

Epicurus

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Epicurus (Greek: Ἐπίκουρος, *Epikouros*, "ally, comrade"; Samos, 341 BCE – Athens, 270 BCE; 72 years) was an ancient Greek philosopher and the founder of the school of philosophy called Epicureanism. Only a few fragments and letters remain of Epicurus's 300 written works. Much of what is known about Epicurean philosophy derives from later followers and commentators.

For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy was to attain the happy, tranquil life, characterized by ataraxia, peace and freedom from fear, and "aponia", the absence of pain, and by living a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends. He taught that pleasure and pain are the measures of what is good and bad, that death is the end of the body and the soul and should therefore not be feared, that the gods do not reward or punish humans, that the universe is infinite and eternal, and that events in the world are ultimately based on the motions and interactions of atoms moving in empty space.

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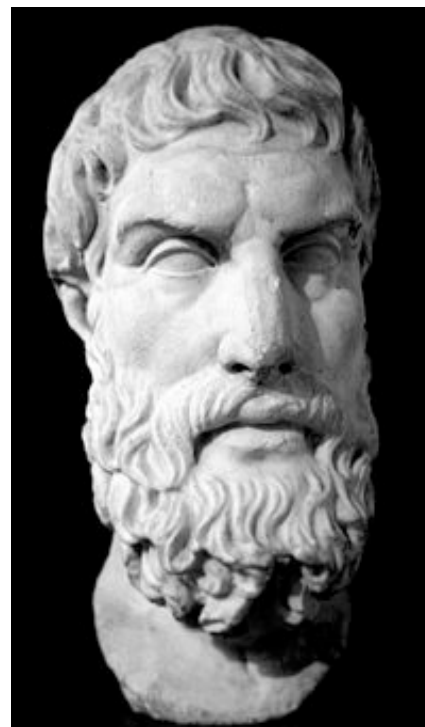
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Biography

His parents, Neocles and Chaerstrate, both Athenian citizens, had immigrated to the Athenian settlement on the Aegean island of Samos about ten years before Epicurus' birth in February 341 BCE.^[1] As a boy he studied philosophy for four years under the Platonist teacher Pamphilus. At the age of 18 he went to Athens

Epicurus

Western philosophy
Ancient philosophy



Full name	Ἐπίκουρος <i>Epikouros</i>
Born	341 BCE
Died	circa 270 BCE
School/tradition	Epicureanism
Main interests	Atomism, Hedonism
Influenced by	[show]
Influenced	[show]

for his two-year term of military service. The playwright Menander served in the same age-class of the ephebes as Epicurus.

After the death of Alexander the Great, Perdiccas expelled the Athenian settlers on Samos to Colophon. After the completion of his military service, Epicurus joined his family there. He studied under Nausiphanes, who followed the teachings of Democritus. In 311/310 BCE Epicurus taught in Mytilene but caused strife and was forced to leave. He then founded a school in Lampsacus before returning to Athens in 306 BC. There he founded The Garden, a school named for the garden he owned about halfway between the Stoa and the Academy that served as the school's meeting place.

Even though many of his teachings were heavily influenced by earlier thinkers, especially by Democritus, he differed in a significant way with Democritus on determinism. Epicurus would often deny this influence, denounce other philosophers as confused, and claim to be "self-taught".

Epicurus never married and had no known children. He suffered from kidney stones,^[2] to which he finally succumbed in 270 BCE^[3] at the age of 72, and despite the prolonged pain involved, he wrote to Idomeneus:

I have written this letter to you on a happy day to me, which is also the last day of my life. For I have been attacked by a painful inability to urinate, and also dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which comes from the recollection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions. And I beg you to take care of the children of Metrodorus, in a manner worthy of the devotion shown by the young man to me, and to philosophy.^[4]

The School

Epicurus' school had a small but devoted following in his lifetime. The primary members were Hermarchus, the financier Idomeneus, Leonteus and his wife Themista, the satirist Colotes, the mathematician Polyaeus of Lampsacus, and Metrodorus of Lampsacus, the most famous popularizer of Epicureanism. His school was the first of the ancient Greek philosophical schools to admit women as a rule rather than an exception.^[5] The original school was based in Epicurus' home and garden. An inscription on the gate to the garden is recorded by Seneca in his *Epistle XXI*:

Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.

