EPICUREANISM AND STOICISM

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

The era after the death of Alexander the Great (and Aristotle, who died a year later) until the death of Cleopatra is known as the **Hellenistic Period.** During this period, Greek philosophy and science spread to other areas around the Mediterranean (especially Alexandria and Rome). However, there was something of a split between ethics-oriented "philosophy" (which tended to focus on the question of "how should we live?") and a technology-oriented "science" (which focused on "how can we build this thing?"). In any case, there won't be anything resembling Aristotle's systematic investigation of nature as a whole until the Renaissance, when philosopher-scientists like Descartes articulate a new (and vehemently anti-Aristotelian) vision for both science and philosophy.

Hellenistic (and later, imperial Roman) philosophy was dominated by three major schools of thought: **Epicureanism, Stoicism,** and **Skepticism.** Each school claimed to provide the "key to happiness" or "guide to life", and they came to serve as something like secular "religions" in the ancient Greek and Roman world. They were heavily influenced by Socrates' idea that the "unexamined life is not worth living," and by (some of) the ethical writings of Plato and Aristotle. The thinkers in these schools also investigated questions in metaphysics, logic, epistemology, and so on, but they did so explicitly in order to show people how to lead better lives (unlike Plato and Aristotle, these thinkers do not advocate the pursuit of knowledge "for its own sake"). Stoicism strongly influenced early Christianity; by contrast, Epicureanism was for hundreds of years the primary rival (and greatest "threat") to Christian thought. The rediscovery and dissemination of Epicurean atomism (in the form of Lucretius's *On Nature*) in the 1500s is considered one of the major causes that eventually led to the Scientific Revolution.

Stoicism will be treated in a separate lecture; here, we'll be talking about Epicureanism and Skepticism.

EPICUREANISM: METAPHYSICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Epicurus was strongly influenced by the atomism of Democritus and Leucippus. Like these thinkers, he held that everything was made up of small, indivisible **atoms** and the **void** that separated these atoms from one another. He also held that the universe was infinitely old (after all, if it wasn't always around, where could it have come from?), would always exist (where it could go?), and was infinitely large (if it *weren't* infinitely large, we'd have to answer strange questions like "What is outside the universe?"). Epicurus's answers to these questions (and the general reasoning process behind them) has proved popular among physicists, and at least some popular accounts of cosmology (such as the currently popular **multiverse, bouncing universe,** and **quantum fluctuation** theories) would entail that he is essentially correct. There are a few things worth noting about Epicurus's position:

- Like Democritus, he holds that the soul/mind is a collection of special atoms. He doesn't simply think it is single, spherical atom, however, and he emphasizes that there is no meaningful sense in which the soul can "survive" the loss of the body. Everything essential to our identity (our feelings, reasoning capacities, etc.) is lost when our bodies dissolve. Insofar as the universe is infinitely large and contains infinite numbers of randomly arranged atoms, anything that *can* happen *is* happening. So, for example, there exists (somewhere) a world that is just like ours that is inhabited by dopplegangers that look (and act) just like us. (In contemporary philosophy, we call these your **counterparts**). In fact, you have an infinite number of dopplegangers, in every possible arrangement (one of your dopplegangers is currently the king/queen of France).

- Like Democritus, Epicurus holds that **perception** involves atoms colliding with our sense organs. Unlike Democritus, however, Epicurus argues that the senses (in and of themselves) cannot be "mistaken" or "false." After all, everything you see/hear/touch was caused by *something*—for example, a vision of a tree might be caused by (a) a real tree or (b) your brain while it is sleeping. Falsity only enters the picture when you make a **judgment** about perception (e.g., You falsely think "that's a real tree" when it is in fact only a dream tree). Epicurus's arguments here are primarily directed against the Skeptics, who held that it was basically impossible to have true beliefs, and the senses should never be trusted. Epicurus notes that the primary *reason* the skeptics provide for not trusting the senses is that we sometimes discover that they are incorrect. But he thinks this sort of reasoning itself presupposes that senses are (sometimes) trustworthy, since we can only discover that "our senses were mistaken in the past" by seeing what the senses tell us now. Epicurus argues that we can trust things that we **clearly and distinctly perceive.** So, for example, we should be wary of fuzzy or confused sensations, as these might indicate that we are dreaming or far away from the object.

