

THE SAGE OF EPICURUS

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Epicurus proposed an avowedly monistic and materialistic metaphysics, whence a mechanist universe logically derives. In this paper, I propose to show that freedom and happiness are secured by this philosopher by means of his doctrine on the divine. In other words, Epicurus brought forth a theology of liberation from oppressive necessity within the logical context of his total system of thought.

Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus consistently taught that pleasure is the essence of happiness. Pleasure is the satisfaction of needs and desires, pain is the privation of such satisfaction. The greatest pleasure, however, consists in the tranquillity of soul. Purest pleasure is enjoyed without any admixture of pain, which causes man to feel threatened from all sides. The Many fear the City of Man, the Cosmos of beautiful but ever-changing things and the unpredictable and chancy happenings in nature. Above all, it is the fear of the gods, especially after death, that spoils the pleasurable life of man on earth.

The fear suffered from other men takes its origin from the evident selfishness animating everyman to seek his own pleasure, even to the extent of injuring others. Strife and contention result when men live together in big groups as in a city, where there are not enough goods to satisfy the just needs of everyone. Justice is not abstract but something that is appreciated only in some concrete situation. It takes the form of a compact between men to ensure that life and property be safe in order to let everyone secure his pleasure, while living with one's fellowmen. The social compact is the result of expediency, which leads men to band together in order to prevent one man from injuring others and to protect him from being injured by them (KD XXXI). The mutual compact regulates relations between men in whichever circumstances they may find themselves, with everybody agreeing that not one of them will either injure or be injured (KD XXXIII).

Nevertheless, the life in the city is a source of fear to all, due to the inconsistency of man, who is apt to violate the social contract. Justice is something useful to Every man but since pleasure is the criterion of happiness, an unjust act is in itself justified by the ensuing pleasure. The pleasure gained in this manner, however, is greatly diminished by the fear

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that one will not escape punishment from those designated to mete it out for any violation of the compact (KD XXXIV). Even a secret violator can never feel confident that he will remain undetected and unpunished in this life.

Granting that someone's myriad unjust deeds may never be detected nor punished in this life, there is still the uncertainty of what will happen to a man after death on account of his unjust actions (KD XXXV). The city has laws embodying justice, but since pleasure and pain are the measure of happiness, laws are easily and too soon turn to increase to be useless, because they become inapplicable to the citizens (KD XXXVII - XXXVIII).

Arts and crafts develop naturally to increase the comfort of city life. Speech is the result of convention as men assigned particular meanings to particular sounds, because language needs to be developed for communication. Life in the city remains insecure, inhabited as it is by men intent on seeking their own pleasure. At any moment, one's fellow citizens may commit injustice to oneself and to others. If these unjust men are not punished soon, they become arrogant and thus hatred and rancor grow apace everywhere, causing even more fear for all.

Even when the city has been relatively well established to regulate men's relations with his fellows, the fear of nature fills man with dread and this tarnishes his pleasure during life. The phenomena of the skies are mysterious to men. The sun, moon, and stars move in unexplained ways. Their motions, periods, eclipses, risings, settings and the like need explaining. Clouds and rain, thunder and lighting, cyclonic storms, earthquakes, volcanoes, hail and snow dew, frost and ice and even the rainbow are events that come and go. What reasonable account is there of them and for other phenomena like the halo around the moon, comets, falling stars, fixed stars and planets (PYTH 90b-115b)? How can man be freed from fear that everything is slipping into nothingness (LUCR II, 861-864)? The vulgar accept the belief in the existence of gods, who rule the world, as a refuge against the phenomena above us and to allay their fear of the unknown fate and an irremediable destiny. The Many believe that the celestial bodies are gods, blessed and eternal, and so they anticipate and foresee eternal suffering after death, because of what the myths of the poets depict. The dread of the gods and of death are all the more painful to the Many, because they trust more to their unreasoning imagination than to reasonable conjecture. The belief that gods exist and that they care for the affairs of men as seen from their control of phenomena, arose when some men had dreams or visions of divine figures, similar to those of statues that adorn the streets of cities. These figures appeared to them dignified in mien and impressive in stature. These seers are the poets who attributed sensation to these superhuman beings, after seeing them move and hearing from them lordly utterances appropriate to their stately and stalwart figures. Eternal

life was attributed to them because the substance of their shapes appeared perpetually renewed and their outward appearance was unchanging. The visionaries also pictured the gods as superior to men and because they saw them perform miraculous acts of prowess without the slightest effort (LUCR V, 1140 ff.).