Epicurus emphasized friendship as an important ingredient of happiness, and the school resembled in many ways a community of friends living together. However, he also instituted a hierarchical system of levels among his followers, and had them swear an oath on his core tenets.

Teachings



Epicurus is a key figure in the development of science and the scientific method because of his insistence that nothing should be believed except that which was tested through direct observation and logical deduction. Many of his ideas about nature and physics presaged important scientific concepts of our time. He was a key figure in the Axial Age, the period from 800 BCE to 200 BCE, during which similarly revolutionary thinking



appeared in China, India, Iran, the Near East, and Ancient Greece. His statement of the Ethic of Reciprocity as the foundation of ethics is the earliest in Ancient Greece, and differs from the Stuart Mill's formulation by emphasizing the minimization of harm to oneself and others as the way to maximize happiness.

Epicurus's teachings represented a departure from the other major Greek thinkers of his period, and before, but was nevertheless founded on many of the same principles as Democritus. Like Democritus, he was an atomist, believing that the fundamental constituents of the world were indivisible little bits of matter (atoms, Greek *atomos*, indivisible) flying through empty space (*khaos*). Everything that occurs is the result of the atoms colliding, rebounding, and becoming entangled with one another, with no purpose or plan behind their motions. (Compare this with the modern study of particle physics.) His theory differs from the earlier atomism of Democritus because he admits that atoms do not always follow straight

lines but their direction of motion may occasionally exhibit a 'swerve' (*clinamen*). This allowed him to avoid the determinism implicit in the earlier atomism and to affirm free will.^[6] (Compare this with the modern theory of quantum physics, which postulates a non-deterministic random motion of fundamental particles.)

He regularly admitted women and slaves into his school, introducing the new concept of fundamental human egalitarianism into Greek thought, and was one of the first Greeks to break from the god-fearing and god-worshipping tradition common at the time, even while affirming that religious activities are useful as a way to contemplate the gods and to use them as an example of the pleasant life. Epicurus participated in the activities of traditional Greek religion, but taught that one should avoid holding false opinions about the gods. The gods are immortal and blessed and men who ascribe any additional qualities that are alien to immortality and blessedness are, according to Epicurus, impious. The gods do not punish the bad and reward the good as the common man believes. The opinion of the crowd is, Epicurus claims, that the gods "send great evils to the wicked and great blessings to the righteous who model themselves after the gods," when in reality Epicurus believes the gods do not concern themselves at all with human beings.

Pleasure as absence of suffering

Epicurus' philosophy is based on the theory that all good and bad derive from the sensations of pleasure and pain. What is good is what is pleasurable, and what is bad is what is painful. Pleasure and pain were ultimately, for Epicurus, the basis for the moral distinction between good and bad. If pain is chosen over pleasure in some cases it is only because it leads to a greater pleasure. Although Epicurus has been commonly misunderstood to advocate the rampant pursuit of pleasure, (primarily through the influence of Christian polemics) what he was really after was the absence of pain (both physical and mental, i.e., suffering) - a state of satiation and tranquility that was free of the fear of death and the retribution of the gods. When we do not suffer pain, we are no longer in need of pleasure, and we enter a state of 'perfect mental peace' (*ataraxia*).

Epicurus explicitly warned against overindulgence because it often leads to pain. For instance, in what might be described as a "hangover" theory, Epicurus warned against pursuing love too ardently. However, having a circle of friends you can trust is one of the most important means for securing a tranquil life.

Epicurus also believed (*contra* Aristotle) that death was not to be feared. When a man dies, he does not feel the pain of death because he no longer is and he therefore feels nothing. Therefore, as Epicurus famously said, "death is nothing to us." When we exist death is not, and when death exists we are not. All sensation and consciousness ends with death and therefore in death there is neither pleasure nor pain. The fear of death arises from the false belief that in death there is awareness.

In connection with this argument, Epicurus formulated a version of the problem of evil. Though often referred to as the "Epicurean paradox," the argument is more accurately described as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion that an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent god could exist in a world that manifestly contains evil.^[7] This doctrine, however, is not aimed at promoting atheism. Instead, it is part of an overarching philosophy meant to convince us that what gods there may be do not concern themselves with us, and thus would not seek to punish us either in this or any other life.^[8]

Epicurus emphasized the senses in his epistemology, and his Principle of Multiple Explanations ("if several theories are consistent with the observed data, retain them all") is an early contribution to the philosophy of science.

