Epicurus and Epicureanism

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Epicurus (341–270 BCE) was a Hellenistic Greek moral philosopher who identified the goal of life as happiness. The study of science was an essential but subsidiary component of his all-encompassing system, which attracted Greek and Roman practitioners for centuries.

The main source for the biography of Epicurus is DIOGENES LAERTIUS' *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*. He was born on the Greek island of Samos to Athenian parents who later moved to Kolophon in Asia Minor. Diogenes and Cicero report that Epicurus claimed to be self-taught, but Diogenes cites ancient sources that name various teachers, including Pamphilos and Nausiphanes. The latter would have taught him about DEMOCRITUS' atomic theory, which became an essential foundation of Epicurean science. Epicurus first attracted followers in Kolophon, Mytilene, and Lampsakos. Around 306, he acquired in Athens a house with a garden (*kepos*) that gave its name to a community of friends, and then to the philosophical school in general. His first colleagues included a slave named Mys and at least two women (Leontion and Themista). Three close associates of Epicurus whose (nonextant) works became authoritative were Hermarchos, Metrodoros, and Polyainos. PLUTARCH and others mention several (possibly fictitious) hetairai from the Garden (*see* HETAIRA). Diogenes Laertius also records Epicurus' will, which passes leadership of the Garden on to Hermarchos, and gives instructions for Epicurean communal gatherings (10.16–21).

Epicurus was prolific, but the only full works to survive are three epistles preserved by Diogenes Laertius: the *Letter to Herodotus*, on physical theory; the *Letter to Menoeceus*, on ethics; and the *Letter to Pythocles*, on astronomy and meteorology. Diogenes also records the *Principal Doctrines* (*Kyriai Doxai*), a collection of forty sayings articulated by Epicurus or culled from Epicurean sources. Also extant is a larger collection now called the "Vatican Sayings." Two types of fragments also survive: ancient quotations and paraphrases of lost works, and severely damaged papyri found in a villa in HERCULANEUM that was covered with volcanic ash in 79 CE. Most of the former appear (often translated into Latin) in much later works by Cicero, Epictetus, Plutarch, Seneca, Sextus Empiricus, and others whose stances toward Epicureanism are generally hostile. The latter include numerous fragments of Epicurus' *On Nature* (*peri phuseos*). Many references to writings by Epicurus' direct associates survive, and PORPHYRY quotes or paraphrases Hermarchos extensively. We owe much of our knowledge of Epicureanism to sources that postdate Epicurus by centuries. Most important is the epic *De Rerum Natura* by the first-century BCE Roman poet Lucretius, who transferred Epicurean teachings into Latin verse. Also crucial are the many fragmentary Greek texts by the first-century BCE poet and Epicurean scholar PHILODEMOS, whose works are found alongside those of Epicurus in Herculaneum. The monumental second-century CE Epicurean inscription of Diogenes at Oinoanda is also significant. Scholars have generally treated later works in both Latin and Greek as faithful sources for early Epicureanism, but many now exercise caution. Lucretius attests to Epicurean conservatism when he addresses Epicurus: "You are our father (*pater*), the discoverer of things, you provide for us a father's precepts" (3.9–10). But Torquatus, the Epicurean mouthpiece in Cicero's *On Moral Ends* (*de finibus*), acknowledges deviations from Epicurean orthodoxy (1.66–70), as does Philodemos, who describes disagreements with the founding Epicureans as "almost parricide" (*Rhetorica* A, col. VII).

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EPICUREAN PLEASURE

Epicurus denied that humanity or any aspect of the universe has a predetermined purpose, and taught that pleasure (*hedone*) is the goal or end (*telos*). Thus the Epicureans were hedonists, but Epicurus writes in the *Letter to Menoeceus* (131), "Whenever we say that pleasure is the *telos*, we do not mean the pleasures of degenerates and pleasures that consist in carnal indulgence, as some assume (out of ignorance or disagreement, or because they misinterpret us), but we mean the absence of pain in the body and the absence of distress in the spirit." A doctrine of "choice and avoidance" was essential. The Epicurean pleasures included the enjoyment of friendship and the pursuit of philosophy. Pleasures that brought turmoil, such as overindulgence and the satisfaction of lust, were to be avoided. *Principal Doctrine* 8 states, "No pleasure is in itself evil, but the things that produce some pleasures also bring disturbances many times greater than the pleasures." Epicurus made a distinction between *kinetic* pleasure (a process) and *katastematic* pleasure (a state). These terms are interpreted variously, but most scholars agree that the latter connoted a spiritual happiness that was valued more highly than bodily pleasure.

