

4 Epicurus

Epicureanism – Exam-Focused Notes

1. The Three Theses of the Epicureans

Epicureanism is built on three core theses:

1.1 Physicalism

- Claim: Everything that exists is physical (made of atoms and void).
- The soul/mind is also made of fine atoms.
- Implication for happiness and death:
 - No non-physical, immortal soul.
 - When the body dies, the soul's atoms disperse → no consciousness after death.
 - This supports the claim that death is nothing to us, because there is no subject left to feel anything.

1.2 Atheism (in Epicurean sense)

- Epicurus does not deny the existence of gods, but:
 - Gods are perfectly blissful and indestructible.
 - They do not intervene in the world, do not reward/punish, and do not care about human affairs.
- From a practical perspective:
 - We must not fear gods (no divine punishment, no afterlife judgment).
 - Religion-based fears (hell, eternal punishment, angry gods) are baseless.
- This removes a major source of mental disturbance, contributing to ataraxia.

1.3 Hedonism

- Claim: Pleasure is the only intrinsic good; pain is the only intrinsic bad.
- All rational choices aim (or should aim) at:
 - Maximizing pleasure, and
 - Minimizing pain.
- But Epicurus has a refined view of pleasure:
 - The highest pleasure is not constant stimulation, but freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance.

2. How Best to Pursue Pleasure and the Absence of Pain

2.1 Pleasure as the Goal: Ataraxia and Aponia

- Goal of life: a state of:
 - Aponia – absence of bodily pain.
 - Ataraxia – calm, tranquil, deeply peaceful mind (absence of fear, anxiety, disturbance).
- Once you lack pain in body and disturbance in mind:
 - You have reached the limit of pleasure; you do not need “more” pleasure.
 - Extra luxuries do not make you more happy in any deep sense.

2.2 Types of Desires and Basic Needs

Epicurus classifies desires:

1. Natural and Necessary Desires

- For:
 - Basic bodily survival (food, water, shelter).
 - Freedom from bodily pain.
 - Mental health and peace (freedom from fear, especially fear of gods and death).
- They are:
 - Easy to satisfy, and
 - Necessary for happiness.
- Example: simple food and drink to remove hunger and thirst.

2. Natural but Unnecessary Desires

- Have a natural basis, but are not required for happiness.
- Example: desire for fancy foods instead of simple, nourishing foods.
- Can be enjoyed, but pursuing them intensely creates dependency and risk.

3. Groundless (Vain) Desires

- Not rooted in natural needs.
- Typically for fame, power, great wealth, status, luxury.
- Hard to satisfy, and even if satisfied, they:
 - Generate anxiety (fear of losing them).
 - Do not secure ataraxia.

Key strategy:

- Focus on natural and necessary desires. - Limit or ignore groundless desires; they produce more disturbance than pleasure.

2.3 Practical Guidance for Pursuing Pleasure

- Self-sufficiency:
 - Learn to be content with little.
 - Simple lifestyle → easier to secure basic needs → less anxiety about losing things.
- Simple pleasures:
 - Plain food, clean water, basic shelter, modest clothing.
 - Once pain from want is removed, such simple goods can be as pleasurable as luxuries.

- Prudence (practical wisdom):
 - Central Epicurean virtue.
 - Use careful reasoning to:
 - * Choose pleasures that lead to long-term pleasure and minimal pain.
 - * Sometimes endure short-term pain for greater long-term pleasure.
 - * Sometimes reject short-term pleasure if it leads to greater long-term pain.
- “Not the life of the profligate”:
 - Epicurus explicitly rejects a life of constant partying, luxury, and excess.
 - Real happiness comes from:
 - * A stable, undisturbed mind.
 - * Freedom from fear.
 - * Modest, secure satisfaction of basic needs.

2.4 Is It Really Easy to Satisfy Basic Needs?

- In theory:
 - Basic needs of body and mind are few and easy to satisfy.
 - In practice:
 - How easy this is depends on society and circumstances:
 - * Economic conditions.
 - * Political stability.
 - * Social safety nets, etc.
 - Still, the Epicurean point: compared to chasing luxury and status, focusing on basics is much more realistic and secure, even in harder societies.
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3. Why Not Pursue Fame, Power, and Wealth?

Epicurus strongly advises against making these your life goals.

3.1 Main Reasons

1. The process is stressful and painful.
 - To get fame, power, or great wealth, you often must:
 - Work excessively.
 - Compete harshly.
 - Engage in flattery, politics, or morally dubious behavior.
 - This creates ongoing stress and mental disturbance.
2. You probably won't get them – and if you do, you'll fear losing them.
 - They are:
 - Rare.
 - Dependent on others' opinions and external circumstances.
 - If you fail: frustration, envy, anxiety.
 - If you succeed: constant fear of loss, jealousy from others, threats to your position.
 - Overall: unstable basis for happiness.
3. They spoil you.
 - Luxuries and status can:

- Raise your “baseline” expectations.
- Make simple pleasures seem dull.
- You become less resilient and more dependent on rare conditions for happiness.

3.2 Connection to Desires and Pleasure

- Fame, power, wealth are examples of groundless desires:
 - Hard to achieve.
 - Harder to keep.
 - Bring more anxiety than secure pleasure.
- Pursuing them works against ataraxia:
 - Increases fear of failure, fear of others, and fear of loss.
- By contrast, satisfying basic bodily and mental needs, plus cultivating friendships, gives stable, long-term pleasure.

