

Epicurus

Introduction Part 3 – The Big Themes & Ideas of Epicurus & the Epicurean Way

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! ... For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. ... You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. ... I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" — Titus Lucretius Carus

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The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher.

Introduction Part 3

The Big Themes & Ideas of Epicurus & the Epicurean Way

THE GOAL (TELOS) or good (agathos) of life—happiness and the nature of Epicurean happiness. Diogenes Laertius reports that Epicurus wrote a work called *On the Goal of Human Life*.¹ Although we no longer possess it, we can guess its likely contents given what Epicurus elsewhere declares about the end or goal of human life.

First, he proposed that there actually is a "natural" goal (telos) of human life.² This means that Epicurus was no ancient existentialist out to freely determine his own essence in the face of an absurd cosmos. In this way, he was no modern. While he strongly believed in human freedom, he nevertheless held that the goal of life was something furnished by nature

(physis). Consequently, it is up to human beings to discover and consider this goal that is, as one translation puts it, "fixed by nature."³

Having established the basic fact of a natural goal, Epicurus likely went on to define its general nature in terms similar to those used by Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that the goal (telos) or good (agathos) of life "is the end for which men do whatever they do."⁴ Along with Aristotle, Epicurus believed that this goal was happiness (eudaimonia), or blessed happiness, the state of being blessed (makarios). Simply stated, then, Epicureanism is the "practice [of] those things that produce happiness" since happiness is, as Epicurus

said, “everything” — which is to say the goal of life.⁵

In itself, this was nothing new. Some form of happiness is the common goal found in most of Greek literature and philosophy going back to Homer.⁶ It was his spin on happiness, however, that was, perhaps, something new.

Positively stated, to be happy is for Epicurus “to do well (*eu prattein*).”⁷ Said another way, happiness is a kind of overall health, what he calls “true health.”⁸ This “true health” consists of a healthy body and a healthy soul or mind. “The goal of a blessedly happy life,” he declares, “is to secure bodily health and mental tranquility.”⁹ But when we begin to explore what this happy life or health is for Epicurus, we mostly come up with what it is *not* rather than what it is, a kind of apophatic approach to happiness.

According to Epicurus, happiness is more of an absence than a presence. Happiness is the absence of various negatives. “Everything we do,” he says, “is for the sake of being free from pain and from fear. The soul’s storm scatters as soon as we achieve this condition. Then we have no need to go around looking for anything that is lacking or seeking something else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled.”¹⁰ From this we see that happiness — or the good of the soul and the body — is tantamount to the absence of something, in this case, the absence of a storm.

Epicurus used several terms to describe this condition of absence. Regarding the body, he stated that the goal is to be “free from disturbance (*aochlēsia*).”¹¹ As for the soul, he used three terms. One describes an undisturbed (*athorubos*) state of mind. As he put it in the *Letter to Pythocles*, “We have come to the point where our life has no need for non-rational and empty opinion. Our one need is to live undisturbed, without trouble (*athorubos*)” — that is, untroubled in mind by the thoughts and feelings that may arise from groundless views. Another term designates the experience of calmness or a calming (*galēnismos*).¹² This state of mind is the calm after the storm, the absence of excitement or agitation of various forms. It is here that we can imagine the peaceful, clear blue sea of Epicurus’ childhood — the sea after a great storm

has passed. Finally, the catchall term used by Epicurus is *ataraxia*. Defined for what it negates, *ataraxia* is a lack of trouble, disorder, and confusion in the mind. Stated in positive terms, it is calmness, tranquility.

Given what we’ve learned about Epicurus’ understanding of happiness, that it is more an absence than a presence, it may be surprising that he emphatically declared that “pleasure is the beginning point and goal (*telos*) of living happily.” After all, isn’t pleasure something positive? — a present rather than an absent phenomenon? Certainly that is what much of modern epicureanism and the present-day epicure is all about. Even so, apparently it was not the case for Epicurus. For him pleasure was also an absence. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus explains that by pleasure,

we do not mean the pleasures of decadent men or the pleasures of sensuality, as some ignorant persons believe, or those who do not agree with us, or those who have willfully misrepresented our position. Rather, by pleasure we mean *the absence* of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.¹³

Obstacles to reaching the goal. If happiness in terms of a condition of absence, or of “pleasure,” or of “bodily health and mental tranquility” is the goal of human life, then what obstacles prevent us from reaching the goal?

According to Epicurus, there are several underlying reasons that explain why we are oftentimes unhappy or disturbed. First, there is what we think we know about the nature of things — both things objectively and subjectively. The truth is our so-called knowledge is oftentimes actually a species of ignorance. We don’t really know the nature of reality, nor do we know how to approach obtaining such a knowledge.

