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EPICUREANISM and FOOD

Introduction: The briefest definition of Epicureanism is hedonistic materialism. However, this technical description is potentially misleading to those unfamiliar with philosophical terminology. Similarly, the terms “epicure” and “epicurean” are now commonly associated with luxurious or *récherché* appetites and even vulgar excesses, although the Hellenistic Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-271 B.C.) encouraged moderation and a simple diet. It is true that he advocated pleasure (*hēdonē*) as a criterion of ethical choice, but his ethics must be understood within the context of his physics. To understand what Epicurus taught about food and pleasure, or even what he meant by pleasure, one must turn to the ancient sources.

The first vulgar yet comedic caricatures of Epicureanism emerged in antiquity, deceptive but memorable distortions of the teachings of Epicurus. Philosophical opponents from his own day including his own disaffected students, later Roman and Greek authors including Cicero and Plutarch, early Church Fathers, and medieval sources misrepresented and distorted Epicurus and Epicureanism to such an extent that their caricatures have persisted in common use today. However, the positive influence of Epicureanism on Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Romantic thinkers, and on modern intellectuals and writers demonstrates the indestructible longevity of, and persistent ideological resistance to this Hellenistic school of thought.

Basic Description of Epicureanism: According to Epicurus, human happiness is possible only through an understanding of the physical world and its unseen workings. Ignorance of one’s surroundings and of the composition of the universe leads to irrational and superstitious preoccupations, such as fear of death and dread of the gods. Epicurus sought to rid mankind of these worries through an explanation of theoretical physics based on the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus. Through careful study of the workings of the universe and the knowledge that everything consists of atoms and void, man is able to achieve peace of mind (*ataraxia*), an inner calm and sense of equilibrium, which is the highest pleasure, the greatest goal in life. Epicurus also encourages a careful discrimination among pleasures, rejecting pleasures that are momentarily intense but followed by pain. He argues for moderation, the pleasure obtained by the self-sufficiency of living a simple life, the joys of friendship, and even the withdrawal from an active political career, as summed up in the maxim, *lathe biōsas* (“live unknown”).

The philosophy of Epicurus demonstrates a keen awareness of, engagement with, and frequently polemical responses to the works of his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries. Although clearly in debt to the earlier work of the atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, and the hedonism of Aristippus, Epicurus nonetheless criticizes their work as insufficient. He attacks other philosophers on whom his own

work rests, including Plato and Aristotle, and his former teachers, reserving particular contempt and vitriol for Nausiphanes, an atomist with skeptical inclinations, who clearly had a formative influence on Epicurus. However, Epicurus did not allow criticism of himself from his followers. An oath of obedience to Epicurus and strict adherence to his teachings were required of members of Epicurean communities. Some of the most vicious comments about Epicurus and his philosophy come from his contemporary and former student, Timocrates, who, upon leaving the school, wrote a book called *Pleasant Things*, in which he accuses Epicurus of profound ignorance of philosophy and disgusting habits, including cohabiting with numerous women (perhaps a criticism of Epicurus' inclusion of women as full members of his school), spending an immoderate amount of money on food, and vomiting twice a day because of his luxurious living. Diogenes Laertius mentions these criticisms in his biography of Epicurus but discounts them as calumny.

Sources: Although Epicurus was a prolific author of over 300 works, few survive in their entirety or at all.

What little is known of his life is found in the tenth chapter of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, written in the second century A.D. Diogenes' biography also preserves the text of the three complete letters of Epicurus (the *Letter to Herodotus*, the *Letter to Pythocles*, and the *Letter to Menoeceus*) and a collection of quotations known as the *Principal Doctrines*. A 14th century Vatican manuscript preserves a similar collection of quotations, the *Vatican Sayings*.

Among the primary sources for Epicurean philosophy are the fragments of an inscription from Oenoanda, in Lycia, modern southwest Turkey. In the second century A.D., Diogenes of Oenoanda, an Epicurean Greek, carved a summary of Epicurus' philosophy onto the wall of a portico in his hometown. The inscription provided Diogenes' synopsis of Epicurus' teachings on physics, epistemology, and ethics. The three registers of the inscription contained three treatises, on Old Age, on Physics, and on Ethics. Less than a third of the inscription, an important source, has been recovered.