- Epicurus rejects Democritus's strong version of **determinism,** which held that the motions of the atoms "determines" what happens to the larger bodies that the atoms make up. He does accept a weaker version of the thesis, though, in which human free choice is due to random, unpredictable **swerves** of the atoms and thus, what happens to us is *partially* due to our own choices. He emphasizes the idea that the way our lives turn out depends on both (a) our choices (or the motions of our soul atoms) and (b) things beyond our control. By contrast, he strongly objects to the idea of **fatalism,** which holds that some humans are "destined" for certain ends that

this will happen *regardless of which choices they make.* This view was popular among the Stoics, who were among the Epicureans' main rivals.

According to Epicurus, the *reason* that we should study metaphysics and epistemology is that it will help to show us that, in a deep sense, the world doesn't care about us one way or the other. Epicurus thought that, as people learned more and more about how the natural world really worked (e.g., as they learned more of what we would probably call "science"), they would eventually come to realize that the gods weren't needed to explain anything and thus, there was no good reason to believe that the gods (at least in the traditional sense) even existed. This, in turn, would set us free from worrying about things like (1) what the gods thought of our actions (so, we wouldn't need to follow any religious rules) and (2) what would happen after we die (since atomism entails that we *don't* exist after we die).

EPICUREAN ETHICS: PLEASURE, PAIN, AND DEATH

The heart of Epicurean philosophy might be summarized as follows: **"The only good thing in life is pleasure; the only bad thing is pain."** This slogan lent itself to a variety of misinterpretations, and both the Roman Stoics and their Christian heirs often portrayed the Epicureans as lazy good-for-nothings who spent most of their time either eating or having sex. While it is likely that some people used Epicureanism as an *excuse* to behave in this way, this sort of life ran directly contrary to what Epicurus (or Democritus, Leucippus, or Lucretius) actually taught. Unlike Aristotle, who thought that some pleasures were intrinsically better than others, and that pleasure could exist without a corresponding pain, Epicurus held that pleasure could be defined (roughly) as "the absence of pain" and that the only thing that mattered about pleasures was their *intensity* and *duration.* This does NOT mean that there is no way of ranking pleasures, however; as Epicurus notes, some pleasures (such as drinking a lot, or hanging out with the wrong people) will lead predictably to pain (hangovers, or having your feelings hurt). In general, Epicurus thinks that the best way of *maximizing pleasure* is to focus mostly on *avoiding pain.* He thinks we can do this by classifying our desires as follows:

- **Natural and necessary:** Our desires to eat, sleep, and regulate our body temperature are of this type (Epicurus would probably also include friendship in this category). For most people (those who are not extremely poor), these desires are relatively easy to meet, since they have a natural limit—there is only so much food you can eat, or so long that it feels good to sleep. Epicurus thinks that fulfilling these desires is an easy way to make us happy, and that doing so carries very little risk (for one thing, there is generally enough of these things to "go around", so it is unlikely that this will lead us into conflict with other people, or to cause us to steal/cheat/murder/etc.).
- **Natural and unnecessary:** Things like the desire for sex, or for *specific* foods ("I feel like having some potato oles") may be *natural*, but they are not *necessary* for life. People can live perfectly well without these things, and the pursuit of these sorts of pleasures is much more likely to lead to unhappiness than is pursuit of the natural, necessary pleasures (sexual rivalry, trying to get money to buy luxuries). To a large extent, this is because these desires lack the "limit" that natural desires have—fulfilling the desire once is just likely to make you want more. Epicurus doesn't strictly prohibit the enjoyment of these pleasures if you stumble across them, but he thinks it is unwise to pursue these pleasures for their own sake.
- **Unnatural and unnecessary.** Things like the desire for fame, fortune, and political power have no inherent limit, and can thus never really be "satisfied." Epicurus thinks pursuing these sorts of desires is a recipe for disaster—you will never get what you "want" and the pursuit of the desire is likely to put you into conflict with others (and will make you treat them unjustly).

Epicurus rejects Plato's and Aristotle's theories of justice. Instead, he proposes an early version of **utilitarianism**—a law (or a system of government) is justified if and only if it succeeds in making the citizens happy. Like modern utilitarians, Epicurus articulates a version of the **principle of diminishing marginal utility,** which states that a unit of "stuff" does the most good if given to the *people who have least.* In contemporary language: $1.00 might buy 1 unit of happiness (a **utile**) for a person who didn't have *any* money (after all, they could now buy a bag or rice); by contrast, the same $1.00 might buy only .1 utiles (or even less) for a person who already had $50,000 (or $500,000) in the bank. This fits nicely with Epicurus's idea that injustice usually results from people trying to get more stuff than they really need to live and be happy. [Interesting side note: According to contemporary research, your happiness increases steadily for each dollar you earn, up to about $20,000/year. After that, it depends on how much the people *around you* earn. For example, people who earn $20,000 tend to be a bit less happy than those who earn $50,000; but this seems to be largely because awareness of inequality itself makes people unhappy. After $50,000; additional money doesn't make people noticeably happier.]

