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EPICUREANISM: THE PURSUIT OF EUDEMONIA

Annetta Kassis

1. Introduction

Epicurus is a philosopher of the ancient world who, in accordance with his time, sought an understanding of how to attain eudemonia. He drew upon his ideas of reality and human nature, used reason to discover truth and knowledge and virtue as a means of proclaiming the pursuit of eudemonia. According to Epicurus, to have happiness is to have everything and the absence of happiness calls for all actions to be directed towards attaining it. Ultimately, he claims that the study of philosophy is the pursuit of happiness.¹ Happiness is attributed to ‘*ataraxia*’², which is freedom from disturbance, and, thus, the ultimate aim of philosophy is to make life happy by making it free from all things that cause disturbance. Epicurus has in the past been considered a hedonist as he equates the concept of happiness with pleasure, which can only be achieved when the mind is free from disturbance and the person can live in a state of pleasure.

2. Understanding of Reality

Epicurus was a passionate atomist and this atomistic view of the world shaped his idea of reality. Epicurus argued that the basic components of the cosmos are permanent and that these basic components of the cosmos are physical bodies and void³, which is, essentially, space. He claimed that most principles of reality are dependent upon the existence of physical bodies in space and, considering that the basic components of the cosmos are atoms, physical bodies are comprised of atoms.⁴ Epicurus’ understanding of physics was that all reality is constituted of indestructible material ‘atoms’ which move through space, ‘the void’. He proceeds with the empirical view that we can know reality through the senses, which allow the

¹ Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus; Letter to Menoeceus; Principal Doctrines.” In ed. N. D. Smith, F. Allhoff, & A. Vaidya, *Ancient Philosophy: Essential readings with commentary*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 316

² David Sedley, “Epicureanism.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www-rep-routledge-com.ipacez.nd.edu.au/articles/epicureanism/v-1/>.

³ Epicurus, “Letter”, 309.

⁴ Epicurus, “Letter” 310.

perception of these physical bodies in space. Considering Epicurus' view that everything is made up of atoms, it follows that atoms must produce the soul and intellect. He claims that when we die the atoms lose their structure of being intellect or soul and thus the soul or intellect of a person ceases to exist.⁵ Epicurus claims that men can free themselves from the disturbance caused by fear of death by studying nature, as this shows there is no life after death to fear or reason to fear death itself because the person ceases to exist in death.⁶

3. Pleasure and Pain

Epicurus also claimed that there are two '*pathē*' that occur with every living thing; pleasure and pain. He allows for no intermediate between the two and defines pleasure as the absence of pain, as any painless, conscious life is a pleasure.⁷ Epicurus' idea - that only the present reality is true because it can be perceived by the senses - creates freedom from disturbance, by declaring that people should not worry about the past or future, as this is unnecessary. Since they cannot be perceived by the senses, they are not a pressing reality.⁸ Also, through his claim of the atomic nature of the soul, Epicurus' idea of reality allows for his reasoning and basic truth claims regarding the freedom of disturbance and assertion of life's ultimate goal for pleasure.

4. Knowledge

4.1. The Senses and Belief

Epicurus' idea of logic was confined to epistemology, '*kanonika*'. This enabled him to distinguish true from false propositions and claim that the primary criterion for truth comes from the senses.⁹ According to Epicurus, knowledge is gained through the senses and the senses can be trusted when properly used. He claimed that falsehood comes from mistaken judgments and opinions of the mind. He also claimed that feelings, '*pathe*', provide criteria for the truth through the ideas of pleasure and pain.¹⁰ He believed that if pleasure is the 'end and

⁵ Epicurus, "Letter", 313.

⁶ Keimpe Algra. *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

⁷ J.C. B. and C. C. W. Taylor, "Epicurus," *The Greeks On Pleasure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁸ Epicurus, "Letter".

⁹ Ad Bergsma, Germaine Poot, and Aart C. Liefbroer. "Happiness in the Garden of Epicurus." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, no. 3 (September/October 2008): 399-400.

