

4 Epicurus

Epicureanism – Exam Notes

1. Three Theses of the Epicureans

1.1 Physicalism

- **Claim:** Everything that exists is physical (bodies and void); no immaterial souls or supernatural forces acting in the world.
- **Human beings:**
 - Body and soul are both made of matter.
 - The soul is mortal: when the body dies, the soul dissolves; **no afterlife**.
- **Moral implication:**
 - Since there is no conscious afterlife, all good and bad must occur **in this life**, in our experiences.
 - This supports the idea that **death cannot be a harm** (no subject left to experience it).

1.2 Atheism (in the Epicurean sense)

- Epicurus says gods exist as **perfect, blessed, untroubled beings**, but:
 - They **do not create the world**.
 - They **do not reward or punish** humans.
 - They **do not intervene** in nature or human affairs.
- For practical purposes: **we should not fear the gods**.
- Moral implication:
 - No divine judgment, no hell, no cosmic punishment.
 - Religious fear is a major source of mental disturbance; eliminating it is essential for tranquility.

1.3 Hedonism

- **Hedonism:** Pleasure is the only intrinsic good; pain is the only intrinsic bad.
- Important Epicurean twist:
 - The **best kind of pleasure** is not intense stimulation, but a **stable state** of:
 - * No bodily pain (**aponia**).
 - * No mental disturbance or anxiety (**ataraxia**).

- Once we reach this painless, tranquil condition, we **need no further pleasure** to make life better.
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2. How Best to Pursue Pleasure and the Absence of Pain

2.1 The Goal: Ataraxia and Aponia

- Best life = **freedom from pain in body** and **freedom from disturbance in mind**.
- Result: **ataraxia** – a calm, deeply peaceful, pleasantly content state.
- This is more valuable than chasing many short-lived, intense pleasures.

2.2 Strategy: Satisfy Basic Needs of Body and Mind

Epicurus' central practical idea:

Seek **simple, easily attainable pleasures** that secure freedom from pain and anxiety.

Key points:

1. Desires fall into types:

- **Natural and necessary**
 - For **life** (food, water, shelter).
 - For **bodily health** (basic medical care, rest).
 - For **happiness/peace of mind** (friendship, security, freedom from fear).
- **Natural but not necessary**
 - Extra variety and refinement (tasty food instead of plain, nice clothes, etc.).
 - Pleasant, but not required for a good life.
- **Groundless/empty**
 - Desires for **fame, power, great wealth, luxury, status**, and limitless consumption.
 - These are culturally inflated and hard to satisfy.

2. Practical rule:

- **Focus on natural and necessary desires**: they are **few and easy to satisfy**.
- Be cautious about “natural but not necessary” desires.
- **Reject or resist groundless desires**: they create constant frustration and anxiety.

3. Self-sufficiency and simplicity:

- Getting used to **simple food, simple shelter, modest lifestyle**:
 - Makes you less dependent on luck and wealth.
 - Makes you **healthier** and more resilient.
 - Means occasional luxury is enjoyed more when it appears.
- Example: Bread and water can be extremely pleasurable when you are truly hungry and free of fear.

4. Prudence (practical reasoning):

- We do **not** choose every pleasure, and we do **not** avoid every pain:
 - Sometimes **reject a pleasure** if it will cause greater pain later.

- Sometimes **accept a pain** (e.g., medical treatment, hard work) if it leads to greater long-term tranquility.
- This requires **calculating** long-term consequences.
- Hence: living pleasantly **requires** living prudently, justly, and honorably; these virtues support stable pleasure.

5. Is it really easy to satisfy basic needs?

- Epicurus claims: what is **natural** is generally easy to obtain.
 - But:
 - How easy basic needs are to satisfy depends heavily on your **social and economic conditions** (e.g., poverty, oppression, inequality).
 - Exam angle: you may be asked to question whether Epicurus underestimates these social factors.
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3. Why Not Pursue Fame, Power, Wealth, and Luxuries?

Epicurus' recommendation: **Do not aim your life at fame, political power, great wealth, or luxury.**

3.1 Main Reasons

1. **The pursuit itself is stressful and risky:**
 - Competing for power, status, and wealth brings:
 - Constant striving, fear of failure, political and social conflict.
 - Moral compromises that disturb your conscience.
 - This undermines ataraxia.
2. **Low chances of success; anxiety even if you succeed:**
 - Most people will **not** become famous or extremely wealthy.
 - Even if you do:
 - You worry about **losing** what you have.
 - You become dependent on external factors you cannot control (public opinion, markets, political shifts).
3. **You become “spoiled”:**
 - Luxuries raise your **baseline expectations**:
 - Ordinary experiences feel dull.
 - You **need more and more** to feel satisfied.
 - This contradicts the goal of being content with **little** and easily maintaining pleasure.