SKEPTICISM: THE BENEFITS OF NOT KNOWING

Skepticism was, together with Epicureanism and Stoicism, one of the main branches of Hellenistic philosophy. Like the other schools, it promised that it could provide the key to contentment. In other ways, however, it was radically different from anything that had come before, though it was inspired by arguments given by the Sophists, Atomists, Socrates, Plato, the philosophers of medicine (such as Hippocrates), and many others. In general, the skeptics held that, while knowledge was in principle possible, certain methods make it

possible for many of us to see that none of our *actual* beliefs count as knowledge. Skepticism was founded by the Greek thinker **Pyrrho** (~300 BCE), a painter-turned atomist philosopher who apparently adopted his radical views after traveling to India and meeting with some of the philosophers there. The most detailed ancient defense of skepticism was given by the Roman physician and philosopher **Sextus Empiricus** (~200 CE), who we will be looking at below.

THEORIES OF THE WORLD: SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

By the time Sextus Empiricus is writing, Western philosophy and science (these two still amounted to the same thing) had formulated a number of deep, seemingly important questions about life, the universe, and everything. Moreover, many of them had presented somewhat plausible *arguments* for their various answers to these questions.

- **What was the basic nature of the physical world?** The early Milesians said "water", "apeiron", and "air." Heraclitus said "flux", Pythagoras claimed "numbers," while Parmenides and Zeno said "there is only one big, unchanging thing." The atomists (and their Epicurean descendants) thought the world was made of atoms, Plato thought that there were immaterial forms, and Aristotle thought things were (in some sense) a mixture of form and matter.
- **Where did living beings come from? Do they have a "purpose"? If so, what?** Some thinkers (Empedocles and the Atomists) adopted early versions of evolutionary theory. Others (Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle) thought that design had to play some role. Finally, still others (such as the Stoics and early Christians) argued that living beings were directly created by an all-powerful deity.
- **What was the nature of the human soul? What happens to it when the body dies?** The Pythagoreans and Plato (together with the Greek mystery religions) said that the soul was immortal, and separate from the body. Most of the others thought the soul was *somehow* a part of the body, though they disagreed about how this worked (the atomists said it was a particular sort of atom, Aristotle said it was the form of the body, and the Stoics said that it was a concentration of pneuma). These differing views led to very different views of the afterlife from the atomist's "there is no afterlife whatsoever" to Socrates's "maybe I'll go hang with the gods" to Aristotle's "the only part of you that survives is your reasoning ability."
- **Is there a God/gods? If so, what are their natures?** Plato and Aristotle both described sort of impersonal, uncaring force that "drove" the universe. The Sophists, Atomists, and Epicureans described views that modern thinkers have usually described as "atheism." By contrast, the Pythagoreans and Stoics (two of the most popular philosophies in the late Roman empire, along with Christianity) were committed to the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent being.
- **What is the role of love, art, friendship in a good life (or a good society)?** Philosophers disagreed about both the *definitions* of these various concepts, and about their *role* in a good life. Plato famously wanted to ban almost all sorts of artistic work in his *Republic,* as well as radically revise the family. Other thinkers were much less radical, but only a few took the time to carefully consider the arguments that he provided.
- **What particular actions were ethical?** Philosophers disagreed vehemently about the ethical status of all sorts of actions: homosexual love (Aristotle famously disapproved, as did many of the Romans; most other Greeks thought it was fine), eating animals, becoming angry (Plato vs. Aristotle vs. Seneca).
- **How do we do science? How do figure out which medical theory, biological theory, or astronomical theory is the right one to hold?** Some philosophers, following Plato, said "it's like math, in that involves lots of careful thought and conceptual analysis". Others, following Aristotle, said "it's nothing like math; you need to get out in the world and do experiments."
- **What is the best form of government? Who should count as citizens?** Many of the early Greeks (the Sophists and Atomists) seemed happy with democracy (at least so far as we can tell), Plato defended a conservative aristocracy, Aristotle defended a somewhat more liberal republic, and many of the Hellenistic philosophers advocated that a person should simply avoid politics altogether, on the grounds that it is likely to stress one out. Plato suggested an increased role for women and (briefly) suggested that slavery could be eliminated if people stopped trying to pursue extravagant desires; most other ancient thinkers disagreed with him.