Consequently, this ignorance gives rise to a variety of disordered thoughts and disturbing feelings — confusion, despair, insecurity, and, most dreadfully, fear and anxiety. To mention just a handful of our concerns, both ours and those of men and women in the ancient world, we’re afraid of the gods, of the

future, of dying, of life after death, of lightning flashing across the sky and the earth shaking beneath our feet, of others harming us, and of whether or not we'll be able to secure what it takes to live. These thoughts and feelings are the second obstacle to reaching the goal of life. It is hard for tranquility to exist amid a storm of dread and anxiety.

Speaking of the storm, third, there is desire (*epithumia*). More specifically, there are certain kinds of desire that cause us to seek pleasures that are always mixed with pain. The problem once again is really one of ignorance. We don't know which desires to satisfy and which ones to leave alone. Accordingly, we end up feeding the fires of desire that need not be fed and tend to burn us rather than letting them die out.

Finally, there's the fact that we haven't chosen to be happy. Not really, anyway. And so we haven't practiced what it takes to be happily tranquil.

In sum, aside from the usual effects of the human condition, effects we can easily live with if necessary, the significant obstacles to happiness are ignorance, negative thoughts and emotions, certain kinds of desire, and the fact that we haven't truly chosen and practiced happiness.

The three parts of Epicurus' system. Given the fact of obstacles blocking the way to happiness, the most significant question becomes this: how can we overcome these obstacles? The answer is Epicurus' general philosophical system—his canonic, physics, and ethics. Here's how Diogenes Laertius summarizes the three:

[Epicurus] divides philosophy into three parts—the canonical, the physical, and the ethical, which is to say canonic, physics, and ethics. . . . The canonical part deals with the standard or criterion of truth, that is, the means by which one may judge what is true. It also deals with the first principle, or the elementary part, of philosophy. The physical part is about becoming and perishing, as well as other aspects of nature. The ethical part, on the other hand, considers human life, that is, what is best to choose and what is best to avoid, as well as the end or goal of human life.¹⁴

Let's look at each of the parts of Epicurus' philosophy in turn. In doing so, we'll learn how best to overcome the obstacles to reaching the goal of human life and how to choose and practice happiness.

Canonic. *Know well what you know—and leave the rest alone.*¹⁵ Before moving on to investigate how we may know with confidence, we would first do well to summarize how it is that we—or rather the typical man or woman Epicurus would have been addressing—understand things, and what kinds of thoughts and feelings such knowledge generates. Aside from our own direct experience of life, which is often frightening, we resort to a variety of authorities that assist us in knowing the nature of reality and ourselves. Most importantly, there are the myths we've been told from the very beginning of our lives, the explanatory stories found in Homer, Hesiod, and others. Secondly, there are the fortune tellers, as Epicurus' own mother apparently was, and the diviners and oracle mongers, who interpret various mysterious signs to us and tell us about the future. Lastly, there is the speculation of the natural philosophers, including the "astrologers" or "astronomers," who tell us about the spectacles in the sky and how such phenomena influence us.

Epicurus would caution us against each of these sources of purported knowledge. As for the first, he states that "the exclusion of myth [in understanding nature] is the sole condition necessary." Again: "It is impossible to set ourselves free from fear regarding the most important things if we do not understand the nature of the whole cosmos, and if we are apprehensive about what the myths tell us." The problem is not the stories themselves but the fear and other negative feelings that arise because of the stories. Then again, the natural philosophers and their theories may make us feel even worse. For example, regarding a kind of determinism or destiny proposed by these thinkers, Epicurus declares, "It would be better . . . to accept the myths told about the gods than to bow beneath the yoke of destiny that the natural philosophers have imposed." As for the diviners and their ilk, Diogenes Laertius explains that "Epicurus rejects everything having to do with prophecy and

divination” because it impinges upon our sense of freedom and control. If the future is set so that it may be read and predicted, then we are not free and have no control over our lives.

The underlying problem with each of these sources of knowledge is two-fold. One, even though they parade themselves as certain and authoritative, they are not. Two, such unfounded knowledge leads to negative feelings and a life that is less than at peace or happy. The question for Epicurus, then, was similarly two-fold. One, what knowledge *is* authoritative? And two, how should we expect to think and feel as a result of such knowledge? This is where we truly get to his canonic.

Epicurus posited that in order to consider anything regarding the world around us, we must first reflect on and be confident in how it is we know anything at all. Such consideration will yield an epistemic yardstick—a measure or rule or canon (*kanōn*, hence, canonic), by which we are able to know what is real. As such, Epicurus proposed his canonic as the general remedy for human ignorance.

