Epicurean Philosophy

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Epicurus, the founder of the Epicurean school, was born at Gargettus, near Athens, in the year B.C. 341. He passed his youth at Samos, whither an Athenian colony had been sent, to which his father, a schoolmaster, was attached. Epicurus is said to have turned his attention to philosophy at the age of fourteen. The story goes that he gave himself to this study on finding that the teacher who was instructing him in grammar and literature, not being able to give him a satisfactory account of the Chaos of Hesiod, referred him to philosophy for an explanation. He began his new studies with the works of Democritus, and these works made such an impression on him that be never afterwards abandoned the principles of the system of Democritus. Nausiphanes, a philosopher of Democritus' school, whose lectures he attended, may also have helped to this result. At the age of thirty-two he appeared as a teacher of philosophy in Mitylene. Thence he passed to Lampsacus, and finally to Athens, where he founded in a garden…the school over which he presided till his death (B.C. 270). His doctrines may be broadly described as a modified form of the Hedonism of Aristippus, combined with the Atomistic theory of Democritus.

In the school of Epicurus a cheerful, social tone prevailed. He reduced the fundamental principles of his philosophy to short formulae which he gave to his pupils to learn by heart. In the composition of his exceedingly numerous works he showed great carelessness, thus proving in practice the truth of his own maxim: "It costs no trouble to write." The one merit allowed his writings is, that they are easily understood; in other respects their form is generally condemned — notably by Cicero (*De Nat. Deo.,* I. 26). He is said to have composed, in all, 300 volumes. Diogenes Laertius gives a list of his works (X. 27.)….

Epicurus defines philosophy, considered from its practical side, as "the art of securing a happy life." It follows that philosophy, considered in its theoretical aspect, must also be directed to this end. The scope of theoretical philosophy is to procure that understanding of things which will enable man to secure for himself a happy life. Epicurus divides philosophy into Canonic (Logic), Physics, and Ethics. Canonic is subservient to Physics, and Physics to Ethics. We shall treat the philosophy of Epicurus in the order indicated in this division.

Canonic of Epicurus

Canonic lays down the laws (canons) according to which knowledge is acquired, and assigns the criteria of truth. This science, then, holds in the Epicurean system the place assigned in other philosophies to Logic and the Theory of Knowledge. Epicurus rejected Dialectic in the strict sense. His Canonic, too, is restricted to a very few principles, which he holds to be enough for the attainment of truth.

In his theory of human cognition, Epicurus is thoroughly sensualistic. Sensuous perception is produced by certain material images (*eidôla*) detached from corporeal objects (*aporroai*), and penetrating the channels of the senses. These images are detached from the outer surfaces of bodies, and make their way through the intervening air to our eye; they pass in through the

eye, and so occasion Perception (*aisthêsis*).

But it is not Perception alone which depends on these material images; they, furthermore, give rise to Thought in the understanding. These images penetrate through the senses to the understanding, and excite in it the thought corresponding to their nature. Not only are our perceptions effected by means of these images, it is by them also that we think (Cic. *De Fin.,* I. 6.) What we call our faculty of thought is passively recipient of these images, quite as much as our faculty of perception. This theory, it will be observed, is wholly sensualistic.

Out of the individual perceptions there arises gradually in the understanding a persistent universal thought-image, due to our memory of several similar perceptions of external things. It comes into consciousness at the mention of the word by which the object in question is designated. These universal thought-images (or, better, representative images) are the so-called *prolêpseis*. The *prolêpsis*, in the Epicurean theory, is no more than that one common image, under which the imagination subsumes a number of similar perceptions. This notion is in keeping with the general sensualistic character of the Epicurean teaching.

The *aisthêsis* and *prolêpsis* form the basis of the *hupolêpsis* or Judgment. In a judgment something is always assumed; a judgment, therefore, always expresses an opinion (*doxa*), hence the *hupolêpsis* and *doxa* are identical with one another. But an opinion of this kind may be either true or false. The question then arises: What is the criterion by which we distinguish the true from the false?

