

Chapter Five

The Epicurean Ethics

*F*rom our discussion in the previous chapters of this book, we have been discussing the criterion of morality. What will be the basis of morality? How can we know whether an act is good or bad? In the previous chapter, it can be said that the immediate or proximate norm of morality is rational human nature, i.e., the nature of man as considered by right reason.

We have discussed that moral decisions, according to the moral relativists, depend upon a particular culture or society judging the action. The followers of the Divine Command theory suggest that the proximate norm of morality is God's will. According to them, it is God's will that ought to determine the goodness or badness of human acts (Quito 1989, 45). However, several philosophers would have different opinions as regards the basis for moral decisions. In this chapter, we will be discussing some of them.

Epicureanism and Hedonism: Man's Search for Pleasure

The main reason why Ethics is given great consideration now is the fact that every human person is searching for happiness. It is believed that in order to obtain happiness, it is necessary that man must live an ethical life. However, what is an ethical life? How can we know whether our action is morally acceptable or not? How do we know whether our conception of the good will really lead us to the happiness that we so desire? Philosophers have different views regarding happiness. Nevertheless, there are those philosophers whose idea of happiness is connected with pleasure. To this belong the hedonists.

The Hedonist Philosophy

Hedonism is the general term for any philosophy that says that pleasure is good and pain is evil. It comes from the Greek word Ἑδονή (Hedone), which means "pleasure." The followers of this philosophy look at the happy life in terms of having the most possible pleasure and the least possible pain. From the point of view of the hedonists, the pursuit of pleasure is our birthright. The great follower and probably the founder of this philosophy is Aristippus (c.340-450 BCE).

For Aristippus, life is basically a search for pleasure. He considered pleasure as always good regardless of its source. Because all people seek pleasure, whether they are aware of it or not, it should, therefore, be considered as the basis of goodness. He believed that life can be discerned by observing our actual behavior. In doing so, people will always be led to the fact that the meaning of life is a pleasure. And because pleasure is the natural goal of all life, we should try to have as much intense sensual pleasure as we can.

Since sensual pleasures are more intense than mental or emotional pleasures, Aristippus held that they are the best of all. Physical pleasure is, therefore, the best of all other things because it makes life more exciting, dynamic, and worth living. And because the pleasure of the present is much more desirable than the pleasure of the future, it is better to desire for the pleasure of the present because the future might not even come. This is the reason why the hedonists follow the principle: "Eat, drink, and be merry today for tomorrow you may die." From this idea, Aristippus held that whatever pleases the person most at the moment is the highest good there can be (Soccio, 199). He, thereby, advised the people that they should be happy at all costs.



Figure 1. Aristippus of Cyrene [<https://www.science-source.com/archive/Aristippus>]

ARISTIPPUS OF CYRENE (c. 340-250 BCE)

Aristippus lived in the town of Cyrene on the coast of North Africa, in what is now Libya. Cyrene was founded by Greek colonists on the edge of a plateau near the Mediterranean coast. The soil and climate made the area rich in flowers, fruits, and lavish vegetation. When Aristippus was born, Cyrene was a prosperous city, noted for its marble temples, magnificent public square, and the luxurious homes of its wealthiest citizens.

Aristippus was a kind and clever man who was fond of any kind of pleasures. While attending Olympic Games, Aristippus heard about Socrates, which led the former to rush to Athens in order to meet Socrates and eventually became his follower. Later on, Aristippus began his teaching career and started collecting very high fees. Shortly thereafter, he opened a school of philosophy in Cyrene where he built his doctrine known as the Cyrenaic hedonism (Soccio, 198).

The Epicurean Philosophy

One of the major philosophers in the Hellenistic period is **Epicurus of Samos**. Epicurus was a practical philosopher. For him, philosophy is important because it may help the human person to free himself from ignorance and superstitions. According to him, philosophy

EPICURUS OF SAMOS (c. 341-271 BCE)

Epicurus was born on the verdant island of Samos, a city of Asia Minor, around 341 BCE, seven years after Plato's death and when Aristotle was 42 years old. Although he was born in Samos, he was, nevertheless, an Athenian citizen because his father, who was a schoolteacher, had moved to Samos as an Athenian colonist.