3.3 Dependence on Culture

- In a culture obsessed with status and wealth:
 - Social pressure to chase these is strong.
 - Resisting this pressure is harder.
 - Still, the Epicurean claim is universal:
 - Whatever culture you live in, real stability comes from:
 - * Modest needs.
 - * Tranquil mind.
 - * Good friendships.
 - Culture may change how hard this is, but not what leads to happiness.
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4. Friendship Is Golden

Epicurus places enormous value on friendship.

4.1 Why Friendship Matters So Much

- Friends provide:
 - Emotional support: comfort in distress, sharing joys.
 - Security: mutual assistance in times of need (illness, poverty, danger).
 - Trust and understanding: feeling known and cared for.
- These contribute directly to:
 - Ataraxia: calm mind, reduced fear, sense of safety.
 - Stability: more reliable than money or status.

4.2 Friendship vs Material Wealth

- Material riches can be:
 - Lost suddenly (accidents, theft, economic changes).
 - A source of envy and danger (people may try to take them).

- Close friendships:
 - Are less vulnerable than wealth to external forces (if well-chosen).
 - Create a network of mutual support that often outlasts and outperforms material safety nets.
- Hence Epicurean advice:
 - Don't waste your life chasing fame, power, wealth.
 - Invest your time and energy in building and maintaining close, supportive friendships.

4.3 Role of Culture

- In some cultures:
 - Individualism and competition can weaken social bonds.
 - People move frequently or work long hours → harder to maintain deep friendships.
 - This makes the Epicurean strategy harder, but:
 - Even then, friendship remains one of the most reliable sources of security and pleasure.
 - You may need to consciously resist cultural pressures to prioritize work/status over relationships.
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5. “Death Is Nothing to Us”

Central Epicurean claim: Death is nothing to us.

5.1 Core Argument

Epicurus relies on two key ideas:

1. All good and bad consist in sense-experience.
 - Pleasure and pain are felt states.
 - To be harmed or benefitted, you must be capable of experiencing something.
2. Death is the complete absence of sense-experience.
 - Because of physicalism:
 - When the body dies, the soul's atoms disperse.
 - No consciousness, no awareness, no sensation.

Argument structure:

- While we exist, we can experience things, but death is not yet present.
- When death is present (we are dead), we do not exist to experience anything.
- So there is never a time when both:
 - We exist as subjects of experience, and
 - Death is affecting us.
- Therefore:
 - Death does not affect us at any time.
 - So death is nothing to us – it cannot be good or bad for us.

5.2 Fear of Death as a Source of Disturbance

- People often:

- Fear death as the greatest evil.
- Suffer anxiety just thinking about their future death.
- Epicurus thinks this is irrational:
 - To fear something only in anticipation, when you know that when it happens you won't feel anything, is to cause yourself unnecessary present pain.
- Correct understanding of death:
 - Removes the fear of non-existence.
 - Makes the finitude of life acceptable.
 - Helps secure ataraxia.

5.3 Objection: "But I'll Miss Out!"

Objection:

Even if I won't feel pain when dead, death is bad because it deprives me of future pleasures I could have had.

Epicurean replies (exam-relevant points):

1. No subject after death:
 - For something to be bad for you, there must be a you for whom it is bad.
 - After death, there is no you at all, so no one who is "missing out."
2. Asymmetry with prenatal non-existence:
 - We do not regard the long time before we were born as a terrible deprivation.
 - Our non-existence after death is similar.
 - If we do not lament the infinite past when we did not exist, we should not obsess over future non-existence.
3. Focus on present life, not infinite extension:
 - A good life is about quality (pleasantness) not quantity (length).
 - The wise person focuses on making life pleasant now, not on extending it indefinitely.
 - Removing the craving for immortality reduces anxiety and dissatisfaction.

5.4 The Four-Part Cure (Tetrapharmakos)

Epicurus' "four-part cure" summarizes how to achieve ataraxia:

1. Don't fear god.
 - Gods (if they exist) are blissful and indifferent, not punishing.
2. Don't worry about death.
 - Death is nothing to us: when we exist, it is not; when it is, we are not.
3. What is good is easy to get.
 - Basic bodily and mental needs are few and easy to satisfy.
4. What is terrible is easy to endure.
 - Intense pains are usually short.
 - Long-lasting pains are often moderate and manageable.
 - With a proper mindset and simple needs, life's bad things are not overwhelmingly horrible.

These points: - Remove fear of gods and death. - Show that happiness is accessible (basic needs) and suffering is limited. - Together, they aim to secure a calm, untroubled life.

6. Key Takeaways for the Exam

- Three theses:
 - Physicalism: everything, including soul, is material; no afterlife consciousness.
 - Atheism (practically): no divine punishment or reward; don't fear gods.
 - Hedonism: pleasure is the only intrinsic good; the highest form = absence of pain/disturbance.
- Best way to pursue pleasure:
 - Satisfy natural and necessary desires → bodily health, freedom from pain, mental tranquility.
 - Avoid groundless desires (fame, power, wealth, luxuries).
 - Aim for ataraxia and aponia, not constant stimulation.
 - Use prudence to weigh short-term vs long-term pleasures and pains.
- Role of friendship:
 - More secure and valuable than wealth or fame.
 - Key source of long-term safety, support, and pleasure.
 - Central to an Epicurean happy life.
- Death is nothing:
 - All good/bad requires sensation.
 - Death = end of sensation.
 - So death cannot harm you; fearing it is irrational.
 - Objection ("I'll miss out") fails because there is no subject after death to be deprived.