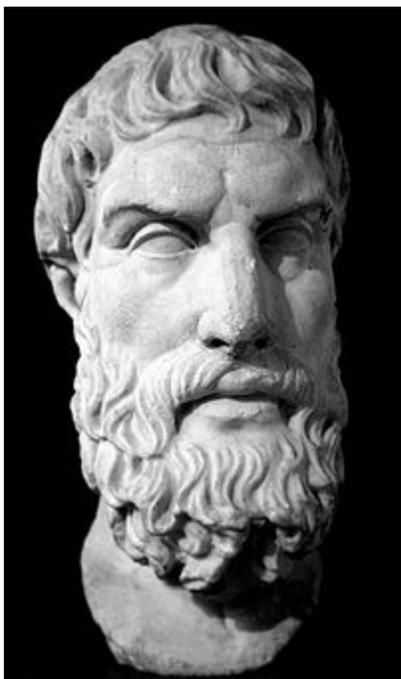


Epicureanism 101

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Epicurus (341 BCE – Athens, 270 BCE) was a Greek philosopher whose school of thought is called Epicureanism.



Some of his philosophy I find very consoling and other parts disconcerting. What follows is a discussion of the basic philosophy as well as some questions the ideas raise for me and my comments. Perhaps you will offer what you believe are the answers to the questions I pose.

The main crux of his 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). I surmise that he

supported exercise, as he said "Even some bodily pains are worthwhile for fending off others like them." *Working out your back so you won't have a bad back?*

"...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.*

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. Was Epicurus the first to speak of living a moderate life, not causing waves, and staying in today and being grateful, or *did Confucius beat him to it?* 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. I can trace my own

unhappiness and unnecessary suffering to worrying about things from the past or the future when if I lived in the present things would be much more pleasant and manageable. 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.” O.k., I agree that in most cases, the pleasures and pains originate from the body. That would make sense to me in the case of getting broken up with (assuming we want to stay in the relationship and that we care. Maybe our **“meat robot”** (the meaning of which is that we are preprogrammed due to genetics and environment and we act according to this – an absence of “free will” replaced by determinism – to be explored in a future newsletter) selves are attracted to this other person to mate, most likely). We first feel those feelings in our body, as a pain, a nervousness, a case of feeling sick. Then our mind further punishes us with images of betrayal, not being loved, fear of being alone, etc. - whatever it means to us by this person leaving. And for physical pain, the mind makes it worse by wondering how long the pain will last, what it implies...I can envision, however, where pain originates in the mind and then goes to the body. Let’s say, for example, that someone suspects their husband is cheating. First they have the thought, and probably a corresponding image of him having sex with an unidentified woman. Second, they will feel anxiety, nausea, anger, etc. all which manifest themselves in the

body. So, the mind can cause pain in the body as well. I suppose Epicurus would have said not to have those thoughts, as they cause needless anxiety. But suppose we don’t worry about it and then find out that he did cheat (he admits to it). Then the pleasure would be far outweighed by the pain, for a long period of time. *Would Epicurus then respond that we never should have entered into a relationship that may potentially cause this kind of pain? Even “meat robots” must get hurt in relationships. Is that merely because it goes against the desire to mate? Is there no emotional attachment?*

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. Probably one of the reasons he didn’t believe in engaging in political affairs!

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. How true. When I am possibly going to get a chunk of money, for example, I put a lot of effort (obsession) into how I am going to spend the money. Then I get anxious about whether I may not get the money. But I want this! How will I be happy without it?! When all of my needs are well taken care of. As Epicurus said, nature provides everything we need to survive. *Intelligent Design?* I know, Epicurus said this happened by accident and without the help of any god.

He went on further to say that "One should envy no one. For the good are not worthy of envy, and the more good fortune the wicked have, the more they spoil it for themselves." So, if you are rich, you just have bigger problems. "Nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little."

Self-Sufficiency is of Paramount Importance

Self-sufficiency, self-preservation, and getting needs met is all a person needs. True, but how hard to swallow, when society has taught us to want and we needlessly rely on other people! Ideas of romance usually include a couple who is always together, perpetuating co-dependence. Of course, Epicurus seemed to have had a lot of friends, but he knew there were a few which he could depend on when he needed help (he uses getting bailed out of jail as an example), and vice versa. A necessary win-win situation.

God/Gods

Epicurus stated that we need not fear the gods, because they are unconcerned with our affairs (similar to a deist approach). [But then again, I would like to believe in positive Divine Intervention (mentioned below)]. He also seemed to indicate that the gods are anthropomorphic because of our images of them from dreams, but they do not communicate with us. 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 living self-sufficiently 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." *How does determinism reconcile with the third category, as he defined chance as "a cause which is unstable with respect to persons, times, and places?"*

One problem I have with some Christians is that they interpret every bit of the Scripture literally. One issue I have a problem with is same-sex relations. The Bible indicates it is a sin in 8 areas. 6 refer to men only. One refers to both. One could be men, women, or both. Christians say it's o.k. as long as you admit, and repent for, your sins. *What if someone doesn't consider it a sin? Is God one of love, or will he punish someone after they die for not repenting?* Sex before marriage is another example. There are more examples. These concerns can create fear in the mind of a Christian. *How can love be wrong if He is a loving God? Are those parts of the Bible written in the bias of the Book's author, is it part of an antiquated historical context, or both?*

Epicurus' discussion of God (where does this God reside? What does God pursue?) is obviously of concern and I cannot answer the age-old question that follows.

