**Epicureanism Anyone?**

It is possible that all people have always wished to be happy. It is not therefore surprising that many people throughout history have offered accounts of how this happiness could be achieved. The Ancient Greeks, for example, were notably occupied with the question of how to live the good life, in the sense of a worthy life. And for them, the good life was inevitably a happy life. They would not have understood the suggestion that one could yoke oneself to an ethical code that appeared to promote goodness but which made you personally miserable. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans, all offered visions of the good life that was also a happy life.

In our modern world, more than 2000 years after the latest of these thinkers, the desire to be happy must be set against the continuing retreat of religion. For centuries, the leading idea of happiness in European culture has not been a purely Greek, but a Christian one. This absorbed Ancient Greek philosophy into an intoxicating mixture which offered, ultimately, to those who desired happiness, a form of eternal ecstasy, as a reward for a life well-lived according to a very particular standard. But increasingly, more people are looking for a guide to happiness that does not rely on religion, and are therefore often looking backwards, past Christianity, to the Greek models of the good, happy life.

Plato’s vision, obsessed as it was with the realm of Forms, and the divine Form of the Good towards which the good person peers, does not entirely meet the requirements of a non-religious philosophy. Aristotle turned away from Platonism to develop a more practical view of the good and happy life based on the development of virtue. But for some reason few modern seekers after happiness look to him for guidance, perhaps because he linked the virtuous life too closely to what was admired in his own culture. His *Nicomachaen Ethics* is often more admired than followed. Today, if people look to the Greeks at all, it is usually either to the Stoics or the Epicureans that they go for a non-religious guide to the happy (and good) life. Here we will ask how happy they will be with the Epicurean solution.

Epicureanism emerged from its founder, Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 270 BCE, although because much of what Epicurus wrote was lost we rely also today on the work of the Roman poet, Lucretius (b. 99 BC), whose poem *The Nature of Things,* was based on what is now one of Epicurus’s lost summaries of his key doctrines.

As is typical of Greek philosophy, the Epicurean vision of the happy life depends heavily on a view of the nature of the world. For most Greek philosophers the good and happy life consisted in living in line with the fundamental structures of the natural world, of bringing one’s own nature in line with the nature of the world. There are risks in doing this and nowadays, we are cautious about rooting our ethical thinking in nature. Since the 18th century, we have had David Hume reminding us of the problems of drawing ethical inferences from factual statements. Also, if we root our ethics in nature, our ethics is exposed to any weaknesses in our vision of nature. Plato’s ethics, for example, is weakened in many ways by his view that goodness is only attainable by apprehension of the nature of the eternal Form of the Good, for it is likely that there is no such thing. And in the case of any ethic developed over 2000 years ago, like Epicureanism, we might expect that its vision of nature will strike us today as wholly absurd, thereby undermining its view of the good and happy life.

However, one of the possible appeals of Epicureanism is how its view of nature seems to chime to some extent with our own. For Epicurus and Lucretius put forward what can be called an atomic theory, a view that the entire world is constituted by atomic particles moving in otherwise empty space. This view, influenced to some extent by the pre-Socratic philosopher, Democritus, might well strike us as remarkably modern, certainly by contrast with Aristotle’s view that the natural world is governed by purpose and the Stoical view that it is governed by design. There is no obvious purpose or design in Epicurus’s view. Atoms possess a few simple properties, of motion, shape,weight and size. They are indestructible and eternal, and they come together in empty space to form compounds and bodies, and bodies and compounds degenerate back into atoms, and so it goes on.