The Ultimate Reality

For Epicurus, the ultimate reality underlying the whole universe of particular and sensible beings are bodily objects; namely, atoms-moving-in-the-void. Although nature presents itself as a cosmos of variegated sensibles, Epicurus traces their origin to lifeless atoms-in-the-void. The common view that the many beautiful things in nature owe their first origins to the gods, whose immaterial mind designs particulars before bringing them into being and at the same time orders them towards a universal goal, is unacceptable to Epicurus. For him, an immaterial mind goes against his primary truth; namely, that everything in the final analysis consists in atoms-moving-in-the-void. Minds, both man and divine, however subtle they may be or howsoever finely grained their constituents might be, trace their ultimate foundation to blind primordial atoms (LUCR I, 1000).

Epicurus holds that all natural phenomena are nothing but indefinitely many combinations of numberless atoms in varied configurations (HER 41 B). Hence, one has to admit the existence of innumerable and unfailing worlds (HER 45 B). An account of the universe cannot be given, unless one stops dividing bodies. Ultimately, one has to postulate invisible particles constituting all bodies experienced in the world, even when these particles are no longer perceptible to the senses. Hence, atoms are invisible, as their very name expresses, otherwise one ends up in affirming that each atom is infinitely great insofar as it is still capable of infinite division and at the same time it is infinitely small inasmuch as it is the ultimate particle, of an already oft-divided furniture is ultimately explained by constantly changing combinations of atoms mechanically moving in the void. Democritus had asserted that the atoms move downwards in the void with a straight and uniform motion. However, in order to explain the possibility of atoms combining, Epicurus contributed the significant insight that atoms have the natural tendency to swerve ever so little to one side in their downward paths (HER 43). It is this built-in SWERVE that causes continual collisions of atoms, whose resulting rebounds for aggregations, which we sense the everchanging particulars of the sensible world.

The Sage

For Epicurus, man does not occupy a privileged position among the particulars of the sensible world. Such a pretension of superiority is claimed by some on the basis of man's having a mind that is supposed to be a non-bodily entity. Epicurus rejects such a supposition, because the ultimate reality underlying all particulars are only atoms in the void. Since the mind of man belongs to this material universe, it cannot be anything else but a body similarly composed of atoms (HER 63 A). Man's mind permits him to shift for himself in a world of things mechanically impelled without plan or design. Man's behavior is adjusted by his mind to an environment, governed by blind chance inherent in the mechanically moving atoms. Perpetual danger threatens man, coming from the dissolution of his own essential composition or from pain inflicted on him by things, other men or gods (HER 78-79). The capacity to shift for himself in a world of constantly changing and accidentally combining atoms aggregations constitutes man's freedom. This freedom comes originally from the swerving motion of the atoms, whose uncaused motion breaks the otherwise unending chain of cause and effect (LUCR II, 251-293). It is through this freedom that man not only preserves himself but also permits him to attain perfect bliss (HER 80).

Happiness for man is pleasure consisting of an agreeable sensation (MEN 127 B - 129 A). Pleasure is the satisfaction of needs and desires, pain is the privation of such satisfaction. Pain nullifies the enjoyment of pleasure and, hence, man naturally tends to maximize his pleasure by fleeing pain (MEN 116 B). The discrimination of one pleasure from the other as well as the capacity to endure lesser pains for the sake of avoiding greater ones or of gaining more pleasures are ways by which man's freedom endeavors to make the most of a lifetime spent within a chancy universe (MEN 129 B).

Gods and Divine Providence

Man suffers from terror of life and dread of death. He foresees his inevitable dissolution at death and fear seizes him of what awaits him in Hades. Surrounding the mysterious silence of the grave, there abound disturbing tales of the poets, telling of the existence of gods, immortal and superhuman, who regard the good but punish the wicked (MEN 124 A). Because of this belief in the existence of anthropomorphic gods, invocation and prayers, sacrifice and expiation, and other religious services are undertaken by the Many as the most serious business in life (LUCR V, 1150 ff. - 1196). This is the case, because it seems pointless for man to accumulate pleasure in this life, if he will have to suffer pain for these same pleasures after death at the hands of vengeful gods. The gods are described by poets as possessing human characteristics and passions, cast in heroic

proportions and degrees. The fear of death is increased by the rumor that the gods are arbitrary in their anger or favor towards men. The gods are said to approve those men most, who are like themselves. (Ibid.).