Does this mean that Epicurus found the doorway to everything knowable? Not at all. But for him, knowledge about everything is unnecessary. Instead, a limited, well-conceived doorway to knowledge is large enough to enter the room where a certain measure of confidence exists that will allow us to choose and practice happiness, the goal of life.

The latter point is essential to understanding what Epicurus was all about. In his own words:

We must hold that the function of the study [or knowledge] of natural phenomena is to clearly understand the cause of the most important things. And we must hold that blessed happiness depends on this.

And:

In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena—whether taken along with other things or in isolation—has no other purpose than tranquility of mind and resolute conviction and confidence.¹⁶

What we want is a measure of confidence about what is real, what is true. The goal of epistemology, therefore, and thus canonic, is to get at reality or the truth of what is real. But again, it bears repeating: we are not pursuing what is real in an absolute or unrestricted sense but only in relation to “the most important things,” or those things that help along our practice of happiness. As for what remains—well, we will see how Epicurus deals with other non-essential phenomena as we go along.

*Reality and its relation to knowing.*¹⁷ For Epicurus, reality has two basic components. First, there is that which sets things in motion or produces real effects. In his own words, “Things that are not real do not produce real effects,”—or, to give an alternative translation, “Things that are not do not move things.” To state it in positive terms, things that *are* real *do* produce real effects or set real things in motion. The idea seems to be that there can be no motion without a mover, or no effect without a cause. Consequently, if there *is* motion or an effect, then there *is* a mover or a cause. The motion itself or the effect itself is the other component of reality. In conclusion, both the thing that is moved (the motion) or caused (the effect) and the thing that is the mover or the cause are the real things that Epicurus’ epistemology is trying to reveal or uncover.

How, then, do we approach reality? Epicurus himself proposed three criteria of reality or truth, the means by which we are able to judge what is real and not real, true and not true. Diogenes Laertius reports that, “Epicurus affirms in *The Canon* that our sensations, preconceptions, and feelings are the criteria of truth.” He goes on to state that later Epicureans “also generally include apprehensions or perceptions of mental presentations.” Let’s look at each of these criteria of reality-truth in turn.

*Sensations.*¹⁸ We can safely affirm that for Epicurus, sensation (*aisthēsis*) included what we would call the five senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Epicurus discusses seeing at length in the *Letter to Herodotus*, as well as giving a much briefer explanation of hearing and smelling.

In Benjamin Farrington’s words, sensations are according to Epicurus “the impressions made on our

sense organs by external phenomena.”¹⁹ In terms of the brief analysis of reality given a moment ago, sensation is that which is caused, whereas things sensed cause sensation. As Diogenes Laertius explains it, “Sensations are not self-caused.” According to Epicurus, sensations offer the one sensing, or the knower, direct and pure information about reality—pure in the sense that sensations do not “add to or take anything away from whatever it is that causes them.” Does this mean that sensation offers an accurate image of reality? The simple answer is yes, if by accurate we mean simply how a thing appears, sounds, smells, etc., to the one sensing.

To give an example, when the sense of sight from one vantage point sees an oar in water, the oar appears bent.²⁰ Strictly speaking, the sense of sight is merely conveying the “image” or “presentation,” what we may term the *sense information*, of the bent oar to the one sensing. If the one sensing were to dive beneath the water to see the oar from that vantage point, or pull the oar from the water, the oar would appear straight. Well, we may ask, which is correct? For Epicurus, the answer is both. As he puts it, “one sensation cannot refute another homogeneous sensation.” To say it differently, in of itself, one seeing cannot disprove another seeing. Whether standing above the water or emerged below, the sense of sight accurately perceives the image thrown off by the oar in the water. The same may be said of the sense information given by a galloping horseman. The sound offers one impression or hearing as the horseman approaches, another just as he reaches us, and a third as he gallops into the distance (think of a police car or ambulance racing by, sirens blaring). In itself, each hearing is correct.

The key word in the example of the oar is *appearance*. In one case, the oar appears bent; in the other, the oar appears straight. Appearance, however, is not the same thing as being, what a thing actually *is*.²¹ We may wonder, then, what the value of sensation is if it merely offers the appearance (or the seeming sound, smell, etc.) of what a thing is rather than its being or actuality. For Epicurus, the answer is that “reason is wholly dependent on sensations,” even

though, paradoxically, “every sensation is devoid of reason.” Without the initial sense information presented by sensation, reason has nothing to work with to judge or opine what is actually real instead of what merely appears real. But before we get to opinion, or the judgment of reason, we must look at the other two criteria of truth mentioned by Epicurus in *The Canon*.