There are also some things for which it is not enough to state a single cause, but several, of which one, however, is the case. Just as if you were to see the lifeless corpse of a man lying far away, it would be fitting to list all the causes of death in order to make sure that the single cause of this death may be stated. For you would not be able to establish conclusively that he died by the sword or of cold or of illness or perhaps by poison, but we know that there is something of this kind that happened to him.^[9]

In contrast to the Stoics, Epicureans showed little interest in participating in the politics of the day, since doing so leads to trouble. He instead advocated seclusion. His garden can be compared to present-day communes. This principle is epitomized by the phrase *lathe biosas λάθε βιώσας* (Plutarchus *De latenter vivendo* 1128c; Flavius Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* 8.28.12), meaning "live secretly", "get through life without drawing attention to yourself", i. e. live without pursuing glory or wealth or power, but anonymously, enjoying little things like food, the company of friends, etc.

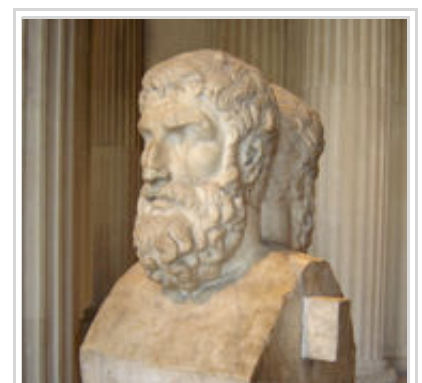
As an ethical guideline, Epicurus emphasized minimizing harm and maximizing happiness of oneself and others:

It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly (agreeing "neither to harm nor be harmed"^[10]),
and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living a pleasant life.^[11]

Legacy

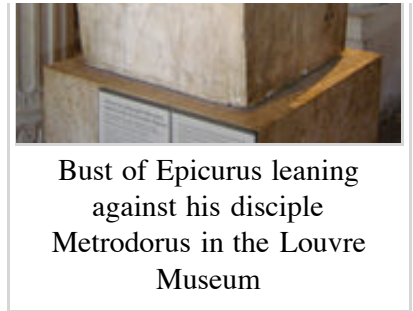
Elements of Epicurean philosophy have resonated and resurfaced in various diverse thinkers and movements throughout Western intellectual history.

His emphasis minimizing harm and maximizing happiness in his formulation of the Ethic of Reciprocity was later picked up by the democratic thinkers of the French Revolution, and others, like John Locke, who wrote that people had a right to "life, liberty, and property." To Locke, one's own body was part of their property, and thus one's right to property would theoretically guarantee safety for their persons, as well as



their possessions.

This triad, as well as the egalitarianism of Epicurus, was carried forward into the American freedom movement and Declaration of Independence, by the American founding father, Thomas Jefferson, as "all men are created equal" and endowed with certain "inalienable rights such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson considered himself an Epicurean. [1] (<http://www.csun.edu/~hcfl1004/jefflet.html>)



Bust of Epicurus leaning against his disciple Metrodorus in the Louvre Museum

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume uses Epicurus as a character for explaining the impossibility of our knowing God to be any greater or better than his creation proves him to be.

Karl Marx's doctoral thesis was on "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." [2] (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>)

Epicurus was first to assert human freedom as coming from a fundamental indeterminism in the motion of atoms.

Epicurus was also a significant source of inspiration and interest for both Arthur Schopenhauer, having particular influence on the famous pessimist's views on suffering and death, as well as one of Schopenhauer's successors: Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche cites his affinities to Epicurus in a number of his works, including *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and his private letters to Peter Gast. Nietzsche was attracted to, among other things, Epicurus' ability to maintain a cheerful philosophical outlook in the face of painful physical ailments. Nietzsche also suffered from a number of sicknesses during his lifetime. However, he thought that Epicurus' conception of happiness as freedom from anxiety was too passive and negative.

I was not; I have been; I am not; I do not mind. – written on the gravestones of followers, seen on many ancient gravestones of the Roman Empire, and often used today at humanist funerals.^[12]

Works

The only surviving complete works by Epicurus are three letters, which are to be found in book X of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, and two groups of quotes: the *Principal Doctrines*, reported as well in Diogenes' book X, and the *Vatican Sayings*, preserved in a manuscript from the Vatican Library.

Numerous fragments of his thirty-seven volume treatise *On Nature* have been found among the charred papyrus fragments at the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. In addition, other Epicurean writings found at Herculaneum contain important quotations from his other works.

