afraid if it becomes known to your neighbor.” You should do what brings you the most pleasure while acting with practicality. Virtues are useful in that they assist with achieving pleasure. But do not act in a manner that will provoke retaliation.

Epicurus believed that no one can harm others without thereby harming himself. Anyone who resists the agreement and seeks to harm others will fail to achieve his good of tranquility and painlessness because he cannot be secure in the belief that his treachery will go undiscovered and unpunished. Human beings need the cooperation of other human beings in order to avoid being harmed.

Conclusion

We've now discussed the common threads throughout Epicurus' philosophy, namely:

- 1) Seek to minimize pain and maximize pleasure
- 2) Do not fear death or the gods
- 3) Anxiety is the root of displeasure – seek to eliminate it
- 4) Stay in the present
- 5) Be self-sufficient
- 6) All is comprised of atoms or the void
- 7) Do not do things which will bring about harm to one's self
- 8) Do not focus on material things
- 9) Do not be run by your desires, be run by your needs – or your happiness will be ruined
- 10) Trust your perceptions of things, especially if there is concurrence
- 11) Good friends are crucial
- 12) The study of philosophy will provide continuous pleasure

These simple things can alleviate anxiety, which is the root of all pain. While they may be simple ideas, in practice they can be very difficult. If stripped down to the bare bones of living, Epicurus believed, we can be happy.