*Preconceptions.*²² A preconception (*prolēpsis*) is the notion or conception we have of a thing that originates with our general and ongoing experience or sensation of that thing. “The preconception itself arises from sensations.” Diogenes Laertius explains that “by the term preconception, Epicureans mean a sort of apprehension, or a right opinion or notion, or a universal idea stored in the mind.” A preconception, therefore, is the recognition of a category or type. “For example,” Diogenes Laertius explains, “pointing at something, someone might say, ‘Such is a human being.’ As soon as the term ‘human being’ is uttered, we have the direct notion of a typical human being by means of preconception.”

The same may be said of an oar. Assuming we are familiar with oars (as Epicurus must have been given his military training and service), when someone says “oar,” we have the direct notion of a typical oar in mind, including the point that oars are straight. It is not so much that at that moment we analyze the nature of an oar, its parts and so on. That’s not how we know that oars are straight. Rather, thanks to our repeated sensation of and therefore ongoing experience and memory of many oars, we simply have a direct, straightforward notion or preconception of what an oar is. “A preconception is the recollection of a frequently appearing external object.”

Preconceptions, therefore, are not about reason, which is to say the analysis or judgment of reason. On the contrary, preconceptions are prior to analysis or judgment. As said a moment ago, “the preconception itself arises from sensations.”

Nevertheless, as “clear” notions arising from sensation, preconceptions are essential for what reason can do in order to analyze and make clear judgments. As Diogenes Laertes puts it, “Matters of judgment in

which we form certain opinions or beliefs depend on something previously clear. Utilizing these clear preconceptions, we are able to answer questions such as, ‘How do we know whether this thing is a human being?’” Or, we may ask, How do we know whether this thing is an oar?—or whether this thing is straight? The implication is that as soon as we begin to doubt preconceptions, which have a kind of self-evident clarity, even if not the clarity of analysis, we begin to stumble. So it is that we must rely on preconceptions, which offer us clear notions of things, just as the various sensations offer us direct information from or about things.

*Feeling.*²³ For Epicurus, humans are “living beings.” This means that we are self-moving organisms. But how do we move? And toward what? What motivates us, whether in body or mind, to go in one direction and not another or toward one thing and not the other? The answer is Epicurus’ last criterion of reality, feeling (*pathē* or *pathos*).

Diogenes Laertius recounts that “Epicureans say that there are two feelings in every living being. They are pleasure (*hēdonē*) and pain (*algēdōn*).” Analyzing each feeling, he declares that “pleasure is an appropriate feeling, natural” to every living being; by contrast, “pain is strange, unnatural.” The significance of pleasure and pain for Epicurus is that these two are the means by which we choose or avoid, move toward or away from something. “It is by means of these two feelings that animals either choose or avoid something.” In other words, if we truly and carefully pay attention to these feelings, we will know what to choose and what to avoid.

We will learn more about this kind of knowledge when we get to Epicurus’ ethics. For now, let’s briefly explore one last criterion hinted at by Epicurus and posited by later Epicureans before turning to the part reason plays in judging what reality is—or, at the very least, how we are able to have true opinions.

Apprehensions or perceptions of mental presentations. First off, it is important to acknowledge that this last criterion is not well-defined by Epicurus. Consequently, scholars approach it variously. Some fail to mention it at all or include it under the heading of

“sensation.” Others regard it as having a double function. Even so, there’s one point that all scholars seem to agree on and highlight, a point that comes through clearly in Epicurus’ own writings: this criterion has to do with our mind or the thoughts within our mind. The point is that the mind itself is a kind of sense; the mind itself senses things.

What is the mind able to sense? Its sensing ability is twofold. One, it senses or apprehends sensible presentations or images, that is, sense information presented by the other sensations to the mind. As such, these sensible presentations become mental presentations. In this way, we come to understand how the mind comes into contact with or apprehends the information obtained by sensation.

Two, the mind senses mental presentations or images that do not originate with the senses. An example of this is the mental image we have of the gods. We do not see the gods, nor do we sense them in any other way by means of the other organs of sense. Nevertheless, says Epicurus, “knowledge related to [the gods] is manifest.”²⁴ How? This knowledge or mental image apparently comes from the gods themselves, seeping directly into what we may call our body-soul complex (which is a bodily reality), and so into our mind (also a bodily reality), where the “clear notion” of the gods shows up. The idea is that real things are constantly giving off various presentations (sight, sound, or smell presentations, etc.) that interact with our body-soul complex. The great majority of these zip past us without any effect. Some, however, penetrate us so that our minds grasp the presentation as a mental image or presentation.