Epicurus holds that the criterion of first importance is the *aisthêsis* or immediate perception. Perception, as such, is always true. There is nothing which can disprove a perception. For neither other perceptions, nor reason, which has its rise in perception, have any higher authority. It follows that the only opinion to be esteemed true, is that opinion which is corroborated by the testimony of the senses, or at least not disproved by them, and that those opinions are to be held false, against which the senses give testimony. Second in order, as a criterion of truth, is the *prolêpsis*. This is to be regarded as a criterion of truth, for the reason that it is a product of sensuous perception. What has a common image of this kind as evidence in its favour is true. What has evidence of this kind against it is false, In the category of criteria we must also include the feelings (*pathê*). The feelings of pleasure and of pain are the criteria of practical action, *i.e.,* they indicate what is to be sought and what to be avoided.

It may be objected that all perceptions are not true; for instance, a tower in the distance appears to us round and small, while, in reality, it is angular and large. To this Epicurus replies, that in our perceptions we, strictly speaking, perceive not the objects themselves, but the material images that are detached from them. An image of this sort, in its passage through the air, may lose its first outlines and dimensions, and this actually takes place in the case of the tower referred to. As it penetrates our senses in this altered form, our perception exactly corresponds to the image, and is therefore true. The false opinion arises from the circumstance that we do not restrict our judgment to the image, but extend it to the object.

Epicurus dispenses himself from stating any theory regarding Judgment and Inference; he considers that artificial definitions, divisions, and syllogisms cannot take the place of perceptions.

Epicurean Physics.

In his physical theories, Epicurus is, in the main, at one with Democritus. He admits no transcendental Divine cause to account for the origin and dissolution of things. In Matter he finds the adequate cause of all things. Everything that comes into existence has its physical cause; there is no need of any higher agent to explain the phenomena of our experience. We

may not, in each case, be able to assign the physical cause with complete certainty, but this is not a reason why we should recur to the notion of a higher Divine Cause. This side of the Epicurean theory is distinctly Atheistical.

Starting with the general principle that nothing is produced from nothing, and that no being of any kind can be reduced to nothing, Epicurus assumes as the primary principles of things vacuum and atoms. We must assume a vacuum, or space; for the bodies, of whose existence sensuous perception assures us, must have being and motion somewhere. Atoms, too, we must assume, since bodies are composite, and therefore divisible. Continuing the division of the composite mass, we must at last come to parts which are indivisible and unchangeable, unless things be said to be reducible to absolute nothing. These ultimate indivisible corpuscles are atoms (*atoma*). Space and atoms exist from eternity.

These atoms are of different dimensions, but they are all, alike, too minute to be visible. Size, form, and weight are their only attributes. Other qualities, such as heat, colour, &c., are produced by the union of the atoms. The number of these atoms is infinite. But how are bodies formed from these atoms? To this question Epicurus answers:

The atoms move in space, with a downward vertical movement, determined by their weight, all moving with the same velocity. In this movement a certain number of atoms deviate from the perpendicular line of descent. This deviation brings about collisions with the other atoms. These collisions sometimes lead to permanent combinations of the atoms, sometimes, by the rebound of the atoms from one another, they produce upward or lateral movements, which uniting to form rotatory motion, produce, in turn, new combinations of atoms. In this wise are formed bodies, which, it will be seen, are no more than complex arrangements of atoms.

The aggregate of the bodies thus formed, united into a definite whole, constitute a world. The number of such worlds is infinite, for the number of atoms is without limit. The earth, and the stars visible from the earth, form one world. But an infinite number of other worlds also exist. These worlds are involved in a continuous process of formation and dissolution. But among the many worlds some are found which are possessed of life, and these endure for a longer time; the others pass quickly away.

The stars are not animated. Their real size is the same as their apparent: "for if their (real) magnitude were (apparently) diminished by distance, the same diminution should be effected in their brilliancy, which is, evidently, not the case. Animals and men are produced from the earth; man has been evolved, by successive stages, from a lower form."