Charred papyrus fragments of Epicurus' 37 volume treatise *On Nature* and the works of authors who quote him were found in the 18th century in the personal library of the Epicurean philosopher and poet, Philodemus, at Herculaneum. Some 1,500 papyrus scrolls were semi-preserved at the Villa of the Papyri when the city was buried by volcanic ash during the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Because of the extremely fragile condition of the recovered papyri, it was not until the mid-1980's that researchers were able to develop an effective technique for reconstructing and reading the fragmentary documents. Today, a UCLA-led international team of scholars, the Philodemus Project, works to reconstruct, translate, and publish the texts. Philodemus (ca. 110 B.C. – ca. 35 B.C.), was a member of the literary elite, who counted the Roman poet Virgil (70 B.C. – 19 B.C.), possibly Lucretius (ca. 99 B.C. – ca. 55 B.C.) and Horace (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.), among his

many students. Philodemus' circle was an important point of entry for the ideas of Epicureanism and other Hellenistic philosophies into the Roman world and Latin literature.

Numerous quotations, fragments, and testimonies on Epicurus found in Greek and Roman literary sources are collected in Usener's 1887 compilation, *Epicurea*.

However, the most important extant source for Epicurean philosophy is Lucretius' hexameter poem, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of the Universe*), the title itself a translation of Epicurus' Greek *Peri Phuseōs* (*On Nature*). Lucretius' work is best understood as a lengthy exposition of Epicurean philosophy, addressed to his patron, the Roman aristocrat and politician, Gaius Memmius. Lucretius describes the poetic form of the treatise as "honey on the cup of wormwood" (a phrase perhaps better understood by our "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down") as it is calculated to make the work's technical content more pleasurable and palatable to its reader. Lucretius' poem is dominated by the Epicurean desire to free mankind from superstition and fear of death. Death is nothing more than the dispersion of atoms, which make up the human soul. Although the gods exist, they are unconcerned with human affairs and need not be feared. For, if they concerned themselves with mortals, they would be troubled, and gods in their blessedness, by definition, cannot be troubled. Rather, their tranquility provides the ideal for Epicurean peace of mind, which each member of the sect should strive to emulate.

A brief summary of Lucretius' poem will show which aspects of Epicureanism he chose to elaborate. Book I is devoted to an explanation of atoms and the void (space necessary for the movement of atoms), and an attempt to refute the physical systems presented by the pre-Socratics Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras. Book II presents the kinetics of atomic theory, with particular emphasis on the properties and movement of the atom. Book III discusses the material composition of the human soul and develops various arguments for its finite existence. Book IV contains Epicurean theories of sense perception, psychology, and will, concluding with a disillusioned description of love and sex. Book V discusses the origins of the world, astronomical phenomena, the origin and development of the human species, and the growth of human institutions, language, art, and religion. Book VI, loosely organized, explains various natural phenomena, including thunder, lightning, the periodic rising of the Nile, the attraction exercised by magnets, etc. It concludes rather abruptly with a description of the plague at Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.

Although Lucretius is faithful to the teachings of Epicurus, his primary focus is on Epicurean physical theory. There are however, moments in the poem when Lucretius either highlights parts of the Epicurean system or depends upon methodologies or procedures that he does not explicitly set forth. These are the *Canonic* ("Rules of Investigation"), Epicurus' moral theory, and the beliefs about the gods and religion.

Insofar as the criteria of truth and moral theory are relevant to a discussion of food and pleasure in Epicurean thought, further discussion of these elements is necessary.

Epicurean Criteria of Truth: The fundamental criterion is sensation. All objects of perception are true and real, and the criteria of truth are sensations and concepts and feelings. Epicurus holds that while sensation is irrational, there is no other criterion by which one can test it. Sensation must be trusted as a reliable guide to the world, insofar as it is perceptible. Thought is derived from sensation. The perceptible world is an instructive guide for the investigation of imperceptible objects. Several images of any one class of things unite to form a general concept of a thing, to which we can refer as a test. This general concept Epicurus called “anticipation”, because it allows one to anticipate or identify the appearance of anything one seeks or wishes to construct. The third criterion of truth is feeling (*pathos*), which is the basis of Epicurean moral theory. All sensation is accompanied by feeling, but feeling is the distinction between pleasure and pain.

Epicurus distinguished between two classes of objects of investigation: things perceptible in normal experience and things imperceptible. The latter category is subdivided into things that are perceptible but distant (not close at hand for investigation), such as celestial bodies, and things, which by their very nature are imperceptible, such as the atoms and the void.

