

4 Epicurus

Epicurus (Epicureanism) – Exam Notes

1. Three Theses of the Epicureans

1.1 Physicalism

- Claim: Everything that exists is physical (bodies and void).
- Human soul/mind is made of fine atoms and dies with the body.
- No immortal soul, no afterlife, no consciousness after death.
- Importance:
 - Removes fear of post-mortem punishment or reward.
 - Supports the idea that death is the end of experience, so cannot be a felt harm.

1.2 Atheism (in the Epicurean sense)

- Epicurus rejects traditional religious views of gods as:
 - World-rulers,
 - Rewarding the virtuous,
 - Punishing the wicked,
 - Interfering in human affairs.
- If gods exist at all, they are perfectly blessed and unconcerned with us.
- So:
 - No need to fear gods.
 - Religious fear of divine punishment is a major source of mental disturbance; Epicurus aims to eliminate it.

1.3 Hedonism

- Only pleasure is intrinsically good, and only pain is intrinsically bad.
- But “pleasure” is understood in a specific way:
 - Not constant partying, luxury, or intense stimulation.
 - The highest pleasure = absence of bodily pain and absence of mental disturbance.
 - * Bodily: no illness, hunger, extreme discomfort (aponia).
 - * Mental: no fear, anxiety, or turmoil (ataraxia).
- We should:
 - Choose actions by calculating overall pleasure vs pain.

- Sometimes endure a pain now for greater pleasure later.
 - Sometimes forgo a pleasure now to avoid greater pain later.
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2. How Best to Pursue Pleasure and the Absence of Pain

2.1 The Goal: Ataraxia and Aponia

- Ataraxia: calm, tranquil, deeply peaceful state of mind.
- Aponia: absence of bodily pain.
- Living well = achieving and maintaining this stable condition, not chasing highs.

2.2 Basic Strategy: Satisfy Basic Needs, Not Luxuries

Epicurus divides desires:

1. Natural and Necessary Desires

- Needed for:
 - Life itself (food, water, shelter).
 - Freedom from bodily distress (basic health).
 - Happiness (friendship, security, freedom from fear).
- Features:
 - Few and simple.
 - Easy to satisfy (in principle).
 - Once met, they bring lasting contentment and remove pain.
- Examples: simple food and drink, safe shelter, close friends, peace of mind.

2. Natural but Not Necessary Desires

- Have a natural basis but are not required for happiness or survival.
- Examples: fancy foods, sexual variety, comfort upgrades.
- They add extra pleasure but can increase dependence and vulnerability.
- Should be treated as optional bonuses, not as needs.

3. Vain or Groundless Desires

- Have no natural limit; often socially constructed.
- Examples: unlimited wealth, fame, high status, luxury lifestyles, immortality.
- Hard or impossible to fully satisfy; typically create anxiety and dissatisfaction.
- Epicurus: these are harmful and should be eliminated as far as possible.

Key recommendation:

Concentrate on natural and necessary desires; be cautious about natural-but-not-necessary; reject vain desires.

2.3 Why Simple Living Promotes Pleasure

- Self-sufficiency: If you can be content with little, you are:
 - Less dependent on luck and social approval.
 - Less vulnerable to loss.
- Simple, modest living:
 - Keeps the body healthy.
 - Makes one more resilient in hard times.

- Lets you enjoy occasional luxuries more when they happen.
- Epicurus insists hedonism is not about constant luxury but about removing pain and disturbance.

2.4 Is It Really Easy to Meet Basic Needs?

- Epicurus claims basic bodily and mental needs are:
 - Few,
 - Simple,
 - Easy to meet.
 - Potential criticism (important to note):
 - How easy it is to secure food, shelter, safety, and friendship depends on your society:
 - * In unjust or impoverished conditions, meeting basic needs may be very hard.
 - This raises questions about how realistic Epicurean advice is in oppressive or unequal contexts.
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3. Why Not Pursue Fame, Power, and Wealth?

Epicurus explicitly advises: do not organize your life around fame, political power, or great wealth.

3.1 Reasons Against Pursuing These Goals

1. The pursuit itself is stressful
 - Climbing social or political hierarchies demands:
 - Flattery, competition, deception, constant vigilance.
 - This creates ongoing anxiety and conflict, undermining ataraxia.
2. Low chance of success, and fear if you succeed
 - Most people won't achieve great fame, power, or wealth → frustration and disappointment.
 - If you do succeed:
 - You become anxious about losing what you gained.
 - You must constantly defend and maintain your position.
 - Result: mental disturbance, fear, and instability.
3. You get "spoiled"
 - Becoming used to luxury and status raises your "baseline":
 - Ordinary experiences no longer satisfy you.
 - You need ever more to feel the same level of pleasure.
 - This makes you less self-sufficient, more fragile, and easier to disturb.

3.2 Connection to Hedonism

- Epicurus is not anti-pleasure; he thinks fame, power, wealth:
 - Do not reliably increase net pleasure.
 - Typically introduce more anxiety, fear, and disturbance than they are worth.
- True Epicurean calculation:
 - Ask: "Will this pursuit, overall, reduce pain and disturbance?"