¹⁰ Bergsma, Poot and Liefbroer. "Happiness", 400.

aim'¹¹, those things which do not allow for a state of pleasure would create disturbance and those things which cause disturbance should be disregarded, as they are false belief. Essentially, Epicurus argued that there is a direct link between our beliefs and our emotions and, thus, our state of pleasure, because these emotions are caused by beliefs. Emotions are determined by value judgments about the world and changing beliefs can change emotional responses. For example, the belief in life after death causes anxiety and thus inhibits freedom from disturbance. Epicurus encouraged the avoidance of those things that induced negative emotions, as they were an error in human opinion¹² that prevented the attainment of the ultimate goal of pleasure. Epicurus also claims that knowledge is attained through reasoning of certain instinctive concepts referred to as 'anticipations'.¹³ These anticipations encompass things, such as the sense of justice natural to mankind, and an understanding of these concepts calls for their practice to prevent disturbance and achieve happiness.

4.2. *Truth and Happiness*

Considering that falsehood comes from mistaken judgments and opinions of the mind and that beliefs should be distrusted as these create disturbance, it follows that Epicurus claims that one must distinguish what is good through the senses and practice these things which produce happiness. He believed that if happiness is present then people will have everything and if it is absent then people must do everything in order to attain it. According to the authors of *Happiness in the Garden of Epicurus*, Epicurus' ideas of truth can be categorized into four most pivotal truth claims necessary for achieving happiness, as understood to be the absence of disturbance and contention with natural satisfactions. First is the claim that the gods should not be feared. The gods exist as humans have a clear knowledge of them through a natural conception ('*prolepsis*') of them shared by all humans. Epicurus described the gods as happy and immortal beings that live in a state of bliss and do not have any interaction with the human world because they would not want to disturb their bliss.¹⁴ Therefore, the gods have no influence over the lives of humans and, considering their disinterest in the human world, there is no need to fear them. Epicurus proceeds to claim that people should not worry about or fear death. He claims that there is no life after death due to the atomic nature of the soul and, therefore, there is no reason to fear death, as it does not affect the living or the dead because

¹¹ Epicurus, "Letter", 317.

¹² Epicurus, "Letter", 317.

¹³ Norman W. De Witt, "Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings.", *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, 133-154.

¹⁴ Bergsma, Poot, and Liebroer, "Happiness", 397-423.

death it is not a reality for the living and essentially the dead do not exist. Ridding oneself of the false belief in the afterlife removes emotions of fear and distress. Life can then be enjoyed through freedom from this disturbance, whereby there is no fear of an end and the desire for immortality is gone and replaced with the desire for pleasure.¹⁵

4.3. *Necessary and Unnecessary Desires*

Another of Epicurus' truth claims is this: what is terrible is easy to endure.¹⁶ Considering that good is what gives pleasure and bad is what causes pain, pain can be ignored and endured by focusing on its opposite; pleasure. Epicurus also claims that it is easy to get what is good.¹⁷ According to Epicurus, it is easy to achieve a state of happiness, with the absence of pain and disturbance, thus eudemonia. He claims that human error causes desires to be pursued in a way that does not allow for a state of pleasure. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*¹⁸, he proceeds to divide desire into three categories as a tool for managing this error. The foremost type of desire is the natural and necessary. Fulfilling this type of desire results in the liberation from pain and, without the fulfilment of this type of desire a person cannot function and be happy. Epicurus gives food and shelter as prime examples of simultaneously natural and necessary desires. Secondly, he claims there are natural but not necessary desires. These are pleasurable but do not cause pain when unfulfilled, for example expensive food when bread and water will suffice. Reliance on this type of pleasure can lead to unhappiness. Thirdly, Epicurus describes unnatural and unnecessary desires, such as thirst for honours. These desires can cause greater trouble than the pleasure they provide. They can cause troubles through the frustration that may arise when they cannot be satisfied and this frustration is eliminated through the rejection of these unnecessary desires.¹⁹ Essentially, those desires that prevent physical or mental disturbance and provide pleasure, are to be sought for eudemonia, and those that do not prevent disturbance yet still provide pleasure should be enjoyed in a controlled manner or not at all.

¹⁵ Epicurus, "Letter", 316.

¹⁶ Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer, "Happiness", 403.