Epicurean Ethics: Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus* is probably the best exposition of Epicurean moral theory. However, this theory is also evident in most of the *Principal Doctrines* and in many other quotations and references in other authors. It does not, however, feature prominently in *De Rerum Natura*. According to Epicurus, every sensation is accompanied by the feeling (*pathos*) of pleasure or pain. The end or purpose (*telos*) of action is pleasure; pleasure is good, pain is bad. Like sensation, feeling is immediate and irrational. It is also universal. All living creatures, as soon as they are born, take delight in pleasure but resist pain. For example, they desire the pleasure of not being hungry and not being thirsty. They do this by instinct, a natural impulse apart from reason. Not only is pleasure an immediate and irrational sensation but the processes of pleasure and pain are also atomic movements of dislocation and readjustment. Epicurean moral theory is firmly grounded in its physical system.

The assertion that it is man’s purpose (*telos*) to seek pleasure (“the pleasure principle”) led to popular misconceptions of Epicurean morality in antiquity and later. For example, in a hostile passage, Plutarch alleged that the Epicureans measure the amount of pleasures as with compasses, from the stomach as center (Plut., *Non posse*, 1098D). However, this was not Epicurus’ philosophy. He did not teach, as did the hedonist Aristippus and his followers, the Cyrenaics, that each successive moment should be filled with maximum pleasure. Epicurus comments in his *Letter to Menoeceus* that when he talks about pleasure as the goal of life, he is not talking about the pleasures of sensuality, but rather of freedom from pain and

mental affliction. It is not eating, drinking and sex, but sober reasoning and the virtue of prudence that produce the happy life. The highest pleasure is thus associated with the absence of pain (*aponia*).

Three further considerations refine Epicurus' concept that pleasure should be sought and pain avoided. Some pleasures bring pain, some pains result in pleasure; therefore not every pleasure should be chosen, nor every pain avoided. Pleasure is the satisfaction of want. According to Epicurus, what the body desires is not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. Such pains are caused by atomic dislocation, and thus the process of readjustment brings pleasure, as does the equilibrium that results. The static or *katastemic* pleasure of equilibrium is greater and longer lasting than the pleasure of movement (*kinetic* pleasure). The Cyrenaics had been aware of the distinction between katastemic and kinetic pleasures but rejected it. For the Cyrenaics, katastemic pleasures were not pleasures at all but rather the experiences of a corpse.

Lucretius clearly describes this satisfaction of want with reference to eating and drinking. The taste and consumption of food and drink bring a certain kinetic pleasure, but it is in their satisfaction of the pains of hunger and thirst that they restore equilibrium to the body. Overindulgence in food or drink, while resulting in immediate kinetic pleasure, would disturb the equilibrium of the body, and therefore should be avoided. It is always the katastemic equilibrium of satisfaction that should be sought over the kinetic pleasure of consumption. Cicero, himself a Stoic clearly engaged in polemic against the rival Epicurean school of thought, misrepresents Epicureanism by saying that the Stoics understand correctly that the first natural impulse of children and animals is for self-preservation, while the Epicureans hold that this first impulse is for kinetic pleasure. Rather, it is clear that Epicurus sees this first natural impulse as a desire for katastemic equilibrium, akin to a desire for self-preservation, as it depends on the satisfaction of basic needs. Epicurus would acknowledge that the kinetic pleasures of taste and consumption accompany the satisfaction of the pains of hunger and thirst, but it is incorrect to attribute to him the notion that the first natural impulse is solely for the thrills derived from these sensations.

Thirdly, there is a limit to pleasure as the satisfaction of desire, beyond which pleasure cannot be increased, but simply varied. Desires may be divided into three classes: physical and necessary, e.g., for food, clothing, and shelter; physical but not necessary, e.g., for sexual pleasures; and neither physical nor necessary, as for elaborate food or clothing. The first must be satisfied, the second should be limited by prudence, and the third should be rejected as unnecessary.

If one considers all these elements together, what emerges is that the maximum amount of pleasure is to be obtained from the simple life, which brings pleasures free from pain, results in the static pleasure of equilibrium, observes the limits of pleasure, satisfies those physical pleasures that are necessary, and wisely limits or rejects those that are unnecessary. This simple life is within the reach of everyone,

as nature has made it easy for humankind to satisfy its most basic needs. What is not easy is unnecessary to satisfy.