Reason and judgment. Reason utilizes the criteria of reality (sensations, preconceptions, and feelings in the form of pleasure and pain) to make judgments about what is real and what we should actually choose or avoid rather than what merely appears to be real or what merely appears to be choiceworthy or worthy of avoidance. Epicurus generally calls such judgments “opinion.” Opinions may be true or false. But how may we know?

*Principles or methods of knowing.*²⁵ Epicurus offers several principles or methods by which we may know

whether our judgments or opinions are true or false. The major ones are offered in what follows.

Stick with the canon. First and foremost, we must stick with the basic criteria of reality-truth to know what is real. Without them—sensations, preconceptions, feelings—reason has nothing by which to make judgments and form opinions or to choose and avoid what affects us. As Epicurus makes the point in the *Letter to Herodotus*, “If you oppose all sensation, then you will have no means by which to judge even those sensations you declare false.” Summarizing the principle of sticking with the canon, with the criteria, Epicurus counsels, “We must by all means stick to our sensations, that is, simply to the present impressions . . . and similarly to our actual feelings. This way we may have the means of determining that which needs confirmation and that which is obscure.” Or, he declares, “Our sensations and feelings” provide “the surest grounds for confidence.”

One last point. We may wonder whether we should stick with our own sensations, preconceptions, and feelings alone, or whether we should also take into consideration those of others. Epicurus seems to indicate both. “Therefore,” he advises, “we must attend to present feelings and sense perceptions, whether those of mankind in general or those peculiar to the individual.”

Move from the known to the unknown. Two, we can utilize what is known to us to understand or interpret what is unknown. “We should interpret things that are unclear to us by means of those things that are apparent [clear] to us.” For instance, how can we possibly understand what goes on in the sky? Answer: we can look for possible explanations within our own experience. To give one example, Epicurus explains that “the moon may possibly shine by its own light.” Or “it’s just as possible,” he says, “that it may get its light from the sun.” Why or how does he offer these two different possible explanations? He does so given his experience of things, using what is known to him in order to understand what is unknown. “I say this because in our own experience we see many things that shine by their own light and many as well that shine by borrowed light.”²⁶

Stick with the facts. Be satisfied with multiple possible explanations. These different possible explanations originating in experience or what we know lead us to another method of knowing, or, most importantly, of being satisfied with what we may *actually* know, what Epicurus calls the “method of plural explanation.”

Sitting outside in the dark of night, we may anxiously wonder how or why the stars move across the sky. Or walking home from our fields one afternoon under dark storm clouds, we may uneasily wonder what causes lightning to flash across the sky or thunder to sound. As for the former, says Epicurus, some “astronomers” tell us that the gods move the stars. As for the latter, we all *know* from myth that Zeus is responsible for lightning and thunder. But are these explanations true? Do they accord with the canon, the criteria of reality? Epicurus tells us that if we stick with the facts presented by the criteria of reality and argue from what is known to what is unknown, then we will inevitably arrive at a number of possible explanations for many phenomena. After giving several possible explanations for lightning, for instance, he states, “And so, it may easily be observed that the occurrence of lightning is possible in many other ways, just as long as we hold fast to facts and take a general view of what is analogous to them.” The same is true for thunder: “There are in addition several other ways in which thunderbolts may possibly be produced.”

Still, shouldn’t we be dissatisfied or bothered by the fact that we don’t have an answer?—that these many explanations vary one from another in possibly significant ways? And if we don’t really know the exact answer, then isn’t it possible that Zeus really does throw lightning (*at us!*) and Poseidon really does cause earthquakes (*beneath our feet!*)?

For Epicurus, the answer is no. Regarding the latter fear (that the gods may act in frightful ways that negatively influence every human being), Epicurus states that regarding our knowledge and explanation of things, “the exclusion of myth is the sole condition necessary. And myth will be excluded if one properly attends to the facts in order to draw inferences about

what is obscure.” For Epicurus, it is important to exclude myth because the various myths are not grounded upon the criteria of reality but arise from the imaginations of poets. Has anyone ever seen Zeus hurl a lightning bolt? Has anyone ever seen the gods move the stars across the sky at night? And yet these views lead us to feel anxiety and fear! So, judges Epicurus, we are feeling disturbed for no reason at all.

The big question, then, is this: what are the facts? Do the facts clearly point to one explanation or to multiple possible explanations?

After explaining from experience the possibilities that the moon may shine “by its own light” or “by borrowed light,” Epicurus argues that “none of the celestial phenomena stand in the way.” In other words, no information arising from the canon bars the way of both explanations. He goes on: “The latter point is true as long as we always keep in mind the method of plural explanation and the several consistent assumptions and causes.” Then he gets to the truly important point: we should keep the method of plural or multiple explanations in mind “instead of dwelling on what is inconsistent and giving these inconsistencies a false significance so that we always fall back, in one way or another, upon the single explanation.”