Epicurus took early to philosophy, travelling from the age of 14 to hear lessons from the Platonist Pamphilus and the atomic philosopher Nausiphanes (de Botton, 50). However, he found out that he could not agree with much of what they taught so that later on, he decided to have his own philosophy. When he was 18 years old, he went to Athens in order to complete the two years of military service required of Athenian males.

Alexander the Great had just died, and the Athenians, who had resented his rule, revolted against the regent he had imposed on them. It took less than a year for this revolt to be stopped, but Epicurus drew an important lesson from it: political activities and ambitions are pointless.

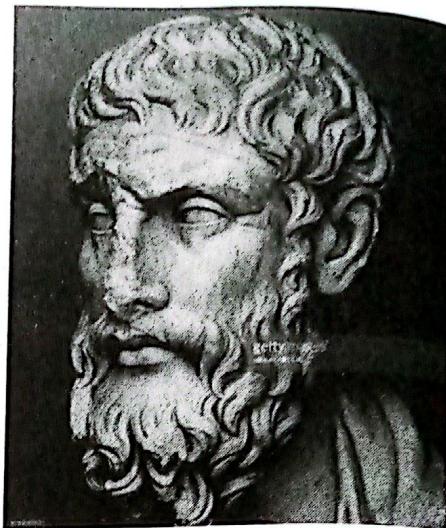
Epicurus stayed in Athens for a time and studied with the followers of both Plato and Aristotle; although he rejected the philosophy of the two. Epicurus referred to himself a self-taught and never acknowledged any philosophical teacher or master. However, during his teenage years, he was exposed to the writings of Democritus, through Nausiphanes, whose ideas about nature had a permanent influence upon Epicurus' philosophy (Stumpf & Fieser, 104).

When the Athenians were driven out of Samos, Epicurus went to Asia Minor to become a teacher in several schools there. He then moved to Athens around 306 BCE. In Athens, Epicurus founded a school which he called the Garden. This school provided a serene retreat from the social, political, and even philosophical turmoil of Athens. It became known for good living and pleasant socializing, as well as for its philosophy.

One of the distinguishing features of the Garden was that it was one of the very few places in Greece where women were allowed and encouraged to interact with men as equal. Epicurus made no distinctions based on social status or race. He accepted all who came to learn: prostitutes, housewives, slaves, aristocrats. His favorite pupil was his own slave, Mysis. Epicurus took as his mistress a courtesan, which, during that time, was a kind of prostitute, named Leontium. Under his nurturing influence, Leontium wrote several books (Soccio, 200).

The residents, i.e., the students of the Garden put the teachings of Epicurus into practice. Because of the influence of the Epicurean philosophy, the school ranked with Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, and Zeno's Stoa as one of the influential schools of ancient times (Stumpf & Fieser).

Epicurus died of kidney stones around 271 or 270 BCE but his philosophy survived his death that it even spread to Rome. Epicureanism flourished as a philosophical movement although it went into decline with the rise of Christianity.



Epicurus of Samos [<https://www.gettyimages.com>].

should not be looked up as simply a mere acquisition of knowledge. Rather, he considered philosophy as the medicine of the soul. This is because ideas are capable of controlling and developing one's life.

To Epicurus, the chief aim of human life is pleasure. What made him turn to the pleasure principle was due to the idea he inherited from Democritus, the atomist. According to Democritus, God was not the creator of everything. For this matter, human behavior should

not be based upon obedience to the principle coming from God. The everyday occurrences of life are only the result of a purposeless and random event. God does not have a hand on our day to day living.

From this idea of Democritus, Epicurus eventually concluded that every existing thing is made up of small eternal atoms. These atoms are indestructible and indivisible. In this case, if God is real and He is existing, He, too, must be made up of this material being called atoms. Hence, human beings are not part of a created or purposeful order caused or ruled by God. Rather, people are only accidental products of the collision of atoms just like any other beings (Stumpf & Fieser, 103).