Like many today, the Epicureans offer a materialistic view of the world. All that exists in our world are atoms, and empty space. Consistently, they also offer a materialist view of mind. They reject completely the Platonist view that what Plato calls the soul is able to exist in incorporeal form independently of the body, and they would therefore reject the similar Christian view. Epicureans believe that the soul is comprised of specific atoms, ones which are smaller, lighter and faster than the atoms that comprise inanimate objects. These atoms provide the life to the physical body that Greeks normally construe as soul or spirit, and which underlies what we call mind. Lucretius actually distinguishes between *anima* or spirit, which is the general life-giving principle and *animus* or mind, which is the power of reasoning. Each – which is based on different kinds of atoms – provides a different aspect of the soul. A key Epicurean view is that neither the mind nor the spirit will survive death, although there is a kind of non-sentient immortality in the eternal survival of the atoms of both.

What of the gods? As a materialist, Epicurus aims to remove the gods as far as possible from his system, but he seems to stop short of atheism. He rejects the existence of such popular conceptions as the Olympian gods, which he sees as projections of human foibles. He claims, in fact, that to see the gods in this way is to do them an injustice. In this he echoes earlier criticisms of popular Greek religion by the likes of Xenophanes, and Plato. In contrast, the gods are seen as highly remote abstractions, who lack any interest in human affairs, indeed in any aspect of the created world. They were not involved in the world’s creation. For Epicurus, this resulted simply from the reordering of atoms – which are themselves eternal. The gods are seen as indifferent to the world and free from any kind of anxiety or concern. In many ways – apart from their lack of involvement in the maintenance of the motions of the world – they are similar to Aristotle’s prime mover. As such, they are quite unlike the later Christian God. But in their abstract way, they represent the ethical ideal to which each Epicurean wishes to aim, one of detached, indifferent calm, what is normally called *ataraxia.*

Breaking any link between us and the gods, and with an afterlife, is, for the Epicureans, one of the key to happiness in this life. Epicurus sees human misery as largely located in fear of death. Because of this we start to solicit the gods, hoping for a possible afterlife, and we are anxious that our solicitous efforts may come to nothing. So we need to see that there is no after life. In seeing this, we may of course become anxious about the prospect of oblivion. But Epicurus thinks this is irrational, for when we are dead we will feel nothing and he argues that it follows from this that death cannot ever be of concern to us:

Hence, a correct comprehension of the fact that death means nothing to us makes the mortal aspect of life pleasurable, not by conferring on us a boundless period of time but by removing the yearning for deathlessness. (*Letter to Menoeceus,* p.156).

Once we have abandoned fear of death, Epicurus thinks that we are in a position to learn to be happy. By not worrying about death, and not fearing the implications of an afterlife, we can focus on taking pleasure from those small things that provide happiness in a normal human lfe. He has been represented as suggesting that when we have given up fearing death, and yearning for eternity, we should start to live a life ruled by sensory pleasure. The Epicurean ‘prefers the most savory dish to merely the larger portion, so in the case of time he garners to himself the most agreeable moments rather the longest span’. But Epicurus is careful to disabuse admirers that he advocates out and out *hedonism.*  While we may welcome delights when they transpire, we should prefer to live plainly where possible, making do with what is sufficient. What we should strive for most is ‘freedom from bodily pain and mental agitation’ (160). Happiness for Epicurus is essentially defined as the elimination of pain. The most blissful state, Epicurus suggests, is one in which we are entirely without anxiety or disatisfaction, like the gods.

The appeal of this combination of materialism, atomism, indifference to religion and an ethic centred on the avoidance of anxiety may seem very attractive to someone living at the start of the 21st century. Indifference to religion may even seem preferable to the anxieties of atheism, and the need to show that there are no gods. One simply avoids such issues, conceding that if there are gods they have no interest in us. Such a view seems close to what is nowadays sometimes called apatheism. The atomism and materialism seem very modern, and in sympathy with a broadly scientific view of the world, and avoidance of anxiety is an attractive ethic for a species that seeks happiness, particularly for itself. While concern for others can motivate us, our behaviour suggests that towards those far removed from our circle of family and friends our concern has a rather detached quality, and so we may be much less attracted to an ethic which exhorts us to a more rigorous campaign on behalf of the other.