There are pains of the body over which one does not have the same control as over one's basic needs, such as those due to disease or accident. If pain is acute, it does not last long, for it either kills or is cured. If pain is chronic, it is not severe, and even permits a predominance of pleasure over pain. To obtain complete freedom from pain, one needs both the control of one's bodily desires and the gift of health.

The mind, too, has its special pleasures and pains. It shares the pleasures of the body, but it also has the capacity for memory and anticipation, which the body does not. The mind also has its own unnecessary desires, which may bring pain, such as avarice, and the desire for wealth, ambition, and public recognition, such as honors like crowns and statues. Desires for power and wealth often lead to crime; the possession of wealth and power seldom leads to the security of a tranquil life. Lucretius also discusses the pain associated with the mind's ability to look back, which gives rise to remorse or the pangs of a guilty conscience, together with fear of punishment. This is often associated, especially in religion, with the fear of death. These latter two great fears of the mind arise from its ability to look into the future. Both the fear of the intervention of the gods in this life and the fear of the punishment of the soul after death may be dissipated by study of Epicurus' physical theory.

Beyond the dissipation of fear, the mind's greatest positive pleasure is obtained through the study of philosophy, which Epicurus promotes as appropriate and enjoyable during all stages of life. The joy of friendship is also encouraged, and the study of philosophy with a friend unites these two highest pleasures of the mind. Finally, to guard against all disturbance of the mind, the true philosopher will eschew public life and politics and live unnoticed (*lathe biōsas*).

Significance of Epicureanism / Conflation with Gourmandism

It should be clear from Epicurus' moral theory that he advocated a life of moderation and simple pleasures and that he taught that happiness is possible even when one experiences physical pain. Nonetheless, detractors often sought to distort and discredit Epicureanism for ideological purposes. Thus, maxims such as "men feast and drink because they know that pleasure is short-lived" (*De Rerum Natura* 3.913-15) are taken out of context and are understood, incorrectly, as a synopsis of Epicurean ethics. The hedonism of Aristippus and his followers is often wrongly attributed to Epicurus.

Epicureanism according to Early Church Fathers

Early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and Augustine, some quoting Cicero extensively, sought to discredit Epicureanism. They exaggerate the primacy of the "pleasure principle", viewing it as incompatible with the forms of asceticism popular in the early church. In addition, they saw Epicurus' teachings about divine indifference to human concerns or

afflictions and the mortality of the soul as inimical to Christian thought. For Epicureans deny the immortality of the soul and invoke the study of philosophy and the workings of the physical universe to allay fears about death and the afterlife that are provoked by religious superstitions.

However, neither Epicurus nor Lucretius was an atheist, and both adduced arguments for the existence of the divine. Impiety, according to Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus*, is to accept popular opinions about the gods, which in fact misrepresent them. Plutarch relates that Epicurus used to claim that although he destroyed providence, he left a place for piety (Plut. *adv. Colot.* 8.1111B). In Epicureanism this piety manifests itself in the contemplation of the world with an untroubled mind, which is in itself an act of worship. Since the tranquil life of the gods is the moral ideal, the imitation of their life is a form of worship. Epicurus saw in this tranquility a communion with the divine. In this way, "a blessing comes to men from the gods," as Eusebius, an early Church Father noted (Euseb. *Praep. Ev.* 15.5).

Although the school of Epicurus at Athens was still open in the 3rd century A.D., when other schools had been closed, by the early 5th century Augustine, a Neo-Platonist, could declare that "their ashes [those of the Stoic and Epicurean schools] are not so warm as that a single spark can be struck out from them against the Christian faith" (Aug. *Ep.* 118, ch. 2). Augustine singles out Epicureanism as the school of thought most in conflict with the tenets of Christianity.

Middle Ages

As Epicurus' teachings were considered the least adaptable to Christian theology, his works did not circulate in the medieval period as widely as those of other pagan writers, such as Plato and Aristotle. Nonetheless, Lucretius' poem was available in 9th century Germany and in France during the 12th. Quotations of Lucretius appeared in the Latin grammars of Probus and Nonius Marcellus, in Isidore of Seville's encyclopedic *Etymologies* (7th cent.) and in Hrabanus Maurus' *De Universo* (*On the Universe*, 9th cent.). However, apart from Lucretius' poem, there is no systematic treatment of Epicurean philosophy in this period.