Friendship (but not marriage or erotic attachment) is essential to Epicurean contentment: "Of the things wisdom acquires to ensure happiness for life as a whole, far the greatest is the acquisition of friendship" (*Principal Doctrine* 27). The development of social ties was a crucial stage in Epicurus' theory of the evolution of human society (Lucretius 5.925–1457). Epicurus stressed utility: friends offer security. Detractors noted Epicurus' devotion to his friends, but objected that his theory of friendship denied the importance of altruism (e.g., Cicero, *de finibus* 2.78–85). Pleasure, rather than abstract moral principles, also guided the Epicurean's pursuit of the good and the just. The *Letter to Menoeceus* states succinctly that "it is not possible to live pleasantly without living wisely and honorably and justly . . . for virtues are naturally part of a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them" (132).

EPICUREAN SCIENCE

The objective of Epicurean reflections about natural phenomena was the release from fear and the attainment of happiness. The 11th *Principal Doctrine* states, "If we had not been oppressed by misapprehensions about the phenomena of the sky, or about death (which means nothing to us), or by ignorance of the limits of pains and desires, we would not have needed to study natural science." *Principal Doctrine* 12 adds that the study of nature is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of unmixed pleasure. The foundation of Epicurean scientific method was an unprecedented degree of empiricism. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus presented his theory of knowledge in a work called the *Canon* ("measuring stick"), whose central assertion was that the senses are an infallible gauge of the truth (10.30). When judgments based on the senses cannot be confirmed, Epicurean science proposes plausible explanations for phenomena, but declines to choose between them. Scholars agree that sensory observation was fundamental, but there is little consensus about the methods of Epicurus' empiricism.

Like Democritus, Epicurus taught that nothing exists other than the infinite void (empty space) and atoms (*atoma*, indivisible pieces of matter). This thoroughly materialist conception of reality meant that Epicurean science included theology, human history, and metaphysics, as well as physics and biology. Even the mind and soul are composed of atoms that are dispersed throughout the body. In Epicurus' view, the atoms have various fixed qualities such as size, shape, and weight. Atomic combinations produce color, smell, and other secondary properties. The

atoms are in constant downward motion. To account for the joining of atoms to form complex bodies, Epicureanism posits that atoms sometimes swerve at random from their otherwise steady course. The swerve of the atoms also releases humanity from determinism and provides for the existence of human volition. Extant Epicurean texts do not elucidate precisely how human freedom is explained by this theory, which we know primarily from Lucretius (2.251–93), Diogenes of Oinoanda (fragment 33), and Cicero's and Plutarch's ridicule. Effluences streaming off from the atoms of solid bodies cause all sensory perceptions, including vision, and are the basis for thoughts and memories. These *simulacra*, as Lucretius calls them (4.30), retain the relevant features of the source. They may outlast the source itself, and may mix with other effluences, thus producing misconceptions of reality, such as illusions and nightmares.

Epicurean science offered liberation from religious superstition and from the fear of death, to which Epicurus attributed the destructive desire for wealth and power. The human soul is mortal, as its atoms disperse at death, which ends all sensation (Lucretius 3.417–614). There is no afterlife, and thus the deceased experience no regret and no divine punishment. The gods, who are made of replenishable atoms, are indestructible beings who inflict no harm and offer no aid (*Principal Doctrine* 1). They dwell in a world apart (the *metakosmos*, or *intermundia*), but human beings can sense and emulate their blessed happiness. Some scholars view the Epicurean gods as ideal constructs rather than conventional deities of the Greek pantheon.