The main aim of Epicurus in his philosophizing was on how to banish from people the fear of the gods, which, for him, would be preventive of the people's acquisition of happiness. For Epicurus, man does not have to worry about ideas regarding punishments from God. He insisted instead that occurrences, like earthquakes and lightning, can be explained entirely in terms of atoms; and this is not due to the will of the gods.

Inasmuch as philosophy is a denial of Divine Providence, Epicureanism was often charged as a godless philosophy. However, the Epicureans denied these allegations. Epicurus held that there are gods, but these gods are quite different from the popular conception of gods. Gods are considered blessed and happy beings who are definitely unaware of our existence as they are living eternally. For Epicurus, the gods function mainly as ethical ideals, whose lives we can strive to emulate, but whose wrath we need not fear.

Through his philosophy, Epicurus thought that he was able to liberate humanity from the fear of God and from the fear of death. Inasmuch as God did not have the control over nature nor over human destiny, He would not, therefore, be able to intrude in the affairs of the people. In this case, death should not also bother anyone because only a living person would have the feeling of either pleasure or pain. This feeling of pleasure or pain would not be felt anymore after our death (Curtis 1981, 103).

The Duty of the Human Person

Epicurean philosophy is a form of *egoistic hedonism*. This is because of the belief of the Epicureans that the only thing that is important in life is one's own pleasure. For Epicurus, neither life nor death is good or bad in itself. Only the quality of our pleasures or pains is important. This idea is actually a major departure from Aristippus' emphasis on intensity, i.e., on the quantity of pleasure. For Epicurus, rather than seek to have the most of anything, including the longest possible lifespan, the wise and sophisticated Epicurean chooses to have the finest.

According to him, all those things that the human person will find to be valuable are valuable because it gives a sense of pleasure to the human person. However, his view on pleasure is somehow sophisticated because he still recommended a virtuous and moderately ascetic life as the best means to securing pleasure.

A lot of people during the time of Epicurus and even during our own time had mistakenly associated the Epicurean philosophy with expensive tastes, exotic food and drink, elegant clothing, and a life devoted to the pursuit of such pleasures. However, for Epicurus, the

highest pleasures are intellectual, and the greatest good is peace of mind, not intense or exquisite physical pleasure.

Epicurus believed that human beings have the power and the duty to regulate one's own desires. Every individual human being can control his own life. This is because every human being is capable of reasoning, and hence, capable of distinguishing the good from the bad. In this case, Epicurus upheld that **pleasure is the standard of goodness**. This is because human beings have the capacity to always desire for pleasure. Inasmuch as every human being finds pleasure to be good; hence, pleasure becomes the gauge in determining the goodness of a human action:

Types of Pleasure

Although pleasure is the gauge for the goodness of a human action, Epicurus upheld that there are different kinds of pleasures that would guide the people to the happiest life. According to Epicurus, the first kind of pleasure is that which is **both natural and necessary**. Example of this kind of pleasure is food. There is also the kind of pleasure that is **natural but not necessary**. Example of this kind of pleasure is sex. Although sex is natural, however, a human being will still be able to survive even without sex. The third kind of pleasure is that which is **neither natural nor necessary**. Example of this kind of pleasure is a luxurious life or a popular life (Timbreza 2000, 84).

What leads to real happiness is not the sensual pleasure as those mentioned above. Rather, Epicurus held that real happiness could be obtained by means of those activities that will free the human being from the troubles of the mind and from the physical pain. Epicurus held that a pleasant life does not mean continuous eating and drinking, or gaining all the luxuries in life. What leads to a real pleasant life is the austere reasoning that will aid man to the true realization of the meaning of life and the avoidance of the greatest disturbance of the spirit brought about by mere opinions.

Epicurus, however, did not mean that we should prevent our bodies from its pleasures and from its luxuries. He was just saying that there were types of pleasures that could never be satisfied. If people would go on aiming for these kinds of pleasures, it would mean that these people could never obtain satisfaction. If we would always aim for money, for instance, we would always be led to continuous dissatisfaction.

Epicurus believed that some people wanted to be famous because they thought that this would make their lives safe and secure. Indeed, if fame were to bring safety and security, it is good and right to be famous. However, if a famous life brings more trouble than an obscure life, it is foolish to want what is actually bad for us.