I agree with Epicurus that if God answered all prayers then suffering or destruction would result. I have never believed that He answered all prayers, because He can predict the possible outcomes and if there wasn't a useful outcome, or it was incongruent with life (such as biology), that one was not answered. (If one prays to be made into a frog, God would not grant that prayer).

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).

I usually thank God when something good happens in my life or I am spared a consequence for something bad I have done. When it comes to bad things happening to me, I view that as punishment, for a current or previous sin. If it's a current sin, then that will be obvious: if I have a bad trip I shouldn't do acid. I know certain natural disasters are necessary to adjust certain things in nature to a more useful state. And a large part of me feels that 9-11 occurred because the U.S. kept inserting its will in the terrorists' Holy Land. 9-11 was retaliation for that. Not a popular

opinion. I posed the above options to one of our pastors, who said in its most simplest of terms that God chose to bind God's own hands. She also quoted "I have never thought that a Christian would be free from suffering, for our Lord suffered. And I came to believe that he suffered not to save us from suffering but to teach us how to bear suffering. For he knew that there is no life without suffering." So, an Epicurean will argue, that he is spiteful. I ask myself "Then, why am I so lucky?" If God intervened for me, but not others whom are more deserving, that makes no sense, or I am special for some reason? But no human life should be valued over another. Perhaps I am just lucky, that I am predetermined to have these good things and bad things happen, and that the bad things are not consequences.

Morality

His morality is not morality at all, as when he asks himself in the *Puzzles* whether the wise man will do some things which the laws forbid, if he knows he will escape detention. He answers, "the plain statement is not easy." *Doesn't this mean he would do it but just not admit it?* I suppose in this example he was indicating if for some reason he knew for a fact he wouldn't be caught, so it was a hypothetical. He definitely advocates not doing anything that one is not willing to pay the price for if caught.

Death

I must admit that I fear death. Well, not death itself, but a painful death. Epicurus died of kidney stones. I understand that kidney stones are very painful. And he endured this for 14

days, which would seem forever to me. 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.

It is true that it was o.k. for me not to exist prior to birth, and it would be o.k. (though not preferred) to not exist after I die, because I would never know. His teachings do put a lot of pressure, in my opinion, on our life, because while giving up the hopes of immortality, we have to make the most of what this life has to offer. Does that mean that those many naps I have taken should have been spent another way? He does support leisure, however. *If you are a “meat robot”, does anything you do matter?*

By the way, I don’t believe that we “meet” God after we die.

Other Random Stuff

Natural Community of Rational Beings

O.k., now that that’s over, a question: *Why, do you suppose, he said “there is no natural community of rational beings with each other.”? Isn’t it possible to have such a community, if the “rational” (in his eyes) were to congregate?*

Wouldn’t he consider the self-proclaimed Epicureans a rational community?

The Soul Does Not Exist Outside the Body

Epicurus did not believe that the soul exists outside the aggregate that is the body. This is not congruent with my belief that we do exist as non-physical entities after we die. What we do or become, I don’t know. I like that he tries to pinpoint where the soul resides. When I was asked once, I said the soul resided in my chest. Most likely because that is where I experience emotional pain. It is interesting that Epicurus thought that the rational part of the soul resides in the chest. But in his view, the rest of the soul is irrational – *so why does that part of the soul exist?* His theories of “fire, air, and breathlike 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.

Presentation of the Truth

In his discussion that...”a presentation is true if it comes from an existing object and in accordance with the existing object, and every presentation arises from the object presented (which is existent) and in accordance with the presented object itself, necessarily every presentation is true.” My reading of this is that he indicated that what you see is what you get; or more accurately, what you see is what you see. *Wouldn’t this contradict Plato’s Allegory of the Cave?*

Or does the phrase “in accordance with” mean the true properties of the thing, meaning in Plato’s case that reality would not be considered a true presentation? Perhaps I am answering my own question because in another area he discussed something being true based on testimony for and lack of testimony against. Then again, in Plato’s case, the cave dwellers would all agree that their reality was true, when their reality was really false. They are unable to distinguish opinion from clear fact.

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.

The Cosmos

His views on the cosmos are “interesting.” They don’t make much sense to me, so once I saw part of it, I decided to skip over the rest. ☺

Don’t Write Poems (?)

What’s he got against writing poems? He thinks we should be conversant on poetry and music. *Is it because writing poems might draw unwanted attention to oneself?* Requested readings, and the like?

How We Got Here

He believed we arose from water and mud. *Is this just an oversimplification of how biologists and others claim that life began?*

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’d have to agree with that, as the unwise are the ones who need to be kept from committing injustice.