The movement of the atoms, and the origin of the world thereby brought about, is, as has been said, a result of mere chance (Theory of Casualism). There is, therefore, in nature, neither final cause, nor any *heimarmenê* or Fate, resulting from a fixed necessity. Chance alone rules everything.

The existence of the gods is not to be denied; for we have a clear evidence of their existence in the fact that they frequently appear to men in dreams, and leave representative images of themselves (*prolêpseis*) behind in the mind. Moreover, since there are so many finite and mortal things in existence, the law of contraries requires that there should also exist beings which are eternal and blissful. Men are, however, in error when they picture to themselves the gods as supremely happy, and nevertheless assign to them the task of governing the world, and endow them with human feelings. These things are perfectly irreconcilable. It is only the ignorance which fails to find an explanation of natural phenomena in the forces and laws of nature itself which has recourse to the gods. The gods inhabit the spaces interposed between the stars, and lead there a happy life, not troubling themselves about the world, or the concerns of men. The wise man does not reverence them out of fear, but out of admiration for their excellence. As for their nature: they are compacted of the finest atoms.

The human soul is a corporeal substance; for if it were incorporeal it could neither act on the body, nor be acted on. Moreover, it is in contact with the body; but it is only the corporeal which can maintain contact with the corporeal. But the soul is a very refined, subtle body, composed of very minute smooth and rounded atoms, otherwise it could not permeate the entire body. Besides, if tbe soul were not so constituted, the body would lose something of its weight after death. The psychical atoms are of various kinds: some are of the nature of fire, others of the nature of air, others of the nature of wind or breath; according to the preponderance of one or the other kind, is the temperament of the human individual.

10. There are, however, in the soul atoms of an unknown and unnamed fourth quality, in virtue of which man is capable of feeling and thought. These atoms constitute the *logikon* (rational element) which is located in the breast, whereas the other atoms form the *alogon*, which is distributed through the whole body, and is the medium through which the mutual action of the *logikon* and the body is maintained. At death — the atoms of the soul are dispersed; and since sensation becomes impossible when the combination of atoms is dissolved, it follows that the immortality of the soul is a mere chimera. But we have no need of immortality; for when death has come we are not present, and as long as we are here death has not come, so that death does not at all affect us.

The Will is stimulated by the images in the mind, but it is not necessarily determined. As there is no *heimarmenê*, we are not controlled in our actions by an extrinsic force, our acts are our own, *i.e.,* we are free. Without this liberty, praise and blame would have no meaning. Freedom of will is nothing more than chance applied to human actions. In the world everything is subject to chance, *i.e.,* uncontrolled by necessity. The acts of human beings are like other things in this respect.

Epicurean Ethics.

In his Ethics, Epicurus follows, in the main, the teaching of the Cyrenaic school. He holds Self-gratification, Pleasure, to be the Supreme Good of man, and Pain to be the Supreme Evil. In proof of this doctrine he appeals to our own consciousness, which informs us that pleasure is what man is seeking, and that pain is what he avoids. He deduces the same conclusion from the fact that all living things, from the first moment of their existence, seek sensuous pleasure, and find enjoyment in it, while they strive as far as possible to escape from pain. The contrast between this teaching and Stoicism, both in method of argument and ultimate conclusion, need hardly be pointed out.

In the detailed exposition of this fundamental principle of his system, Epicurus distinguishes the Pleasure of Motion and the Pleasure of Rest — between *Voluptas in Motu* and *Stabilitas Voluptatis* (Cic. *De Fin.*, II., c. 3). In the first division are included all the pleasures which are accompanied by a stimulus of sense; in the second is signified that condition which is free from all pain or unpleasant feeling.

Epicurus teaches that the highest happiness cannot be obtained by the pleasure of motion. In this view he is at variance with the Cyrenaics, who, as we know, regarded the pleasure of motion as the highest good. According to the opinion of Epicurus, the highest happiness is attained in that condition which is called the "Pleasure of Rest" — in freedom from all pain or unpleasant feeling — in a word, in the condition of painlessness. When man has attained this summit of happiness, he experiences, indeed, a variety and a succession of pleasurable feelings, but the measure of his happiness is not increased thereby.