One might begin one’s criticisms of Epicureanism, however, with reservations about its general ethical position. One could contrast it, for instance, with a position like that of the modern Utilitarian, Peter Singer, who has argued that we should actively promote the well-being of those less well-off than ourselves, even to the extent of transferring to them sufficient of our wealth that we are then no better off than they are. Singer’s position seems to highlight the possibility that an adequate ethical position seems to place *demands* on us that we could well regard as uncomfortable, and is not therefore conducive to fostering a state of *ataraxia.* A similar point could be made about a Christian ethic, which demands that one treats the other as oneself. Is there not something a little insular about the Epicurean requirement that our main ethical aim should be an absence of concern? Perhaps our main aim should be concern and anxiety, about the plight of the millions who suffer, and a desire to do something about it.

It is notable that Epicureanism seems to frown on two aspect of human life that seem to lead to focus on the needs of the other. One is family life, and the other is political life. Epicureans seem to promote chastity, in order to avoid the anxieties associated with the seeking out of sexual partners. And they regard political life as essentially a source of anxiety rather than an opportunity to do wider good.

In reply the Epicurean will point out that they advocate a life of restraint, free of constant yearning for material goods. Simple living is recommended. One eats and drinks what is sufficient. For the aim is not to increase pleasure by indulgence, but by the removal of pain and anxiety. One teaches oneself to want less and in doing so makes oneself content with little. This kind of restraint is what indeed Peter Singer was looking for from those who would then be expected to pass the unused monies thus accrued to the poor. The problem for Epicureanism is that if their lifestyle became widely shared there would presumably be limited excess wealth for those who possess it to share with those who do not. But perhaps the reduction in desire for material goods might have beneficial knock-on effects for those who by necessity consume little. However, the Epicurean’s lack of interest in politics suggests that they would do little to ensure that a radical alteration in peoples’ lifestyle could lead to better distribution of goods. To this extent, one might feel that the Epicurean ethic, while it might once have been admirable, is not necessarily one to which we should not be expected to turn from the situation in which we now find ourselves. For it offers little guidance of how goods might be redistributed from those who are affluent to those who are not. However, perhaps it can be seen as a valuable support for those who are seeking a way of coping with their own difficulties, without necessarily seeking to find ways of helping others with theirs.

For many, the advocation to avoid sexual love is unlikely to be popular. This, of course, has been one of the messages of Christian thinking, although it has been more muted in modern times. At times, the reservations of Lucretius about sex echo some of the severer sentiments of Christian theology.

*Even at the moment of coition the heat of lovers fluctuates in an uncertain tide, nor are they sure what eye and hand shall first enjoy. Whatever they crave they closely press and put the body in pain; and oftentimes their teeth lash the lips with kisses that come like blows – this because their pleasure is impure (p.171)*

The prudishness of this is almost quaint, and it only reflects one aspect of the sexual lives of most people. What is not considered is the possibility that a close, sexual relationship may be one of the most important aspects of any life, and highly conducive to absence of anxiety. One would think that any contemporary ethic would need to make room for this. Even contemporary Christian ethics recognise the importance of close, faithful sexual relationships.

Where Epicureanism may seem most effective as a secular guide to life is in its recommendations about how we should approach death, and the sufferings that accompany it. Non-religious guides to life seem obliged to find some way, when they have ridiculed the religious suggestions about the possibility of afterlife, of helping us to come to terms with the evident alternative, oblivion, probably preceded by an indeterminate period of suffering. Epicureanism is faced acutely with this issue, perhaps, given that, contrary to some popular conceptions, it does not suggest that one should over-indulge in this world, smoothing the path to the end with wine, women (or men) and song, and particularly as it seems inclined to reject one of the most likely comforts for the ageing and dying, the presence of a close lover.

The Epicurean message about death is that it can be of no concern to a rational person because when dead you have no awareness, and there is no reason to be concerned about something of which you are not aware. Lucretius puts the point eloquently:

For if someone will ail and suffer at some future day,

He must *exist* in that time when the maladies beset.