For Epicurus, philosophy was above all therapeutic. Philodemos records the *tetrapharmakos* ("the fourfold cure"), which encapsulated the essentials of the Epicurean outlook as follows: "God is not to be feared, death should cause no anxiety, easily obtained is the good, and easily endured is the bad" (Herculaneum Papyrus 1005).

LATER EPICUREANS AND CRITICS OF EPICURUS

As a philosophical community, and more generally as a worldview, Epicureanism was long-lived. Diogenes Laertius mentions many early Greek disciples, including Kolotes (ca. 310–260), whose criticism of philosophical skepticism was later countered by Plutarch. Papyri from Herculaneum have revealed texts by or about other early Greek Epicureans, including Apollodoros, Carneiscus, Philonides, and Polystratos. There is abundant evidence for intense interest during the Late Roman Republic. Although Epicurus did not advocate the composition of poetry, the two best-known first-century BCE Epicureans are the poets Lucretius and Philodemos. Well-informed allusions to Epicurean traditions also appear in the poetry of VERGIL and HORACE. Epicurean teachers and scholars among their contemporaries included Amafinius, Phaedrus, Siro, and Zeno of Sidon. Prominent first-century BCE Roman statesmen who espoused Epicureanism included Albucius, Pansa, and Piso (all pilloried by Cicero), and Cassius (a conspirator against Julius Caesar). The Garden flourished also in the second century CE, when Diogenes of Oinoanda broadcast the philosophy on the walls of a stoa in Asia Minor. Plotina, the politically active wife of the emperor Trajan (ca. 53–117), was an Epicurean who successfully petitioned Hadrian to grant the Epicureans the right to appoint a noncitizen as head of their school. A memorable caricature of an Epicurean who combats a fraudulent oracle monger appears in LUCIAN's *Alexander the False Prophet*. In the next century, Diogenes Laertius' appreciative survey presented the Garden as the culmination of his entire work.

Negative stereotypes of Epicureans were widespread in antiquity, as Plutarch makes clear: "If renown is pleasant, disgrace is painful; and nothing is more disgraceful than lack of friends, idleness, irreligion, profligacy, or being regarded with contempt. All people

except the Epicureans themselves consider these attributes to belong to their sect" (*Non Posse* 1100 D). The Epicurean theory of pleasure inspired many polemics, as did their alleged atheism and a tradition of withdrawing from politics. The most extravagantly hostile texts include Cicero's *Against Piso*, Plutarch's screeds *de latenter vivendo* and *non posse*, and Seneca's *de vita beata*. Indications of early censure and lampoon include allusions to a lost text by Metrodorus' brother Timocrates, a few surviving parodic lines by Timon of Phleios (ca. 320–230), and fragmentary scenes from third-century BCE New Comedy. Hostile assessments are prominent in Epictetus' *Discourses*, and in Cicero's *On Moral Ends*, *On the Nature of the Gods*, and *Tusculan Disputations*. In the Roman world, Epicureanism was often viewed as a polar opposite to STOICISM, particularly in theological, astronomical, and political matters. Early attestations to this rivalry appear in the fragments of the Greek Stoic Chrysippos. Epicurus' rejection of teleology contributed to charges of atheism, particularly among early Christians. Some opponents' abhorrence was not absolute. Seneca closes his *Epistles* with quotations of Epicurus, Cicero's close friend Atticus was an Epicurean, and Plutarch includes Epicurean friends as conversation partners in various works.

Much scholarship since the late twentieth century has been largely appreciative, but as A. A. Long has written recently, "Epicurus, though much of his thought is firmly rooted in the Greek tradition, was too innovative overall to gain a fair hearing from his intellectual rivals; and the process of rehabilitation is still far from complete" (2006: 199). Current work on Epicureanism includes renewed interest in Lucretius, examinations of Epicurean responses to pre-Socratic philosophy, and an increasing focus on Philodemos, whose texts from Herculaneum continue to be deciphered.

SEE ALSO: Cicero, Marcus Tullius; Lucretius; Philodemos, Epicurean; Philosophy, Hellenistic; Philosophy, Roman; Science, Greek; Soul, Greece and Rome.

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