

Lecture 10.1: Epicurus and Lucretius

Rorty: UCSC

Let me start with some more comparisons between Plato and Aristotle, this time in respect to their ethical positions. This will be useful for us in the next few days because it is in their ethical positions that both the Epicureans and the Stoics reacted most strongly (and with most originality) against Aristotle (even more than against Plato).

The beginning of ethics was someone pointing out the inconsistency and vagueness of common moral experiences, giving rise to a desire to somehow render consistent the data of the moral life.

In Socrates this took the form of a search for definitions. He apparently believed that knowledge alone could be the source of a coherent system of virtue. On the other hand, he denied that he had such knowledge. He apparently considered the received opinions of his fellow citizens a possible source of the coherence he sought. Whether his questioning of his fellow citizens was any use to them or not, it apparently helped Socrates to examine his own life, the interrelation and consistency of his own moral principles. Socrates emphasized harmony of different elements of the city and of the soul as a step toward the virtuous life, and justified the superiority of virtue by appeal to self interest; to do evil harms the soul, and it is the virtuous man who has the best chance of happiness. His own personal commitment to the moral life was paradigmatic; but the life he chose, which was the life he led, was a life in society, a practical life.

Plato reacted to this demand by seeking that which is common to all instances. True knowledge is of the general facts common to all instances—not the individuals primarily, but the qualities the individuals exemplify. So Plato's search was not so much for consistency among received opinions, but for the 'true nature' of the virtues in question; he looks for what it is that all courageous acts have in common. He suggests in the Republic, for instance, that justice in individuals and justice in the state have in common that they represent a kind of harmony or balance, with each element (of the soul or the city) minding its own business, fulfilling its own best role. There is one supreme science—wisdom, which has as its object absolute good, in which everything else we could desire to know is implicitly contained—and all practical virtue as well, since for Plato $K=V$.

The best life for Plato is quite different than that which Socrates seems to have chosen, that of a practical man leading a life among his fellows. For Plato the happy life was the life of the mind searching for knowledge. Of course that person is also the practically good man, and the perfect statesman, because the parts of his soul are in harmony, and his behavior is consonant not only with wisdom, but with the other cardinal virtues: justice, courage and temperance.

Aristotle's theory of the human good is almost identical with Plato's. Someone has called the *Nicomachean Ethics* a "Socratic monologue." For both of them, politics, like ethics, is based upon a view of human nature. Aristotle has an equal appreciation of the life of wisdom as the highest good for man. Both recognize that to know the good is to do the good; Socrates thought that ignorance was the source of wrong doing. Aristotle qualified that somewhat, in his discussion of *akrasia*, indicating different ways in which one could be ignorant; but basically he agreed. Both recognized the importance of education and training for the virtuous life, although Aristotle emphasized it more. The role of pleasure in the two is fairly similar: it's not the primary constituent of well being,

but is described as an inseparable accident of it. Virtuous activities are attended by, and to some extent perfected by, the pleasure associated with them.

Aristotle is rather more Socratic than Plato in his sense of the importance of common sense opinions about the nature of virtue, in both induction from them and verification by recourse to consistency among them. But both Plato and Aristotle, compared to Socrates, share a rather distasteful elitism: the best life for man is that of theoretical contemplation, with the life of practical virtue coming only second. This is not an ethics for Joe the Plumber or the Walmart mom. The Epicureans and the Stoics whom we will read for Thursday, really hated that. They were such intellectual elitists! Snobs. Know-it-alls. They were rather fond of Socrates, on the other hand, and tended to consider themselves more his heirs than those of P and A.

Epicurus

Epicurus was born 7 years after Plato's death, and he was about 20 when Aristotle died in 322. At that point he was studying with a Democritean in Turkey. He moved to Athens and founded a School there when he was about 35. The philosophical system that is attributed to him included a kind of Democritean physics but is best known for its ethical teachings.