But Death removes the possibility, since Death won’t let

The man exist for whom these ills are hoarded up. It’s clear,

Therefore, that Death is absolutely nothing we need fear,

And that he who is *not* cannot be wretched or forlorn.

What can it matter to the man that he was born

Once Deathless Death despoils him and his mortal life is shorn?

It is certainly true that when you are dead, and if there is no afterlife, you will not be anxious. The obvious objection though is that you have still been harmed by death, because you have been deprived of certain possibilities that you would have otherwise enjoyed, that is, you have been deprived of some obvious goods. Interestingly, this is an issue that is perhaps recognised by a follower of Epicurus, Philodemus, who wonders if death may harmfully thwart the future possibilities of an Epicurean who is working hard at improving their own level of enlightenment.

Thomas Nagel[[1]](#footnote-1) has tried to explain the harm of death in terms of the relation between how a person is at a point in their lives and how they *could* have been. Not all harms are ones of which a person is aware. In one of Nagel’s examples, an adult suffers an injury that reduces her to the level of a contented three year old. On the Epicurean view, this would not constitute a harm to the adult, for they are content and unaware of any pain. Yet we are inclined to endorse Nagel’s view that a harm has to be done to the adult because of what they could have been had they not incurred this injury. After all, most people would feel compassion for someone to whom this has occurred. The Epicurean is reduced to regarding such compassion as misplaced, as misplaced, presumably, as sexual love. The harm of death can then be accounted for in similar terms. A healthy twenty year-old, for instance, is harmed by death because [[2]](#footnote-2)they could have been a healthy twenty one year old.

Nagel points out how his account of the harm of death addresses an argument used by Lucretius the Epicurean to show the harmlessness of death, what is now called the symmetry argument. We do not regard the time before our birth with any dread, so why do we regard the time after our death with dread? Nagel points out that we stand in different relations to these two times. The time after death is time of which we are deprived, in which we would have lived had we not died when we did. But the time before our births is not time in which we would have lived had we been born earlier. There is a real sense in which if we had been born before our births we would not be the same person.

Phillips Mitsis has suggested that Nagel’s conception of death’s remains a little unclear. He writes:

The notion that death robs us of the goods of life, or even just some further moments of life itself, may be one of our most common intuitions, but it quickly runs up against the Epicurean’s demands for further clarification … For instance, exactly when does death rob us of life or life’s goods? It certainly cannot rob us of anything when we are dead, the Epicurean replies, since we are not there to be robbed. By the same token, to claim that our future death is currently harming us by robbing us of something while we are now alive would seem to assume some form of backward causation, otherwise how could a posthumous event do us any harm now?[[3]](#footnote-3)

Nagel’s view is that we cannot place the temporal moment at which death causes harm, but this does not prevent us from recognising that harm has been done due to the range of possibilities that have been denied to the person who has died.

If the Epicurean recipe for dealing with the fear of death is not successful, it is not entirely clear in what lies the general appeal of the Epicurean position. Epicurus makes it clear that it is fear of death that is the root of most human anxiety. If this is true, then the failure of his attempt to explain why we should not regard death as a harm is severely damaging to his general account. The advocacy of a simple lifestyle and the avoidance of anxiety is not without appeal, although in its concerns about the complexity of sexual love and, say, political engagement, its seems almost hermit-like. It seems to discourage what one might call the socially active person, a Greta Thunberg, for example, from attempting to raise general anxieties about such things as global warming in the hope that something might then be done about them. Some anxieties, one might think, are very useful. If a disregard of anxieties of this kind is founded in a sense that the unpleasant death that might follow by disregarding them is nothing to be feared, then we might worry that Epicureanism does not really offer us an outlook that will be of much value to us.

1. Thomas Nagel, *Death* in Nagel, T., *Mortal Questions,* Cambridge (1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phillip Mitsis, *When Death is There, We Are Not* in *Bradley, Feldman & Johansson (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death, OUP (2013), p.209* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)