People should aspire for things that will bring happiness but only with a minimum desire. He believed that nature is requiring our body in order to receive easily the satisfaction that we needed. In other words, when the needs of the human body are already satisfied, then the person's physical nature will be balanced. Moreover, aside from consuming only a little of what the human person desires, he or she will, therefore, need only a little. Hence,



An artist's perspective of the school of happiness of Epicurus [<http://thephilosophsmail.com>].

People should determine the minimum desire, which nature is requiring the body. People should be able to easily determine what it is that will satisfy him. When the needs of the human body are satisfied, it is only then that nature's physical nature will be balanced. Moreover, aside from consuming only a little of what the human person desires, he or she will need only a little of his needs. In this regard, he will easily be satisfied.

The Self-Centered Moral Philosophy

The concern of Epicureanism was the individual pleasures and not the pleasures of the human society. Hence, his teachings can rightfully be called the **self-centered moral philosophy**. The concern of this philosophy is the attainment of pleasure of the self. According to Epicurus, the height of pleasure is the freedom from all pains and the getting rid of all discomforts in both the body and the mind. Such pains and discomforts may be experienced when one would focus his concern on the happiness of the others, which can be detrimental to one's self. Hence, Epicurus focused his concern on the pleasure of the self; wherein, if such pleasure is present, all pains of both the mind and the body will be absent.

The things that will bring pleasure to every person are those that will free them from troubled minds, i.e., from the fear of God, from the fear of death, and from the fear of pain. Those who have such kind of freedom from the troubles of the mind, they are believed to be already living a good life. If such freedom from troubled minds teaches the person how to rationally manage his desires, then he has reached already the height of pleasure and the end of all evil.

The aim of life is the attainment of pleasure, the pursuit of that which brought happiness—the final goal of every person. According to Epicurus, pleasure can be obtained personally by self-control, i.e., by the mastery and limitation of desires as far as possible to those that were strictly necessary. However, Epicurus added that pleasure also implies limitation of social relationships, i.e., by refusal to be involved in family, religious, or political

affairs. Good life could not be found from one's service to fellow human beings. Rather, it is to be found only in a pleasant and decent company of intellectually fascinating friends. In this case, if there is a need for a civil society, its only function is to punish any individual who will inflict pain upon others.

The society was not a natural phenomenon. Rather, it is a deliberate creation aimed at bringing into order the society and the environment. The presence of the law, the provision of punishment and the preservation of order could augment pleasure. In this case, unlike Plato and Aristotle, who believed that the leader of the society should be a philosopher, Epicurus held instead that philosophers should not engage themselves in any political affairs. According to him, instead of aiming for the creation of a good society, philosophers should instead find means in order to avoid pain.

Just as philosophers should seek to detach themselves from the tyranny of exotic foods, so also should they seek to detach themselves from the entanglements with other people and, particularly, with poor people, whose needs and problems are abundant. Therefore, in order to obtain a moral life, the followers of Epicurus instead follow these eight counsels as the basic guide to Epicurean living:

1. Do not fear God;
2. Do not worry about death;
3. Do not fear pain;
4. Live a simple life;
5. Pursue pleasure wisely;
6. Make friends and be a good friend;
7. Be honest in your business and private life; and
8. Avoid fame and political ambition.

According to the Epicureans, by following the eight counsels, one will be able to avoid physical pain and mental troubles. When this happens, the human being will then be capable of obtaining a good and meaningful life.

Critique on Epicureanism

Epicureanism may be upholding a life that is lived simply. This idea may become contradictory to their principle that happiness may be obtained by way of pleasure. However, such pleasure must be controlled. They should be able to have only the minimum desires. This idea can be easily said than done because when one starts to acquire pleasure, it will become difficult for him to control such. At the same time, pleasures cannot just be limited to the avoidance of physical pain and troubles of the mind because physical pains and troubles of the mind can still be considered morally acceptable if the experience of such pains may lead the person to the greater glory and for the greater good.

Epicurus also held that pleasure also implies limitation of social relationships because social relationships may lead one to be involved in sacrifices for the sake of others. Such sacrifices may be contrary to the avoidance of physical pain. Moreover, there are those who take pleasure in living with and helping others.