

PHIL 321
Lecture 22: Epicurus on Death

11/12/2013

Epicurus' main argument

Principal Doctrine II: "Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us."

Expanded argument in *Letter to Menoeceus*:

[P1] Good and bad consist in sense-experience

[P2] Death is the privation of sense-experience

[P3] Hence death—i.e. *being dead*—is not good or bad

[P4] So, if you are dead, it is not good or bad for you

[P5] It is irrational to fear the future occurrence of something which is not bad when it is present

[C] Hence it is irrational to fear death

[P1] relies on E's hedonism

E claims that "Pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly" (*LM* 128)

E's conception of pleasure, however, is quite atypical: "The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together" (*PD* III)

[P2] relies on E's doctrine of the soul

E is an atomist: all reality consists in atoms (i.e. indivisible, indestructible, units of matter that bond together to form more complex objects) and void

Even the soul, according to E, is composed of atoms (i.e. the soul is a body—quite different from Plato and Aristotle), which "dissipate" upon death

If [P1] and [P2] are too controversial, maybe we can substitute less controversial variants:

[P1*] Good and bad depend on there being a subject who could experience them

[P2*] Death is the extinction of the 'self' or 'person' — i.e. of the subject capable of experience

Three central problems Epicurus has highlighted:

[A] How can something be bad for S if S does not or *cannot* mind or care one way or the other, since S is non-existent?

[B] Who could be the possessor or subject of this bad once S is non-existent?

[C] When could the subject suffer this bad?