These questions have (with the possible exception of the second question, which was addressed by Darwin) remained at the forefront of philosophical and scientific enquiry to the present day. The **Skeptics** noticed something strange about these questions, however—no matter how long people argued about them, or how much evidence they gathered, nothing seemed to change. However, the Skeptics were nevertheless impressed by people like Socrates, who *searched* for the truth. With this in mind, they adopted the following position:

1. Any theory according to which (a) there is a right answer to any of the questions and (b) we can *know* what this answer is can be called **dogmatism.** (You can only have **knowledge** of P if you **believe** that P AND you are **justified** in believing the P).
2. Dogmatism is false because the people don't have *justified* beliefs. In particular, the skeptics will repeatedly emphasize that you can only justify your belief if you can show that it is *more probable* than other possible beliefs. Skepticus provides a number of methods

for showing this in never possible. While he can't claim "these methods will always work" (that wouldn't be very skeptical, after all), he invites the dogmatic reader to try them out for him/herself.

3. Once you realize that you cannot have any knowledge about philosophical/scientific matters, you will **suspend** your judgment as to what is "really good", "really bad", "really true", or "really false." This will serve the purpose of making you happier, since it will prevent you from chasing after so-called "good things" when (a) you might fail and (b) they might not really be good.

4. In ordinary life, it's fine to go by your **natural instincts** and **social habit.** It's also fine to trust your senses ("I see an apple tree. I wonder if I will see apples on the ground if I get closer?"), so long as you suspend judgment as to the deep questions ("Is that *really* an apple tree? Or am I actually living in the Matrix?").

5. Skepticism should be distinguished from views like **cultural relativism** (truth varies by culture), **subjectivism** (truth varies by the individual), or the various forms of philosophy (including some versions of Platonism and some religious views) that the world makes it *impossible* for us to know the truth. These views all make claims about the deep nature of truth, and thus qualify as dogmatic.

CURING DOGMATISM: SOME SKEPTICAL METHODS

Skepticism's great contribution to philosophy and science came via a number of **skeptical arguments,** purporting to show that scientific, ethical, and metaphysical knowledge was impossible. When these arguments were rediscovered in the Renaissance, they inspired thinkers like Descartes to try and answer them. Many of them remain among the "toughest" arguments that any new philosophical/scientific theory must face. Here are some of the most famous (I've given some of them their modern names):

- **The Argument from Cultural Variation.** Dogmatists claim to (intuitively) know the *truth* about ethical and religious matters. But there are dogmatists in every culture (both ones currently existing and that used to exist) that were *equally confident* about their beliefs and had *just as good evidence.* But not all these cultures can be right (though they might all well be wrong).

- **The Evil Demon Hypothesis.** Dogmatists claim that they have good reason to trust their senses when they "clearly and distinctly perceive something." But this ignores the possibility that we are being systematically fooled—i.e., we are dreaming, we are being tricked by an evil demon, we are brains in a vat living in the Matrix, and so on.

- **The Problem of Evil/The Argument from Design.** You believe in God? Fine, then explain to me so many innocent people suffer. You don't believe in God? OK, then account for the existence of the universe (and the humans in it). [A good skeptic is, of course, an agnostic.]

- **The Pessimistic Metainduction.** Over the course of recorded history, people have proposed thousands of scientific theories. We now think that *all* of the old ones are false. So, it's very likely that our current theories are false, too.

- **The Problem of Induction.** In order to know something, you have to have *independent* justification to believe it. But you can't do this for any beliefs about the future. So, for example, consider the claim "aliens will not attack the earth tomorrow." Since it concerns the future, we can't *observe* its truth; since it is a contingent claim (i.e., it's not a necessary claim like "all bachelors are male"), we can't logically *prove* that it's true. It seems like the only justification we can give for this *the future will resemble the past.* But if you look closely, you'll notice this itself is a claim about the future, and thus can't be used to justify the original claim. After all, what reason do we have for thinking the future will *continue* to resemble the past (i.e., that this will still be the case tomorrow)?