We have now to inquire how this condition of painlessness may be arrived at. Epicurus, on this point, gives us the following answer: "Pain is the disagreeable feeling experienced under

the pressure of some need or some desire; pain is absent either when we can satisfy the needs or desires we have, or when we have no needs or desires which call for satisfaction. We can, therefore, attain to painlessness either by satisfying all the needs and desires we have, or by restricting our needs and desires to that measure which it is in our power to satisfy."

"The first means here suggested is not possible to man; firstly, because he has not at his disposal the means to satisfy all his needs and desires; and, secondly and chiefly, because his needs and desires are, in themselves, unlimited and insatiable. There is, then, nothing left for those who would attain to the state of freedom from pain, except to restrict their needs and desires to that measure which it is possible to satisfy. Considered from the point of view we have now reached, Painlessness may be said to be the absence of all needs or desires which we are not in a position to satisfy."

From this exposition it appears that the highest good of the Epicureans is not something wholly negative (Painlessness), but that it has its positive side also; for this Painlessness is attained by satisfying the desires, that is to say, by positive pleasure. It is true this positive factor must be restricted withih certain limits; *i.e.,* the satisfying of the desires must be effected in determined measure, otherwise the state of Painlessness cannot be reached. In the light of this conclusion, we may state the fundamental law of life, according to the Epicurean Philosophy, in the following formula: "Restrain your needs and desires within the measure in which you will be able to satisfy them."

This principle furnishes an explanation of the further tenets of the Epicurean Ethics, such as the following:

(a) We must distinguish between those desires which are natural and necessary those which are natural but not necessary, and those which are neither natural nor necessary. Due moderation in the satisfying of our desires demand that we should refuse satisfaction to the desires of the last class, and restrict ourselves to desires of the first and second kind only.

(b) There are cases in which pleasure arises from pain, and other cases in which pain follows from pleasure. "We must not, therefore, allow ourselves to he carried away by the excitement of present pleasure, nor permit ourselves to be blinded and misled by the desire of the moment; we must renounce pleasure when it would be followed by a greater pain, and accept pain when it would be followed by a greater pleasure." Moderation in satisfying our desires requires that we should act thus.

(c) There is a spiritual pleasure as well as a bodily pleasure, just as there is pain of mind as well as pain of body. For the purposes of human life spiritual pleasures are of far higher worth than bodily. The body experiences only the pleasure which is actually present; the soul has the gratifying remembrance of its pleasures past, and the enticing prospect of pleasure to come. Spiritual is, therefore, to be preferred to bodily pleasure. Spiritual pleasure, however, has its ultimate cause in the pleasures of sense, for it consists in the remembrance or anticipation of the pleasures of sense. Epicurus was, therefore, warranted by his own theory in saying (Diog. Laert. X. 6) that he had no notion of any good apart from the pleasures derivable from taste, hearing, sight, and the gratification of sexual tendencies.

(d) But he is willing to admit that bodily pain is assuaged by the psychical pleasure derivable from pleasant memories and from hope, in the same way that sensuous pleasure is diminished by unpleasant memories and by fear. And thus we again find indicated the rule already laid down, that the one class of feelings must be moderated by the other, in order to secure complete absence of pain.

On these doctrines is based the fundamental law of Epicurean Ethics. "Calculate the pleasure and pain that are so closely linked in human life, so that you may procure from your life the greatest possible sum of pleasure, and the smallest possible amount of pain." To this

end Epicarus particularly recommends frugality, the cultivation of simple habits, abstinence from costly and extravagant enjoyments, or at least a sparing participation in them, in order that health may be preserved, and the relish for enjoyment may remain unimpaired. He also specially recommends intercourse with friends; friendship, according to Epicurus, being the best means of assuring every pleasure of life.

