



Epicureanism

December 6, 2012

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Learning Objectives

- Know that Epicurus established his own school in Athens and how it differed from previous schools
- Know Epicurus' views on Philosophy
- Know his Theories on:
 - Atoms
 - Knowledge based on Sense-Perception
 - Moral Theory - First Four Principles
 - Pleasure and Happiness
 - The Gods
 - The Human Psyche (Soul)
 - Death

Epicurus

341 – 271 BCE

- Born on island of Samos
- At 18 traveled to Athens
- Established philosophical circles in Mytilene and in Lampsacus
- Settled in Athens in 306
- Established his own school the *Garden*

Epicurus

- Atomist and moralist
- Hedonist – pleasure was “the good” for human beings
- Ego-centric or psychological – pleasure private matter
- Criteria of all value for human beings are pleasure and pain

Epicurus' Works

- Epicurus Wrote over 300 manuscripts – Diogenes Laertius
- Small fraction survives
 - Three Letters:
 - *To Herodotus* – Summary Of The Main Principles Of Atomism
 - *To Pythocles*
 - *To Menoeceus* – Summary Of Epicurean Moral Theory
 - Vatican Manuscript – Forty Maxims
 - Herculaneum - Fragments

Epicurus Theories Preserved

- Lucretius (99-55 BCE) – Poem *On The Nature Of Things* – Expounds the philosophical system of Epicurus
- Diogenes Inscription 200 CE (Turkey) – Summary of Epicurus' teachings including 40 “Principle Doctrines”

Epicurus' Garden

- Different from Academy and Lyceum
 - Not A college or research institution
- Society of friends
 - Living according to common principles
 - Retreat from civic life
- Women and slaves admitted

“Cleon brought me a letter from you in which you continued to show goodwill towards me matching my own love for you. You are trying not ineffectively to memorize the arguments which are directed at a life of sublime happiness, and you ask me to send you a brief summary of the argument about astronomical phenomena so that you can easily get it by heart. For you find my other writing difficult to remember even though, as you say, you are always using them. I was delighted to receive your request and it caused me joyous expectations”

Letter to Pythocles

Epicureanism

- “The only missionary philosophy produced by the Greeks” N. W. De Witt
- Spread to Lampsacus And Mytilene In Epicurus’ Lifetime
- Established early on in Antioch And Alexandria
- Spread Into Italy And Gaul In The 1st Century BCE

Epicurus' Philosophy

- Asserted philosophy has no value unless it helps men attain happiness.
- Mixture of empiricism, speculative metaphysics and rules for a tranquil life
- Immediate sensation and feeling v. logical analysis
- Based his moral philosophy on his theory of atoms

Atoms

- Universe composed of only two kinds of things: bodies and the void
- Bodies of visible size are compounded out of bodies of invisible size -- Atoms
- Epicurean atoms can not be split into smaller bodies
 - The Atom consists of minimal parts un-splittable and indivisible in thought
 - Atoms are everlasting
- Atoms possess only three variable qualities: size, shape, and weight

Atoms

- All atoms are subject to continuous movement – downward at the same speed
- Occasionally they swerve in a random way and may collide with other atoms
- Objects are the result of such collisions

Knowledge Sense-Perception

- All men have sensations (*aisthēsis*)
- Color, sound, smell – caused by objects
 - Atoms thrown off the surface of objects (effluences) – enter sense organs
 - Disrupted atoms change the sensation
 - Sound sharp or faint
 - Images clear or blurred
- Only reliable if impressions are clear and distinct

Theory of Knowledge

“ If you fight against all sensations, you will have nothing by reference to which you can judge even those which you say are deceptive”

(*K.D.* xxxiii)

Preconceptions

- Sense-impression versus judgments or identification of objects
- Impressions must be classified and labeled through “preconceptions” (*prolēpseis*)
- Error arises when words which signify a preconception does not correspond with the phenomenon

Dreams and Hallucinations

- Images Which Penetrate Directly Into The Mind
 - Atom Clusters
 - Density Is Much Finer
- Account For
 - Dream-images
 - Phantoms
 - Visions Of The Dead
 - Objects Of Ordinary Thought
 - Gods

Moral Theory - First Four Principles

“God is not to be feared, death should cause no apprehension, and the good is easily obtained, the terrible easily endured” (*LS 24J*)

Pleasure And Happiness

- Removal of all pain defines the magnitude of pleasure
- Specifying – conditions of A life free from trouble
- Epicurus - happiness = peace of mind
- Virtue, excellence of the soul
 - Plato and Aristotle = happiness
 - Epicurus = means to the attainment of happiness

“We say that pleasure is the starting-point and the end of living blissfully. For we recognize pleasure as a good which is primary and innate. We begin every act of choice and avoidance from pleasure, and it is to pleasure that we return using our experience of pleasure as the criterion of every good thing” Ep. Men 128-9

Desires

- Natural and necessary
 - For happiness
 - For freeing the body from troubles
 - For life itself
- Natural but NOT necessary
 - Do not bring pain if not met
- Neither natural nor necessary

Pleasure

- Kinetic pleasure – results from removing pain
- Static pleasure – follows the complete satisfaction of desire
- Satisfy desires for the sake of well being not for pleasurable feelings

- “When we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasure of the dissipated and those which consist in the process of enjoyment... but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the mind. For it is not drinking and continuous parties nor sexual pleasures nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a wealthy table which produce the pleasant life, but sober reasoning which searches out the causes of every act of choice and refusal and which banishes the opinions that give rise to the greatest mental confusion” (*Ep. Men.* 131-2)

Pleasure

- Sources of pleasure and pleasure itself not uniform
- One must use intelligence distinguish between beneficial and harmful pleasure
 - Not every pleasure is chosen
 - Not every pain is avoided
- Memory of past and anticipation of future pleasures can “mitigate” present suffering

Theory of Gods

- There are gods
- Gods are sublimely happy and immortal
- Their happiness consists in uninterrupted tranquility
- God do not possess a solid body

Theory of Gods

- The belief that the gods controlled human affairs
 - primary source of human anxiety
- Gods are not responsible for any natural events
- Gods have no influence over human affairs

Human *Psyche* (Soul)

- Soul consists of atoms and is:
 - Primary cause of sensation
 - Soul cannot have or cause life
 - Must be contained with in a body

Death

“Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved lacks sensation; and that which lacks sensation is no concern to us” (*K.D. II*)

- Complete and permanent loss of consciousness at death
- Birth and death are limits of human existence

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