Contrary to the opinion of vulgar men, the sage seeks the truth about the nature of the gods as the sure means of liberation from terrors both in life and in death. Through reflective reasoning, he discovers the mythical character of the belief of the Many, who imagine the gods ruling the forces of nature and decreeing the fate of every man in an arbitrary fashion (LUCR VI, 40ff). The sage discovers that the gods of the vulgar are illusory beings, which originate from the unthinking rabble's acceptance of tales coming from poets' imagination. The poets depict the gods after their own human form and they imagine them to possess human characteristics and passions in superhuman proportions (MEN 123 - 124 A).

The sage discovers through reflection that should the gods really exist, they could not be otherwise than mere aggregations of lifeless elements. The constituent atoms of the gods must be affirmed to be of the slightest structure and of the finest texture, as subtle and as brilliant as those of breath or fire (HER 97). In spite of this, the gods remain chance aggregations of the primordial and fundamental elements, blind atoms moving in the void. One could admit that the gods are immortal, because their shape is continually replenished by the numberless atoms. Subject to the same mechanical laws inherent in the nature of the atom, gods can claim no fixed abode. They glide unobserved by human eyes along the interstices of the universe, so fine are the atomic gains that constitute their bulk.

Neither does the sage admit the superstition of the Many, who hold that the gods have passions similar to those of men, save that they possess them to a far more intense degree. If this were true, through their assimilation to men, the gods would effectively lose their vaunted superiority. Hence, if one must believe in the existence of the gods, and every just man is bound to do so, for it is only the unjust who would deny their existence, then one must conclude that the gods live gently abiding through the crevices of the highest heavens.

In addition, the Epicurean sage sees the emptiness of the belief of vulgar men, who are convinced that the gods rule the universe, caring for men and ordering wordly events as they see fit and proper (MEN 124 A; LUCR 11, 1090-1104). Certain of the falsity of this supposition of divine providence, the sage escapes the fear of the gods both in life and in death. Even granting that the anthropomorphic gods do really exist, the added notion cannot be taken for granted but must be proven that they are able and are willing to undertake the care of men. The claim of a special divine providence on the part of the gods on behalf of men is presumably on the pretension that man is a privileged inhabitant of the universe based on man's presumed

possession of a non-bodily mind. The sage sees the impossibility of such a belief that the gods dwelling in the upper reaches of the heavens can do favor or harm to men. The distance separating the gods from men alone effectively isolates the gods from human concerns. In addition, should gods busy themselves with human affairs, this would detract from the acknowledged state of the gods; namely, that the gods live in imperturbable calm enjoying bliss to the full in complete tranquillity of mind. Unlike the multitude, the sage distrusts his imagination when reflecting on the gods; he relies only on reason for understanding their true nature. The sage is certain that isolated from the things of the world, the gods glide through the interstellar crevices in perfect tranquillity of mind, incapable of involving themselves with human and cosmic affairs (LUCR III, 18 - 24).

Armed with the knowledge of the true nature of the gods, the sage finds no reason to fear death, under whichever form it may present itself. He knows that his body and soul are mere aggregations of primordial blind elements. The time will have to come when both aggregations forming the human composite will get so changed as to be no longer able to continue to exist recognizable as a human being. This dissolution of man into other forms incompatible with a living human form is called death. Death cannot possibly cause pain to the sage, who is certain that to die is the inescapable destiny of man. Were there, in truth, an existence for man after death, this could not cause the sage any pain or unhappiness. He knows full well that the basis of the vulgar fear of death is their belief in gods meting out justice to both good and evil men in Hades. The sage is exempt from such a terror in the certainty that the final constitutive elements of the immortal and blessed gods are the dumb primordial atoms in the void.

In addition, the sage remains indifferent to the supposed existence after death, whichever pleasure is granted as reward for just deeds or whichever pains are given in retribution for unjust deeds in life. This indifference comes from the sage's knowledge that when his body and mind shall have been dissolved and transformed into non-human atomic aggregates, his personal consciousness will fail (HER 65). To the unconscious, no amount of pleasure or pain is of any relevance (KD II). The truth concerning justice is known to the reflective sage; namely, that reward for just deeds and punishment for unjust actions take place in this life. This is the case, because ignorance punishes the vulgar, with the dread of death through life. In contrast, reflective reasoning leads the sage to the knowledge of ultimate truths liberating him from all such fears.

