

Epicurus

Epicurus was born circa 341 BC on the island of Samos in the Aegean. At the time Samos was an Athenian colony and Epicurus's family were Athenian colonists.

He started studying philosophy at 14. He went to Athens at 18. However, within a couple of years Athens lost a war with Macedonia and as a result all Athenian colonists were expelled from Samos. Epicurus's family became refugees in part what is today northern Turkey. Epicurus left Athens to join his family. He continued his studies under a philosopher named Nausiphanes. He disliked Nausiphanes intensely and later described him as a 'the mollusc' and a 'bad man' with "habits of a kind that could never lead to wisdom".

In 311 Epicurus set up his own school of philosophy in Mitylene, the main city on the island of Lesbos. He moved it to Athens in 307. It consisted of a house and a separate garden in which he conducted his lessons. As a result his school became known as 'The Garden'. You joined it to learn the key to happiness and lived in community with others. It was open to anyone, including women and slaves and you paid what you could afford.

Epicurus thought pleasure – understood as a positive conscious sensation - was the ultimate goal of life. He often stressed the pleasure of eating. The result of this was that people assumed members of his 'garden' were spending their time eating delicious foods. This is the origin of the word 'Epicure' (an 'Epicure' is someone who indulges in pleasure, especially of a gastronomic variety). The irony is that Epicurus thought it was fundamentally irrational to cultivate expensive tastes and advocating keeping one's diet as simple as

possible – he ate mainly bread and water (and occasionally – as a treat – some cheese).

Epicurus lived in Athens for the rest of his life, dying sometime around 270 B.C. He was dogged with health problems and died a very painful death from a kidney stone blockage.

Epicurus was a wonderful friend to those around him and seems to have been endlessly kind. Indeed, because of his great generosity - allowing pupils to pay what they could afford, rather than charging fixed fees – he was often short of money. A lot of his letters include requests for financial assistance of one sort or another.

Like Plato, he viewed sexual desires with suspicion, saying of sex itself that it “has never done a man good and he is lucky if it has not harmed him”. He also viewed possessive love of the kind associated with sexual relations as being hazardous to happiness and that cultivating desires for it was unwise.

Epicurus prized friendship. Unsurprisingly he never married and did not have any children (though he seems to have adopted the children of his late friend Metrodorus). He thought the key to happiness was to keep a low profile, be unambitious, eschew wealth and strong passions, keep your tastes simple, and surround yourself with pleasant company.

He seems to have loathed other philosophers. He viewed his most eminent predecessors as idiots, and his contemporaries as frauds with no earnest interest in wisdom. They, in turn, disliked him and spread rumours about what went on in his Garden. This is why both ‘hedonism’ (the view that pleasure is the ultimate goal) and ‘Epicureanism’ have come to be associated with indulgent and licentious behaviour.

Epicurus was prolific. He is said to have authored over 300 works. Unfortunately they have all been lost. What we know of Epicurus's philosophy comes to us via fragments, letters, and the writings of the Roman poet Lucretius (99B.C – 55 B.C).

Epicurus's guide to happiness

Epicurus believed the life you have most reason to live is the one that contains the most pleasure. Epicurus was a 'hedonist' (a 'hedon' being a unit of pleasure and a 'hedonist' being someone who focuses on maximising pleasure). As a result, much of Epicurus's philosophy is designed to provide us with insight into how to lead the most pleasurable life. To that end he outlined four basic doctrines, reflection on which he thought would give you the best chance of a happy life. They became known as the 'Tetrpharmakos'. Here they are:

1. There is no divine retribution.
2. Death is not harmful
3. Pleasure is easy to achieve
4. Pain is easy to cope with

We'll now go through each one and see what philosophical support Epicurus provided for them.

There is no divine retribution.

In the Ancient world virtually everyone believed in gods of one sort or another. Epicurus believed fear of divine retribution – Godly punishment - was a potent source of unhappiness to many. There will be those who think they are going to receive divine punishment – they will live lives characterised by worry. And there are those who forego many pleasurable activities to avoid incurring divine punishment.

Epicurus thought this was thoroughly misguided. He believed there would be no supernatural repercussions for anything we get up to. There are two reasons for this: the one Epicurus gave, and the one implied by Epicurus's worldview, but that Epicurus would have been incapable of expressing at the time.

The first is that the gods, being perfect beings, are tranquil and happy. This is inconsistent with them being concerned with what we get up to, and angered by any of it. Anger and concern are, after all, kinds of suffering and thus marks of imperfection. So, he reasons, as the gods are tranquil and perfectly happy, they must be totally indifferent to us. They simply do not care what we get up to. Thus we have nothing to fear from them. It is irrational to worry about divine punishments – there will be none – and it is irrational to forego pleasures out of fear of incurring divine punishments too.

Death is not a harm

Another source of human unhappiness, thought Epicurus, is fear of death. He thought this was also irrational. Our deaths, thought Epicurus, will constitute the end of our existence. He did not believe we have immaterial souls that will survive the demise of our bodies. Rather, he believed our minds are composed of tiny soul atoms that, upon death, will become dispersed and cease to be able to support any sensations. As a result, when we die we no longer exist. In turn this means that “where death is, we are not, and where we are, death is not”. Thus our deaths cannot be harmful to us.

In fact he seems to have two subtly different arguments for the claim that death is not harmful to us. The first version goes as follows:

1. If something is harmful for a person, then the person must be able to experience it.
2. A person's death cannot be experienced by that person
3. Therefore, a person's death cannot be harmful for that person.

Pleasure is easy to achieve

Epicurus thought we regularly fail to notice how easy it is to be happy. Most of our desires are very easy to satisfy. The key to happiness is both to notice this, and to avoid cultivating desires it is harder to satisfy, or desires it is impossible to satisfy.

Take desires for food. These are natural and necessary. They are also easy to satisfy (for most of us anyway). But most people foolishly cultivate desires for ever more luxurious, refined foods. These desires get increasingly harder to satisfy, and do not yield more satisfaction when satisfied than simpler desires. It is, then, irrational to cultivate expensive, refined tastes. What you should do, to get maximum satisfaction out of life, is keep our tastes simple and just occasionally indulge (so, Epicurus ate diet of bread and water, but occasionally indulged and had a piece of cheese).

Epicurus also enjoins us to reflect on what we have, rather than on what we have not. As he put it “Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for” and “he who is not satisfied with little, is never satisfied with anything” Epicurus thought desires for wealth and fame are also among those it is unwise to cultivate, for they are hard to satisfy to any degree, and can never be fully satisfied.

Epicurus was suspicious of love of the sexual and possessive kind. He thought a desire for that kind of relationship was hazardous as such relationships are both hard to cultivate, and probably not worth the candle. If you fall in love with someone there is a decent chance that he/she will not love you back, in which case you will be frustrated and miserable. And even if you get lucky and manage to fall in love with someone who feels as intensely about you, it may not last, at which point both parties are going to be caused considerable suffering. Epicurus thought it wiser to cultivate loving friendships instead.

Pains are easy to cope with

Suffering, thought Epicurus, is generally either of the sharp or dull variety. Sharp pains are intense, but typically short-lived. So they are easy to cope with. And dull pains, though they may last a long time, are by their very dullness easy to deal with by reflection on happier times. Plus, if the worst comes to the worst, one can always kill oneself. Remember, on Epicurus's view, you

would not be doing yourself any kind of harm by killing yourself.....so suicide is always a viable means of dealing with suffering on the Epicurean view (and at least one prominent Epicurean – Lucretius – killed himself). But remember: his argument for this conclusion is fairly dodgy!