¹⁷ Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer, "Happiness", 403.

¹⁸ Epicurus, "Letter", 316.

¹⁹ Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer, "Happiness", 308.

5. Pleasure and Relationships

Epicurus argues that the natural goal of humanity is essentially to pursue happiness by seeking acts that are pleasurable.²⁰ He believed that humans are motivated by the desire to magnify their own pleasure and minimize their pain and that reason and understanding truth are a means of achieving the goal of eudemonia. He argues that security and friendship are aspects of the human condition which are essential to the attainment of pleasure by removing disturbance.²¹ In order to live a life free from disturbance, the person must feel safe from harm at the hands of others and this can allow them to attain happiness. Epicurus argues that human nature has a common interest, which is neither to injure nor be injured.²² He claims that this security is most easily achieved through friendships and also through the creation of laws to prevent harm to or from other people. He emphasised the importance to seek personal friendships, as a true pleasure, because they make one feel satiated. There has been some debate regarding inconsistency with Epicurus' approach to pleasure from the physical and psychological perspectives. This issue is in the fact that he often implies that the sensual pleasures are not as important as those of the mind and relationships, yet he proceeds to claim that he can 'conceive of no good, if the pleasures of taste, love, hearing and sight are removed.'²³ This issue may be refuted by the assertion that Epicurus is not claiming that other pleasures, such as that of the intellect, are not as essential but that the removal of sensual pleasures may diminish the good through distress if these pleasures cannot be conceived e.g. the pleasure of taste to satisfy hunger.²⁴ Epicurus also believed that human nature is not to serve its society but to retreat from the many and live a quiet life with close friends, as this lifestyle is more likely to be free from disturbance of unnecessary or 'unnatural' desires such as wealth and honour, and thus lead to eudemonia.²⁵

²⁰ Epicurus, "Letter", 315.

²¹ Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer, "Happiness".

²² Taylor, A. E. "The Salvation of Man," *Epicurus*, 93. (New York: Dodge, 1910). <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007674588>.

²³ Gosling and Taylor. "Epicurus."

²⁴ Gosling, and Taylor. "Epicurus."

²⁵ Bergsma, Poot, and Liefbroer, "Happiness", 404.

6. Ethics; the Virtues

Epicurus is famous for his approach to ethics, which has often been referred to as hedonistic. However, his beliefs do not truly adhere to a modern idea of hedonism²⁶ because he does not believe in the fulfillment of all desires, but rather focuses more on the absence of pain for eudemonia. Epicurus claims that virtues are to be honoured only if they bring pleasure and if not they are to be disregarded. Prudence is the most important virtue according to Epicurus. He claims that human beings have to be prudent since we have to discover reason for every choice and sort out or overturn all beliefs and opinions that cause turmoil. Epicurus claims in his *Letter to Menoecus*, that prudence teaches that people ‘cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor and justice, which is not also a life of pleasure.’²⁷ Essentially the virtues are necessary for a pleasant life and a pleasant life will exude the virtues.

7. Conclusion

Epicurus pertains to the idea of happiness or eudemonia as ‘ataraxia’ and sets about reaching this goal through his philosophy. His atomistic approach to reality and empirical view of the senses allows for the fundamental truth claims of life and death, which he acquires from reason. Epicurus’ ideas of truth direct one towards a state of pleasure achieved for the body by a simple lifestyle in which all necessary desires are fulfilled, and for the soul through the study of physics, which offers freedom of disturbance by eliminating the supposed main sources of human anguish, fear of god and death.²⁸ According to Epicurus, prudence is a key virtue in the pursuit of ataraxia as it is crucial in the process of reasoning, to determine and disregard false beliefs and opinions, which evoke emotions that cause physical and psychological disturbance. Essentially, pleasure is freedom of disturbance and this is the natural goal of man and the endeavour of philosophy from which all other values emanate. The state of pleasure is happiness epitomised, thus eudemonia.

²⁶ "Hedonism". In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

²⁷ Epicurus, "Letter", 317.

²⁸ Sedley, David. "Epicureanism." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://www-rep-routledge-com.ipacez.nd.edu.au/articles/epicureanism/v-1/>.

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