Why should we do this? Because as good Epicureans (let’s say) we wish to know and organize our lives around reality rather than unreality. Part of this reality is that we may not be able to know with precision what is real or unreal about many things—particularly those things that are at a distance from us (as are those things in the sky) or anything else we cannot closely examine. Nevertheless, observes Epicurus, humans tend to obsess; we tend to desire and so offer single explanations for such phenomena (so the gods). The problem with such explanations is not so much the explanation itself but the fact that it has no apparent relationship with the facts, and, most importantly, the disturbed feelings that may come with such explanations. This is ultimately what we wish to avoid. We want to know well in order to think and feel well:

Nor can we make our treatment always as clear as when we discuss human life or explain the other questions regarding nature—for example, that the whole of being consists of bodies and intangible nature, or that the ultimate elements of things are indivisible, or any other proposition that admits only one explanation of the phenomena to be possible. But this is not the case with things in the sky. As for their occurrence, celestial phenomena allow for more than one cause and a variety of accounts of their existence—none that contradict sensation. In the study of nature, we must not accept empty assumptions and arbitrary laws. Rather, we should follow the promptings of the phenomena, the facts themselves. We have come to the point where our life has no need for non-rational and empty opinion. Our one need is to live undisturbed, without trouble. As soon as we suitably understand what may be plausibly said of everything—if everything is explained by the method of plurality of causes in conformity with the facts—we will realize that all things go on in an unshakeable manner, consistent and reliable. But when we pick and choose among the causes, rejecting one that is equally consistent with the phenomena, we clearly fall away from the study of nature and tumble into myth.”

By tumbling into myth, we tumble into uncertainty, confusion, and fear, as everything comes to “rest in the lap of the gods,” as Homer would express it. This means that there’s no actual order to reality, no real rhyme or reason; rather, everything happens according to the arbitrary will of the gods. Epicurus implies that experience belies this notion. Our senses tell us that things do go on in an ordinary, regular manner. We may not understand why, exactly, but if we stick with the canon, the criteria of reality, we can at least form the opinion that “things go on in an unshakeable manner, consistent and reliable.” But how, we may wonder, can we know that our judgments or opinions are themselves reliable?

Submit all views to the ongoing tribunal of evidence. The method of confirmation and contradiction. We may know whether an opinion is true or false according to the method of confirmation and contradiction. This method submits opinions to the ongoing tribunal of evidence, that is, to the criteria of reality. Diogenes

Laertes explains the method this way:

An opinion is true if the evidence confirms and does not contradict the opinion. On the other hand, it is false if the evidence does not confirm and instead contradicts the opinion. Therefore, [Epicureans] have introduced the expression, “That which awaits confirmation.” So, for example, before declaring that an object in the distance is a tower, one should approach the object and learn what it looks like when near to it.²⁷

Does the object in the distance send clear sense information to the one walking toward it? Yes. Might we form an opinion regarding what the object is? Sure. We might say, “That thing looks like a tower.” The problem, however, is that the sense information, though clear for what it is, is not clear enough for us to judge with certainty that “That object is actually a tower.” To make this judgment requires more evidence, another sensation. The latter comes as we approach the object. Closer now, we are in the position to judge or opine with certainty whether the object is actually a tower. If the evidence confirms the judgment, then the opinion that the distant object is a tower is true. If the evidence contradicts it, then it is false. It may be, after all, that the object in the distance turns out to be the towering stump of an old tree.

To give another example, there are the planets, or what Epicurus in Greek calls “the wandering stars.” If we judge that these wandering stars actually move from one place to another, we may or may not be right. As Epicurus admits, “Regarding the wandering stars, the senses say yes.” Nevertheless, he goes on, we “must wait for confirmation.” Unfortunately, since we are not in the position to move closer to these wandering stars (unless we possess a telescope or spaceship), we may never know whether they actually move or if they only appear to move. But that’s no problem. In that case we can utilize what we know based on the criteria of reality to offer many possible answers to the question of the wandering stars. In doing so, we’ll rest content with the facts rather than asserting that the wandering stars must be alive or that some other living being is moving them—assertions that are

satisfying in some ways but dissatisfying in others in that they cause fear in us that some living being is up in the sky looking down at us, controlling the stars and us.

The whole point is that we want to know what is real, the nature of things. Epicurus’ canonics aids us in getting there and gives us the confidence to live in the assurance of what we know. As for the nature of things, it is to that we must next make our move.