In Literature

In Canto X Circle 6 ("Where the heretics lie") of Dante's *Inferno*, Epicurus and his followers are criticized for supporting a materialistic ideal.

Epicurus the Sage was a comic book by William Messner-Loebs and Sam Kieth, portraying Epicurus as "the only sane philosopher."

Notes

1. ^ Apollodorus (reported by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 10.14-15 (<http://www.attalus.org/old/diogenes10a.html#14>)) gives his birth on the fourth day of the month February in the third year of the 109th Olympiad, in the archonship of Sosigenes
2. ^ Bitsori, Maria; Galanakis, Emmanouil (2004). "Epicurus' death". *World Journal of Urology* **22** (6): 466–469. doi:10.1007/s00345-004-0448-2.
3. ^ In the second year of the 127th Olympiad, in the archonship of Pytharatus, according to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 10.15 (<http://www.attalus.org/old/diogenes10a.html#15>)
4. ^ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 10.22 (<http://www.attalus.org/old/diogenes10a.html#22>) (trans. C.D. Yonge).
5. ^ Two women, Axiothea and Lastheneia, were known to have been admitted by Plato. See Hadot, Pierre. *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, page 99, Gillimard 1995. Pythagoras is also believed to have inducted one woman, Theano, into his order.
6. ^ The only fragment in Greek about this central notion is from the Oenoanda inscription (fr.54 in Smith's edition). The best known reference is in Lucretius' *On the nature of things*, 2.216-224, 284-293 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Lucr.+2.284>) .
7. ^ Tattersall, Nicholas (1998). "The Evidential Argument from Evil (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/nicholas_tattersall/evil.html) ." *Secular Web Library*. Internet Infidels. Retrieved on 2008-02-12.
8. ^ O'Keefe, Tim. "Epicurus (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/epicur.htm>) ." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved on 2008-02-12.
9. ^ Lucretius.
10. ^ Tim O'Keefe, *Epicurus on Freedom* (<http://books.google.com/books?id=ugI3eRmNJrcC&printsec=frontcover>) , Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.134
11. ^ *Epicurus Principal Doctrines* (<http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/princdoc.html>) trans. by Robert Drew Hicks (1925)
12. ^ *Epicurus (c 341-270 BCE)* (<http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentViewArticle.asp?article=2011>) British Humanist Association

Further reading

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- Bakalis Nikolaos (2005) *Handbook of Greek Philosophy: From Thales to the Stoics Analysis and Fragments*, Trafford Publishing, ISBN 1-4120-4843-5
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- *Diogenes of Oinoanda. The Epicurean Inscription*, edited with Introduction, Translation and Notes by Martin Ferguson Smith, Bibliopolis, Naples 1993.

External links

- Epicurus.info (<http://www.epicurus.info>) - Epicurean Philosophy Online: features classical e-texts & photos of Epicurean artifacts.
- Epicurus.net (<http://www.epicurus.net>) - Epicurus and Epicurean Philosophy
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/epicur.htm>) - Entry for "Epicurus"
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>) - Entry for "Epicurus"
- Epicurus & Lucretius (http://www.societasviaromana.net/Collegium_Philosophicum/epicurus.php) - Small article by "P. Dionysius Mus"
- *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>) - Karl Marx's doctoral thesis.
- "Epicurus on Happiness" (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5353866757306368589>) - A documentary on the philosophy of Epicurus, first 11:25 of below, Greek subtitles.
- Epicurus' Guide to Happiness (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3535764476733084568>) - 24 minute documentary, Alain de Botton, UK Channel 4, no subtitles.
- Epicurus on Free Will (<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/solutions/philosophers/epicurus/>)
- Principal Doctrines (<http://www.epicurus.net/en/principal.html>)
- Vatican Sayings (<http://www.epicurus.net/en/vatican.html>)
- The Garden of Epicurus (<http://www.pinktriangle.org.uk/leaflet/epicurus.html>) - useful summary of the teachings of Epicurus
- Epicurus quotes (<http://www.winwisdom.com/quotes/author/epicurus.aspx>)
- Letters
 - Letter to Herodotus (<http://www.epicurus.net/en/herodotus.html>)
 - Letter to Pythocles (<http://www.epicurus.net/en/pythocles.html>)
 - Letter to Menoeceus (<http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoeceus.html>)

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