The Benevolence of Nature

In what, then, does the good life consist? It can only be the life of the sage, who-having conquered the dread of death, he is now ready to vanquish the fear of life, through the imitation of the blessed and immortal

gods (LUCR III, 105; V 40 ff.). Hidden from the turmoil of the city, the sage devotes his energy and time to a life hidden in the bosom of Mother Nature. The latter's benevolence prompts the sage to occupy himself with the contemplation of ultimate truths and their consequences. It is here that the true value of the gods for man comes to the fore. The gods are made the pattern for the activity and life of the sage, who desires to share their ATARAXY, i.e., tranquillity of mind. Man's inborn thrust for perfect bliss takes the form of withdrawing from public affairs as much as possible. Far removed from the troubled existence in the crowded city, the wise man escapes the fury of strife arising naturally between men continually intent on their own pleasurable self-aggrandizement. Even at the expense of their fellowmen (MEN 124 B). The sage finds peace in Nature, in whose bosom repose and quiet lie. Nature proves benevolent to the sage, as he seeks to regulate his desires amid the chancy events of the natural and social worlds (MEN 130 B - 131 B). Necessary things coming from natural wealth are limited but are easily obtained; contrariwise, wealth defined by fancy is always beyond reach but unnecessary (KD XV). Withdrawn from the noisy concourse of men, the sage is favored by Nature, which opens up its secrets to everyone earnestly searching ultimate truths.

The greatest discovery made by the sage is the knowledge that come to him from reflecting on the movement of the heavens. He comes to the realization that all the beauty of the earth and the skies are but a mask for the one true ultimate reality hidden from the superficial look of a mere observer. It is only through prolonged meditation that the sage discovers the secret that the beautiful things of the world, including the immortal gods, are reducible to the irrefragable atoms-in-the-void. Knowing the origin of every being brings wisdom and happiness to the searcher of truth. The beautiful cosmos with its whole machinery continually crumbling into new forms, the honey which gives a sweet taste to the keen seeker of truth preparing him for the bitter medicine of the full truth that the universe will not end in nothingness, because of the indestructibility of the infinitely many atoms. This realization of the solidity of innumerable worlds continually being replenished by atoms bring tranquillity of mind to the sage. He knows that atoms have no passions; they do not laugh, neither do they engage in speeches. Just as meaningless letters combine to produce a beautiful poem so do the atoms combine to produce the beautiful forms of wordly things, including the powerful gods themselves. (CF. ANATOLE FRANCE'S THAÏS). The paradox of numberless beautiful things being constituted by the blind primordial elements is hid from the vulgar, who follow their imagination and not their reason. Arts and crafts which develop in the city to provide mere sensual enjoyment and more ostentatious ambition for its citizens further disguise the true reality of things.

In contrast to the turmoil of body and mind inherent in the life within the luxurious city, the quiet countryside is the source of partial ease for the

sage, from the god of bodily pleasure and proud ambition. Through reflection, the sage feels safe in the bosom of Nature. Having chosen reason to lead him to seek tranquillity of mind, he chooses the enjoyment of the finer pleasures of the senses. Reducing his bodily needs and desires to a comfortable subsistence, he is content with the little needed for moderate subsistence. He remains a citizen only to the extent that he can secure sufficient provision for his physical life. Forsaking the grosser, kinetic pleasure of agreeable sensations, the wise man devotes himself to the finer and keener, catastemic, (i.e., static) pleasure of reflective thinking and contemplative living amid the ultimate truths (MEN 132 B - 135 B; CIC, DE FIN, II, 3).

The Good Life

The sage in solitude shall not be solitary. He shares his pleasurable occupation with like-minded men and women, whose company enhances their common joys, while assuaging the different individuals' private pains and sufferings. Untroubled by the giddy affairs, the community of Epicurean sages search together for the deepest treasure of tranquillity of mind. In mutual love they lead contemplation of eternal truths. This company of sages pass their days in the pleasurable occupation of quiet but earnest discussion of nature and things. This communal life of sharing goods and talents, joys and sorrows, is peaceful to the extreme, because friendship and philosophy bind them to each other with closest bonds. The Garden bought by Epicurus for his friends was small and the house where they lived was unpretentious. But there ATARAXY held sway rivalling that of the gods themselves (LUCR V, 126 - 173). Freed from the fear of death and of life, through the thorough understanding of nature and things, the community of the Garden feasted like gods with the little that they had.

One can now see the truth of the claim that it is the theology of Epicurus, which liberates the sage from the clutches of a terrifying mechanist universe made up of fundamentally blind atoms. The mathematical machine of things ever replenished by lifeless atoms could indeed banish what is characteristically human, i.e., friendship and speech, to solitude and silence. But the sure knowledge of the nature of the gods makes it possible to bring the calm and secure intramundane joy of shared speech and needless generosity to the company of wise friends. In the bosom of Mother Nature, the company of sages are intent on giving goods to each other, because they have chosen joy and friendship, discourse and contemplation to be their treasure, which is not diminished for one because it is being shared by the other. The gods bridge the gap between nature and man. If Nature proves so benevolent to man but the gods remain indifferent to him, surely the sage can enjoy the bounty of nature with complete tranquillity of mind. By imitating the gods in their ATARAXY, the company of wise men do homage to the gods. They are the just, because it is only

the impious who deny the existence of the gods.