*Physics or natural philosophy—discovering the nature of things.*²⁸ In describing the three parts of philosophy, Diogenes Laertius explains that for Epicurus, “the physical part is about becoming and perishing, as well as other aspects of nature.” Epicurus himself asserts that his natural philosophy is about “the true story of the nature of things” that will help us understand that “all things go on in an unshakeable manner, consistent and reliable.” This understanding in turn will, as we’ve already come to grasp, deliver a measure of peace if we’re willing to stick with the facts. As Epicurus states it: “Without the study of nature, there is no enjoyment of pleasures unmixed with fear and worry.” So then, what is the nature of things? What follows offers Epicurus’ view on the matter.

*Four initial points: nothing comes from nothing (no ex nihilo); nothing falls into non-existence (no ad nihilum); the sum of things is ongoing with no beginning; the sum of things is infinite.*²⁹ To begin, we must start with four basic ideas or principles.

One, nothing comes into being or arises from nothing or from non-existence. To discuss it anachronistically for a moment, the point is nearly the opposite of the Christian doctrine that God created *ex nihilo*, “from nothing.” Christians have historically wished to stress the fact that God, and God alone, is responsible for what exists (and thus all things are radically dependent on him). He did not create using preexisting matter, whether water, earth, or some other material. Moreover, God created moved by his own inscrutable wisdom and will. By contrast, Epicurus wished to stress the reverse, hoping to avoid such an apparently arbitrary (to him) cosmos.³⁰ Again: “we will realize that all things go on in an unshakeable manner,

consistent and reliable.” For Epicurus, therefore, the gods are not responsible for things. They don’t mysteriously or magically (as it were) cause things to spring up from nothingness. Zeus doesn’t rub his divine hands together and poof! there’s a ready-to-throw lightning bolt. Nor do things just spontaneously arise. No, things come from previously existing things. Here’s how Epicurus conveys the idea in the *Letter to Herodotus*: “To begin with, nothing comes into being out of what is non-existent. Otherwise, everything could come into being from everything, and there would be no need for any seeds.”

The corollary point to nothing comes from nothing (no *ex nihilo*) is that nothing returns to or falls into nothingness or non-existence (for the sake of a parallel construct, we may say, no *ad nihilum*). For Epicurus, the reason is straightforward: “If that which disappears is so absolutely destroyed so that it ceases to exist, then everything would soon perish since the disappearing things would be dissolved into that which is non-existent.”

So, we begin with two points: things (whatever exists) do not arise from non-existence (nothing *ex nihilo*), and things may not fall into non-existence (nothing *ad nihilum*). As for the third point, it simply teases out a conclusion that follows from these two: the sum of things is ongoing. “The sum total of things—which is to say, everything—was always the same as it is now, and such it will always remain.” Why? If nothing radically new appears *ex nihilo*, and if nothing disappears *ad nihilum*, then what we are left with is whatever now exists. This is not to say that things do not over time appear differently. They do. But whatever things are in their most basic sense, they do not come into existence or go out of existence. Therefore, everything must go on in some basic sense that we will explore in a moment.

It follows from this ongoing duration of things that there is no beginning to the sum total of things. What exists (again, in its most basic sense) has always existed. Otherwise, the sum of things would have to have originally come from nothing.

The final point is that the sum of things is infinite. Epicurus argues for the idea this way: “The sum of

things is infinite. For that which is finite has an extremity, and the extremity of anything is discernable only in comparison with something else. Since the sum of things has no discernable extremity, it has no limit. And since it has no limit, it must be unlimited or infinite.”

What we have, then, is an infinite sum of things that has, in its most basic sense, always existed and will always exist just as it exists now. The next query must be, What is the nature of these things in their most basic sense?

*Bodies and place; atoms and void.*³¹ Everything, whether on earth or in the sky or anywhere else, is made up of bodies and place, which is to say atoms and void. “The whole of being consists of bodies and intangible nature.” Or: “the sum total of things consists of bodies (*sōma*) and void (*kenos*).”

Given Epicurean canonics, why must this be true? The argument is straightforward. One, we see and otherwise sense bodies. Two, we see and otherwise sense bodies move. Consequently, three, there must be something through which bodies move. This something is called “place” or “void” (literally “emptiness,” what we would call space). Interestingly, we cannot sense the void. It is intangible—which in this case means more than it merely cannot be touched (as in the sense of touch). Rather, it cannot be touched or grasped by any sense whatsoever. Nevertheless, we indirectly know that it exists thanks to the fact that bodies move, and, therefore, that there must be something through which they move. Void, then, or the emptiness, is the place through which bodies move. As such, the void does nothing. It is simply the stage upon which everything is done. “The void itself is able neither to act nor be acted on, but it simply allows bodies to move through it.”