But during the Middle Ages a double image of Epicurus emerges: on the one hand, Epicurus the philosopher, the proponent of an atomistic view of the universe; on the other, Epicurus the gatekeeper of the garden of earthly delights, playing the vulgar roles of cook, bartender, and pimp. (Cf. Martianus Capellas' *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* [5th cent.], John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* [1159], John Gower's *Mirour de l'omme* [1376-79], and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.)

Christian polemic against Epicurus continues. Towards the end of the medieval period, Dante locates Epicurus in the Sixth Circle of his *Inferno* for denying the immortality of the soul.

Renaissance

Poggio Bracciolini's discovery of a manuscript of Lucretius' poem in a monastery near Lake Constance in 1417 aroused great excitement, but the first extended Humanist treatment of Epicureanism was Lorenzo Valla's 1431 *De Voluptate (On Pleasure)*, which was written without reference to Lucretius. Although Lucretius was readily available by the mid-15th century, the general identification of Epicureanism with extreme hedonism was such as to discourage the orthodox from too open an interest in this philosophy. Nonetheless, Michel Montaigne's *Essays* (1580) demonstrate a more than casual familiarity with Lucretius, containing no fewer than 149 quotations. François Rabelais' *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*, five sequential novels written in the 16th century, are Renaissance tales based on medieval themes. Although Rabelais does not mention Lucretius or Epicurus by name, his novels clearly bear the impression of the bawdy medieval persona of Epicurus. The story is that of a long wish-fulfillment in nearly all areas of mental and physical, although not sexual, desire.

Among the scientists of the Renaissance who sought to revive the theories of the workings of the universe espoused by Epicurus and Lucretius were Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Both of these men suffered severe censure from the Catholic Church for these and other of their ideas, considered heretical.

Afterwords

In the 17th century, the anti-Aristotelian philosopher and scientist Pierre Gassendi undertook a dramatic revision of Epicureanism to remove it of elements at variance with Christian teaching. Although Epicureanism was practically unrecognizable as a result, Gassendi's efforts led to a dramatic upsurge in European scholars' interest in the scientific theories of Epicureanism. Influenced by Gassendi, John Locke's interest in Epicurean Canonics (the "Rules of Investigation") and in the primacy of sensation in the formation of ideas played an influential role in the development of British Empiricism. Gassendi's counterpart in the English-speaking world was Dr. Walter Charleton, graduate of Magdalen Hall, now Hertford College, Oxford and physician in ordinary to Charles I and Charles II and future fellow of the Royal Society and the Royal College of Physicians. Charleton's first publication, *The Darkness of Atheism Dispelled by the Light of Nature* (1652), advertised that it was the "new" atomism that he espoused. At about this time, a characterization of the Epicurean emerges that is closer to the modern connotation of "epicure," someone who cultivates refined and sophisticated tastes and manners at table. William Whately's *Prototypes* (1646) describes Potiphar as "such an epicure was [he] – to please his tooth and pamper his flesh with delicacies."

In 19th century America, Thomas Jefferson identifies himself as an Epicurean in his 1819 *Letter to William Short* and provides therein an accurate précis of Epicurean philosophy. In England, the Epicurean promotion of happiness as the chief end of living provided support for the Utilitarian movement of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Bentham was an ethical hedonist, and drawing upon Epicureanism, he held that the moral rightness or wrongness of an

action was a function of the amount of pleasure or pain that it produced. He formulated an algorithm, the *hedonic calculus*, to facilitate selection of the best course of action by considering the variables of the intensity, duration, certainty, proximity, proliferation, purity, and extent of pleasure and pain associated with it. Bentham's student Mill correctly cites the primacy of intellectual over physical pleasures in Epicureanism, and Mill's "proof" of the principle of utility adduces the Epicurean reliability of sensation. According to Mill, just as visible objects can be seen and audible objects heard, so desirable objects are desired. Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and his philosophical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) were important contributions to the Aesthetic and Romantic movements. In the early twentieth century, the works of the French author and philosopher Anatole France (*The Garden of Epicurus* [1895] and *The Gods Are Athirst* [1912]) demonstrate sympathy with Lucretius' Epicureanism. In 1921 France won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and in 1922 the Catholic Church placed all of France's works on its Index of Prohibited Books.

Summary:

The positive influence of Epicurean philosophy throughout the ages should not be underestimated. Simultaneously, the satiric caricatures of the vulgar gourmand and the fussy epicure yet persist. Nonetheless, these are incorrect characterizations of Epicurus' original philosophy.

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