The function which Epicurus assigns to virtue in man's moral life is now apparent. Virtue is not good or praiseworthy in itself, as the Stoics maintained. It is good and estimable merely because it is useful in securing the happiness of life. It is, therefore, essentially directed to pleasure as a means to an end, and it is of importance only insofar as it subserves this purpose. The virtues, according to the reckoning of Epicurus are four in number: Prudence, Temperance, Courage, and Justice.

(a.) Prudence (*phronêsis*) is the chief of the virtues. It has a theoretical as well as a practical side, In the first sense, it is that knowledge of the true causes of things which delivers men from foolish fear of the gods, and of their judgments, and of death, and which thus makes possible a happy life. In the second sense, it enables us so to regulate our pleasures that one pleasure shall not hinder another, nor any pleasure be so intensified that it shall pass into the opposite pain, and it furthermore enables us to maintain our enjoyments at suitable intensity, contrives that they shall mutually enhance one another, and brings within our reach not oniy the pleasures actually present, but also past pleasures which we remember and future pleasures to which we look forward.

(b.) To Temperance it belongs to keep our enjoyments within due bounds, and to exercise self-control in the enjoyment of the several pleasures. Courage consists in "excluding the disturbing and distressing emotions which Prudence perceives to be unwarranted, in foregoing pleasure and accepting suffering as often as prudence warns us that this will contribute to happiness, and finally in putting an end to life when it can afford no more pleasure, but has oniy pain in store for us."

(c.) As regards Justice, Epicurus holds that all right is based upon a compact or engagement existing between men not to hinder one another. Justice consists in observing the law of the general safety founded on this compact. Justice contributes to a happy life, inasmuch as the just man has no punishment to dread, can count upon the protection of the law, can acquire property, and gains the good will and confidence of his fellow-citizens; all which give earnest of a happy life.

The virtuous man is the true sage. He alone reaches the goal of perfect happiness, and he alone cannot miss it. Virtue is the only way to happiness, it is also the certain way. The sage is, therefore, always happy. The duration of existence does not in any way affect the measure of happiness.

The Epicurean doctrines present us with a system of Materialistic Hedonism, which, however, full of contradictions, flatters and favours the sensual tendencies of man. We cannot, in consequence, be surprised to find that this doctrine was in high favour under the Roman Empire, when the stern morality of the older Romans was perishing under despotic rule. It contained no principles of morality strictly so-called. If there is nothing intrinsically good or bad in our actions, no immutable objective law according to which the morality of our actions is determined; if pleasure and profit are the oniy standard according to which we are to act; if pleasure of every kind is good in itself and becomes an evil only in the injury it may possibly entail upon the individual; then is there an end of everything which could give a moral character to our acts. The Epicurean Philosophy is a theory of effeminate ethics, wholly incompatible with an earnest morality. Cicero calls special attention to the fact that the notion of honour finds no place in the Epicurean teaching. The reproach is deserved. But it is by no means the most

serious objection which can be urged against the system.

The doctrines of Epicurus received little development from subsequent philosophers. The most remarkable of his followers were: Metrodorus of Lampsacus, Polyaenus the Mathematician, Hermarchus of Mytilene, who succeeded Epicurus in his school, Polystratus the successor of Hermarchus, Timocrates, Leonteus, Colotes, Idomeneus, Apollodorus, the author of four hundred vo1umes, Zeno of Sidon the pupil of Apollodorus (born B.C. 150), who was the teacher of Cicero and Atticus, and whom Cicero distinguishes among the Epicureans for his logical, dignified, and ornate style, and on whose lectures were based the works of his pupil Philodemus, the two Ptolemies of Alexandria, Demetrius of Lacon, Diogenes of Tarsus, Orion, Phaedrus an earlier contemporary of Cicero, and lastly Titus Lucretius Carus (B.C. 95-52) who in his didactic poem, *De Rerum Natura,* gave a complete exposition of the Epicurean system with the purpose of convincing his readers of the truth, and delivering them from fear of the gods and of death.

Albert Stöckl. *Handbook of the History of Philosophy*. (*Part 1: Pre-Scholastic Philosophy)*. Trans. T.A. Finlay. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1887.