Logic was not particularly important to him, and it is by contrast with Epicurean philosophy that we become most conscious of how intellectualistic both Platonic and Aristotelian approaches were. Epicurus developed a completely materialistic metaphysics, an empiricist epistemology and a hedonistic consequentialist ethics. His metaphysics was highly derivative, consisting primarily of modifications of Democritus. He did not think that there was a 'natural order' to which man must accommodate himself, and despite his materialism, he was in no sense a determinist. He denied both necessity and fate. He wanted a philosophy for the ordinary man, not one designed to turn ordinary men into philosophers; for that reason he denied any hard and fast connection between knowledge and virtue. Although he was not strictly an atheist, he insisted on the mortality of the soul and that the gods had no interest in, and no influence on, the lives of men. Epicureanism was for that reason suppressed as heretical under Constantine in the 3rd century AD.

Diogenes Laertius, the great gossip of antiquity, is our major source for Epicurus' writings, including the two letters and summary of the doctrines that is included in our text. Later Epicureans seem to have stuck pretty well to his doctrines, so Lucippus, who is also included in our text, counts as a major source, and some of the most quotable quotes of Epicurean doctrine come from him.

A materialistic metaphysics

1. The basic constituents of the world are atoms and the void: discrete, solid, indivisible particles below the threshold of perception, unlimited in number, indestructible, possessing size, shape and weight, and in perpetual motion. Everything that exists is composed of atoms, so his is a strictly materialistic philosophy. Even the soul and mind of man is material; the atoms composing it are tiny and subtle, but atoms nonetheless. The properties of macroscopic bodies, and all the events and changes we see around us, are explained in terms of the collisions and interactions and combinations

of atoms. The bodies around us are capable of causing us to have certain experiences because of their atomic structure (and that structure is a real property of those bodies).

2. The void is infinite in amount, and also eternal; it has no beginning and will have no end, but has and will always exist. Our particular cosmos, while important for us, is only one of possible worlds, which go in and out of being. But it is a regular, a predictable and relatively intelligible cosmos; the regularities of nature are explicable in terms of the characteristics of its basic and unchangeable building blocks. There's no such thing as spontaneous generation, or fate, or, for that matter, immanent teleology.

3. Explanation of change for natural phenomena is purely mechanistic, with no need for mythological explanations of thunder, or divine intervention for floods. He seems to have believed both that this world, our cosmos, does have fixed patterns of regularity (which we can determine by observation, for instance, of the fixity of astronomical details, the regularities of generation and destruction in nature)—and that other of the infinitely many cosmoi that may be generated, may operate differently. He thus avoids either universal necessary laws, or unpredictable chaos. There is a certain regularity and uniformity of nature--“in these first principles there is neither multiformity nor any possibility of variation” -- and by studying natural regularities we can get sufficient predictability to allow us peace of mind – without thereby requiring that we know which of various possible explanations is the only one. “Phenomena may take place in many ways.” (p.464)

There is room for chance, unpredictability—and most importantly, free will—in Empedocles' cosmos. The mechanical basis for free will is found in his doctrine of the 'swerve' of the atoms: unlike Democritus, for whom the world seems to have been a possibly deterministic mechanism, Epicurus hypothesizes that atoms for no apparent reason just randomly diverge from their course.

4. In this materialistic world the soul too is something bodily. It consists of very fine atoms (air, fire, wind and aether) scattered throughout the body. It can act on other material things and be acted upon by them. There is a rational function that is somehow discrete from the rest of the soul and has its seat in the heart; it is responsible for the higher intellectual functions, and through it error in judgment can enter.

We do have reason, to guide our choices, and free will, by virtue of which we are subject to praise and blame for them. Epicurus is very clear about the latter; we have control over our choices and our actions; this seems to be somehow correlated with or explained by the swerve (but I'm not clear how).

The material nature of the soul, and its association with the particular body, entails its mortality: with death, the atoms that make up the body disperse, and the atoms that make up the soul disperse as well. Without an association with a particular body the soul-atoms have no possibility of sensation; thus the famous aphorism, “nothing to feel in death; so why should we fear it?”