The opponents of the god-like Epicurus and his numerous communes of monastic simplicity could only attack them by means of malicious slander. However, these charges of abuses contradicting the most precious doctrines of the Epicurean sages are only desperate attacks, which are nullified by the magnificent record of these communities. Athens and many Hellenic cities owed the relative quiet of their regimes to the wise insights garnered by the Epicurean sages, who influenced the rulers of Greece. The Epicurean brotherhood did not engage EX PROFESSO in ruling cities as did the Pythagorean Bands of Friends. The Epicureans were content to let their doctrine permeate the minds of rulers with their ideal of ATARAXY for everybody. Such is the benign influence deriving from the true Epicurean sage. The contemporary bias which attaches to the name of Epicurus, namely, the equation of his system with a gross form of Hinduism must be rejected as unworthy of the saintly philosopher. The marvel is the fact that in a materialistic and monistic system of thought, in which anthropomorphic gods are rejected, only the god-like Epicurean sage comes forward to vindicate the dignity of morality and holiness.

Lucretius' words of praise for Epicurus are well merited:

As soon as your reasoning, sprung from that god-like mind, lifts up its voice to proclaim the nature of the universe, then the terrors of the mind take flight, the ramparts of the world roll apart, and I see the march of events throughout the whole of space. The majesty of the gods is revealed and those quiet habitations, never shaken by storms nor drenched by rain-clouds nor defaced by the white drifts of snow which a harsh frost congeals. A cloudless ether roofs them and laughs with radiance lavishly diffused. All their wants are supplied by nature, and nothing at any time cankers their peace of mind. But nowhere do I see the halls of Hell, though the earth is no barrier to my beholding all that passes underfoot in the space beneath. At this I am seized with a divine delight, and a shuddering awe, that by your power nature stands thus unveiled and made manifest in every part (LUCR III, 14 - 20).

Summary and Conclusion

The arguments behind my exposition of what the Epicurean sage really is can be briefly summarized thus: When Epicurus accepted the materialistic position of identifying the ultimate one as atoms-moving-in-the-void, an immaterial mind ordering the universe is effectively expunged. With the monistic reality of material universe of chancy events, firmly

established, the reasonableness that would order the natural and human affairs would be without foundation and justification. The characteristically human is reasonable and it includes the visibility of the world, passion, craft, speech, choice, justice, friendship, and joy. It would not have the support of a fundamental reality, namely, the blind primordial atoms. No immaterial mind resides in the gods either, whose ATARAXY makes them indifferent to human. With reason gone, human pain and pleasure, art and speech, freedom and perfectibility of man are reduced to silence. Without reason ordering the universe, fear of life and dread of death fill men's lives with terror.

Epicurus, logically, recovers the characteristically human. He situates the search for truth, friendship and joy in the community of Epicurean sages, who pay homage to the gods by imitating their ATARAXY. By withdrawing themselves from the turmoil of the city, the sages enjoy the bounty of Mother Nature. The secret of the ever-changing face of the universe with the constant threat of its fallen wells ending up in nothingness is the sweet honey, which makes bitter medicine palatable to the wise man. The cosmos will never fail because of the infinitely many but lifeless atoms-in-the-void. The shared philosophical speech and moral beauty of the Epicurean community of sages, becomes the abode of the characteristically human.

The doctrine that the gods live in ATARAXY is not made use of by Epicurus to bridge the chasm between the fundamentally lifeless atoms and the terrified human being struggling for meaning. By using gods as the paradigm of the good life, the company of sages recapture the characteristically human by accommodating themselves to the exigencies of rustic nature, isolated from the noise and turmoil of the city.

In the context of a materialistic and mechanistic universe, Epicurus' thrust is to insist that the sage takes place of noble human life. Knowing that the gods do not exist as envisioned by the crowd, the sage utilizes the freedom injected into a mechanical morality in theory and to establish sanctity in practice.

The main objection against Epicurus is that NOUS, i.e., Mind, cannot be blotted out from the nature of things by the postulate of atoms-in-the-void. A stronger reason needs to be given to Mind, and this is the rock on which every materialistic system is apt to get shipwrecked.

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