- For fame/power/wealth, Epicurus answers: No.
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4. The Role of Friendship in Epicureanism

4.1 Why “Friendship is Golden”

Epicurus sees friendship as one of the greatest sources of stable pleasure.

Main benefits:

1. Security and support
 - Friends provide:
 - Material help in need (food, shelter, care).
 - Protection in a dangerous world.
 - This reduces fear about the future (a major mental disturbance).
2. Emotional well-being
 - Companionship, affection, mutual concern → ongoing mild pleasures.
 - Shared joy and reduced suffering:
 - Happiness is enhanced when shared.
 - Burdens are lighter when others help carry them.
3. Philosophical and moral support
 - Like-minded friends help each other:
 - Maintain Epicurean attitudes (e.g., not fearing death, not chasing vain desires).
 - Practise prudence and virtue.
 - This stabilizes ataraxia over time.

4.2 Friendship vs Material Wealth

- Epicurus: friends offer more real security than wealth.
 - Wealth can be stolen, lost, taxed.
 - True friends are more reliable in crisis and maintain your mental peace.
- Instead of chasing public recognition and riches, Epicurus advises:
 - Invest your time and energy in close, supportive friendships.

4.3 Cultural Dependence

- How well friendship can provide security depends partly on:
 - Social structures and norms (e.g., legal systems, safety nets, persecution).
 - In some cultures:
 - Tight-knit communities may make Epicurean friendship especially effective.
 - In harsher contexts:
 - Friendships may be more fragile under external pressure.
 - The core idea: whatever the culture, strong friendships are a central, relatively reliable route to long-term pleasure and security.
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5. Epicurus' Argument that "Death is Nothing to Us"

5.1 Core Argument

Epicurus's key claims:

1. All good and bad consist in pleasure and pain.
 - Something is bad for you only if it involves, or leads to, your suffering (physical or mental).
 - Something is good for you only if it involves pleasure or removes pain.
2. Pleasure and pain require sense-experience.
 - You feel pleasure and pain only while you are conscious.
 - No awareness → no pleasure, no pain.
3. Death is the complete absence of sense-experience.
 - At death, the soul/mental atoms disperse.
 - There is no subject left to feel anything.
 - Therefore, there is no pleasure and no pain after death.
4. Therefore, death is nothing to us.
 - "When we exist, death is not present; when death is present, we do not exist."
 - There is never a time when both you and your state of being dead coexist.
 - So death cannot be experienced as a harm by you.

Conclusion:

We should not fear being dead, because being dead is not an experience and thus cannot be bad for us.

5.2 The "You'll Miss Out" Objection

Objection: Even if you don't feel anything when dead, death is bad because: - It deprives you of future pleasures you could have had.

Epicurean reply:

1. Harm requires a subject.
 - To be harmed, you must exist at the time you are harmed.
 - After death, there is no "you" to be deprived.
 - So deprivation by death cannot be bad for you.
2. Anticipatory fear is irrational.
 - People suffer now from fear of a future state (non-existence) that:
 - Will never be experienced.
 - Epicurus: This is unnecessary mental pain based on confusion.
 - Once you grasp that death is nothing, the fear dissolves, making life more pleasant.
3. Focus on quality, not length, of life.
 - The wise person:
 - Does not cling to life at any cost or fear non-existence.
 - Seeks the most pleasant life, not the longest.
 - Once you have lived pleasantly (with ataraxia), there is no rational need to crave more and more time.

5.3 The Four-Part Cure (Tetrapharmakos)

Epicurus offers a “four-part cure” for human anxiety. It targets the main sources of mental disturbance:

1. Don't fear the gods.
 - Gods, if they exist, are blissful and non-interfering.
 - No divine punishment or reward to fear → reduces religious anxiety.
2. Don't fear death.
 - Death is the end of sensation.
 - No possible experience of pain after death.
 - Understanding this removes the fear of being dead and much of the fear of dying.
3. What is good is easy to obtain.
 - True goods are:
 - Basic bodily needs (simple food, water, shelter).
 - Basic mental needs (friendship, freedom from fear).
 - These are few and simple, at least in principle, so a happy life is within reach.
4. What is bad is easy to endure.
 - Intense pains tend to be short; long-lasting pains are often mild enough to be bearable.
 - With the right mindset, most suffering can be tolerated without destroying happiness.

Connection to death: - Parts (1) and (2) directly remove fear of supernatural punishment and non-existence. - Parts (3) and (4) reassure us about life's hardships, making our finite life sufficient and acceptable. - Altogether, the Four-Part Cure aims to secure ataraxia, showing why death and the finiteness of life are not threats to happiness.

Summary for Exam

- Three theses: Physicalism (no immortal soul), Atheism (no interventionist gods), Hedonism (pleasure = good, pain = bad; highest pleasure = absence of pain/disturbance).
- Best pursuit of pleasure: Satisfy natural and necessary desires; simple life; avoid vain desires (fame, wealth, power) which create stress and anxiety.
- Friendship: Central to security and stable pleasure; superior to wealth; crucial for long-term ataraxia.
- Death is nothing: No sensation after death → no pain → no harm; fear of death is based on confusion; Four-Part Cure removes fears (gods, death, poverty, suffering) and secures tranquility.