5. *Theological corollary:*

Epicurus was accused of atheism; but this is not literally true. He affirmed that there were gods; he even recommended reverence and emulation of them. They lived in the intermundia and enjoyed perfect tranquility of mind. What he did not believe was that they had any interest in, or influence on, human life. They did not intervene; they did not sustain the cosmos; they did not reward or punish.

“Now as to celestial phenomena: we must believe that these motions, periods, eclipses, risings, settings and the like do not take place because there is some divinity in charge of them, who so arranges them in order and will maintain them in that order, and who at the same time enjoys both perfect happiness and immortality.” (Let to Herodotus, p. 463)

We demand of our philosophical systems some sort of consistency—and that is perhaps a problem for Epicurus’ theology and maybe why he was accused of atheism: it is hard to imagine how he could explain the immortality he sometimes ascribes to the gods (cf. 465). Certainly nothing else in his system is anything like immortal, save the atoms themselves.

An empiricist epistemology

All our knowledge comes from the senses, and Epicurus, like Aristotle before him, discusses sensation, perception, and the relation of the knowing mind to the world. The initial starting point of all thought is sensation, the interaction of the sense organs and objects in the world. Sensations give us reliable information about the sensible world, and are neither true nor false in themselves—they are simply reports about what is there. He explains sensation in terms of *eidola*—thin images of the same shape as the bodies from which they come, flowing from the surface of the object to our sense organs. Sensations are clear, distinct and vivid ideas arising in the soul. We can test sensations against other sensations; but sensations themselves are never in error. Sensation is a passive mechanical reception of images by the sense organs.

On the basis of our sensations, fainter images can be produced, based upon accumulations of previous sensations and stored in the memory. These fainter images are called ‘preconceptions’ (*prolepsis*) and are available to our mental faculties even in the absence of the physical objects from which they originated. They are the material of judgment—and it is when we reason about our sensations (for instance, claiming that something is as we perceive it to be) that error can arise. Perception then is always true, and error arises when we add opinions to them. We can combine our fainter images in ways that do not correspond to the ways in which we originally received them, and thus error arises. In addition to sensations and the resulting images, we have feelings, primarily those of pleasure and pain. If we add fear, hope or memories to actual perceptions, intermixing our opinions and suppositions to what we feel, we can err. Sensation, on the other hand, is veridical, and should not be doubted.

A hedonistic ethics

Epicurus agreed with Aristotle that the highest good is that which is valued for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else—and like Aristotle, he calls that ‘happiness.’ But although he considered a life of pleasure as one option, Aristotle, as we have seen, identified happiness with self-realization and excellence of function. Epicurus is traditionally understood as opting for the first alternative instead: for Epicurus, that which is valued for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else is pleasure. This he considers a fundamental psychological truth. Pleasure and pain are elementary sensations. They are unmistakable. All sentient creatures are attracted to the one and repelled by the other. The main purpose of reason is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

Hedonism in ethics:

1. Happiness=pleasure
2. Whatever is pleasant in itself is good in itself. (A hedonist can admit that some pleasures are bad because of their results.) all pleasures=good
 - a. Cf. Principle Doctrines VIII: “no pleasure is evil in itself”
3. Only pleasures are intrinsically good: whatever is good in itself is pleasant in itself. Only pleasure=good
4. Pleasure is the only criterion of intrinsic goodness.

Psychological hedonism: it is what in fact all things (animals, babies) aim at. Introspection also confirms what observation tells us; no argument is needed.

Ethical hedonism:

Now: just because it is what things do aim at, that doesn't logically decree that it is what things ought to aim at: 'is', Hume notoriously claimed, does not logically imply 'ought.' But Epicurus is also an ethical hedonist: that is, he will argue that we ought to aim at pleasure; and how he spells that out constitutes his ethical theory.