3.2 Exam Connection

You should be able to:

- Explain **why** Epicurus thinks these goals are irrational from a hedonist standpoint.
- Contrast:
 - A life of **simple sufficiency + tranquility** vs.
 - A life of **ambition and luxury** with constant anxiety.
- Reflect briefly on whether this advice might depend on:
 - How your society rewards or punishes non-ambitious lifestyles.

4. Friendship in Epicureanism

4.1 Why “Friendship is Golden”

Epicurus places **huge** value on friendship. Reasons:

1. Pleasure and emotional support:

- Friends provide affection, companionship, and joy in everyday life.
- They share your values and help calm fears about the future.

2. Security and protection:

- Friends help you in times of need: illness, poverty, threats.
- This reduces fear about the future and **increases ataraxia**.
- In many cases, close friends provide **more reliable security** than any amount of money.

3. Moral and psychological stability:

- Living among like-minded friends helps you maintain Epicurean attitudes and avoid social pressures toward wealth, status, and excess.
- You cultivate trust and mutual care, which reinforces peace of mind.

4.2 Friendship vs. Wealth/Power

- Instead of competing for power and status, **invest in close, supportive friendships**.
- Epicurean “riches”: having what you truly need, plus reliable friends.
- Exam angle:
 - Be ready to explain why friendship is a **better long-term strategy** for happiness than wealth or fame.

4.3 Dependence on Culture?

- In some societies:
 - Strong community networks may make Epicurean friendship-based security more realistic.
- In others:
 - High mobility, individualism, and economic insecurity might make close, lasting friendships harder to attain.
- You may be asked to consider: **Does Epicurus’ optimism about friendship assume a certain kind of social environment?**

5. “Death is Nothing to Us”: Epicurus’ Argument

Epicurus’ famous claim: “**Death is nothing to us.**”

5.1 Core Argument

1. All good and bad consist in sense-experience

- Something can be bad for you only if you **experience it** as painful or unpleasant.

- Likewise, something can be good only if you experience it as pleasurable.
- 2. Death is the absence of all sense-experience**
 - When you are dead, you do not feel anything: no pain, no fear, no regret.
 - Since the soul is material and dissolves at death (physicalism), there is **no conscious subject** after death.
 - 3. Therefore, death is not bad for the person who dies**
 - When you exist, death is not present.
 - When death is present, you do not exist.
 - So there is **no time** at which both you and your death are present such that you can be harmed by it.
 - Thus, death is “**nothing to us**”—not an evil to the one who dies.

5.2 Reply to the “Missing Out” Objection

Objection: Even if death is not painful, it is bad because you will **miss out** on future pleasures you could have had.

Epicurean replies:

- 1. No subject, no deprivation:**
 - To be deprived of something (like missed pleasures), you must **exist** to have that deprivation.
 - After death, you do not exist; so there is no “you” to be in a deprived state.
 - 2. Anticipatory fear is irrational:**
 - People often say they fear death not for the pain when it happens, but because thinking about future death now is painful.
 - Epicurus: it is irrational to let the thought of a state (death) that **will not be bad when it arrives** cause you distress now.
 - If being dead is not bad **when it happens**, then fearing it in advance is a **useless self-torment**.
 - 3. Focus on quality, not length, of life:**
 - A wise person does not cling to life at any cost nor rush toward death.
 - The goal is not to live as **long** as possible, but to live as **pleasantly and peacefully** as possible.
 - Once life is full of ataraxia, adding more years is not inherently better.
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6. The Four-Part Cure (Tetrapharmakos)

Later Epicureans summarized Epicurus’ therapeutic strategy as a “**four-part cure**” for the soul’s main anxieties:

- 1. Don’t fear the gods**
 - They do not interfere with human affairs; no need to fear divine punishment or wrath.
- 2. Don’t worry about death**
 - Death is nothing to us: when death comes, we no longer exist to suffer.
- 3. What is good is easy to obtain**

- True goods (basic bodily needs and tranquility of mind) require only simple, modest means.

4. **What is terrible is easy to endure**

- Extreme pains are usually short; long-lasting pains are tolerable or manageable.
- With the right attitude and simple living, life's hardships do not destroy happiness.

Exam use:

- Explain how this “cure” connects: - To **physicalism and atheism** (no afterlife punishment, no interventions by gods). - To the **focus on basic needs** and simple pleasures. - To the argument that **death is nothing to us**.
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End of Epicureanism Exam Notes