1. He defines pleasure negatively. Pleasure itself is characterized as, defined as, the absence of pain. Of course there are pleasant sensations, and he does not deny that. But he does focus much more on avoiding pain than on achieving pleasure; the absence of pain, the state of satisfied desire, is itself a pleasure, and indeed, the most enduring pleasure.
 - a. Cf. Principle doctrines III: “The removal of all that causes pain is the boundary of pleasure.”
2. Although all pleasures are good, not all are to be chosen: some immediate pleasures lead to long-term pain, so reason is very important in allowing us to discriminate between which pleasures we should pursue (although all are good) and those pleasures which we would be well advised to avoid (since they will lead in the long term to a predominance of pain over pleasure). 467; also PD 8: “the means by which certain pleasures are gained bring pains many times greater than the pleasures.”
3. Not all pleasures are physical, either. We do have mental pains, the association of feelings with thoughts; and we need to cultivate peace of mind; freedom from fear, as well as avoiding discomfort. The Epicurean doctrines that are most emphasized are those that protect us from mental pains: the fear of death and fear of punishment by the gods.
4. He distinguishes active pleasures, constituted by titillation of the senses, and “static” pleasures; the absence of unfulfilled desires is not just a neutral state, but is itself a positive pleasure of a rather quiet sort.

Because of the link between desire-satisfaction and pleasure, Epicurus distinguishes among **desires**. Some are natural and necessary; some are natural but unnecessary; some are ‘vain and empty.’ The *natural and necessary* are hard-wired needs for survival, like food, shelter, warmth; they are naturally limited. The *vain and empty* are for things that are not necessary for life, like power, wealth and fame; they have no natural stopping point, and they serve no natural function. The *natural but unnecessary* desires are the kind of frills associated with natural desires that distinguish between a hut and a mansion, between bread and pate. Only satisfaction of the natural and necessary desires truly contributes to happiness; the others should be controlled or eliminated. And given your

choice between fulfilling a desire and eliminating it, Epicurus tends to recommend you should eliminate it. (For a hedonist, he is incredibly ascetic.) His recommended life, rather than being a round of pleasures, seems to be tranquility: the absence of pain plus the suppression of unnecessary desires.

[For those of you who will be taking an ethics course, by the way, Bishop Butler has offered what seems to me the best refutation of hedonism. He provided it as a counter to the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, both hedonistic consequentialists. His claim is that hedonists basically misunderstand the nature of pleasure: it is not itself an object of desire. Rather, we have desires for specific things; and pleasure is a result of, a consequence of, satisfaction of those particular desires. It supervenes upon the satisfaction of desires. This seems to have been Aristotle's view as well.]

Social theory:

Several of my sources point out that he is the first person to have developed a contractarian theory of justice: society is based upon mutual agreement to neither harm nor be harmed, his definition of justice. Men are not by nature just, but reason tells us that it is desirable to enter into such agreements for our self-interest. It is useful for the members of a society that such an agreement exist. The establishment of justice as a condition of society is thus a means to the happiness of its members.

The fate of Epicureanism:

Epicurean philosophy was very popular for a few hundred years, and various people called themselves Epicureans well into the period of Roman dominance; Lucretius himself was a greek living in Rome, and several other roman scholars, including Cicero, studied the doctrines of the school. It was suppressed as heretical under Constantine, who wished to unite the Roman empire under Christianity in the 3rd century AD. The doctrines about the soul and the gods were basically incompatible with that tradition.

You will not be surprised to learn, however, that it underwent a resurgence in modern times. After the invention of the printing press Lucretius treatise *On the Nature of Things* was dug out of a german monestary and published in 1473, and became rather widely known. In the 17th century several Epicurean positions became popular. To Epicureanism are attributed the roots of modern social contract theory; the role of pleasure and utility in ethics, particularly 19th century utilitarianism; his physics and cosmology were considered more compatible with modern science than anything Aristotle had produced, leaving traces in corpuscularian and mechanistic philosophy of science. Even the mortality of the soul gained some popularity, and Gassendi referred to Epicurus in contradicting Descartes.