By bodies, Epicurus means whole things or separate things rather than the accidents or properties of these things. Some bodies are composites, that is, they are composed of other bodies. Other bodies are those bodies or elements out of which composites are formed. These latter bodies or elements are bodily or corporeal realities that are unchangeable. Epicurus invites us to think of them as strong and enduring,

solid and indestructible. Most importantly, he asserts that “the ultimate elements of things are indivisible.” Literally, they cannot be cut. Accordingly, in Greek they are *atomos* (uncuttable); they are atoms.

How did Epicurus know that such atoms exist? Could he see them with his own eyes or sense them in any other way? Not at all. Even so, beginning with sensible things—composite bodies—and keeping in mind the fact that things in their most basic sense cannot fall into non-existence, he could reason toward the existence of atoms. Here’s part of his argument:

We must reject as impossible the unlimited cutting and division of a finite body into smaller and smaller parts. For to go down such a path would result in reducing everything to nothing. In that case, we would be forced to admit that the existent things that make up compound bodies—which is to say, atoms—can be reduced to non-existence.

To finish the argument: there must, therefore, be things that are unable to be cut. These things are atoms or what we may call indivisibles or uncuttables.

What are atoms like? First, atoms do not have parts, an observation that follows from the fact that they are uncuttable. We cannot divide atoms into parts (even mentally) since atoms are indivisible. Second, atoms are full, meaning they have “no emptiness in them.” Third, each atom has three qualities that do not change: size, weight, and shape. As for the latter, atoms “vary indefinitely in shape.” As for size, however, there is no such indefinite variation. How does Epicurus know this? “If atoms came in all sizes,” he says, “then we would have by now encountered an atom large enough to see. But we have never observed this—nor can we conceive how an atom could become visible.”

Next, we may wonder what atoms do and how they behave. The most important point is that atoms are constantly moving: “Atoms are in continual motion through the ages.” Atoms move with equal speed through the void at the speed of thought:

Atoms necessarily move with equal speed when

travelling through the void without meeting resistance. Heavy atoms will not travel quicker than small and light ones—assuming nothing encounters them. Nor will small atoms travel quicker than large ones if atoms find a passage suitable to their size, and if they are not obstructed in their movement. . . . As long as there is either motion, it must continue at a speed as fast as thought itself as long as there is no obstruction.³²

Epicurus explains that, if not for other atoms, single atoms would travel indefinitely through the void. Since there are other atoms, however, they bounce or rebound off one another. When such a bounce occurs, one of two results may happen. One, the atom may rebound a long way from the atom against which it bounced. Otherwise, it may almost immediately bounce into another atom or a cluster of other atoms. If that happens, then the atom may oscillate, or bounce back and forth, between these atoms thanks to the void between the atoms, “imprisoned,” as Epicurus says, “in a mass of entangling atoms.”

Where do we stand so far? We stand amid an infinite sum of things that had no beginning and will have no end—atoms moving through the void and bouncing off one another.

We know these atoms end up forming composite bodies. But what sort of composite bodies or things are formed? On the large scale, there are whole worlds. Epicurus tells us that “a cosmos (*kosmos*), or a world, is a circumscribed portion of the sky, which contains stars, an earth, and all other visible things. It is cut off from the infinite, terminating in an exterior that may either revolve or be at rest.” By cosmos he doesn’t mean simply our own world alone; rather, Epicurus argues that “there is an infinite number of such worlds”—including worlds within worlds and worlds between worlds and worlds with varied shape, whether “round or triangular” or otherwise.

Considering our own world, everything within it was formed by atoms or the composite bodies formed by atoms.

The sun and the moon and the remaining stars did not

come into being independently from our world only later to be included in our world. Instead—like the earth and sea—they at once began to take form and grow by the accretions and whirling motions of certain substances of the finest texture, substances having either the nature of wind or fire, or of both. This, anyway, is what sensation suggests.

Even the gods are formed of atoms. But to them we will return in a moment when we get to Epicurus' ethics.

Next in our cosmos we come to us—to the ones who sense and form opinions. We too, says Epicurus, are composed of two basic bodily or corporeal realities, a body and a soul. These in turn are composed of atoms and void. The soul itself is composed of finer atoms or particles than those that make up the body. Epicurus explains that

the soul is a bodily thing composed of fine particles dispersed throughout the whole assemblage of atoms in the human organism. The soul most nearly resembles wind with an admixture of heat. It is like wind in some ways and heat in others. But there is the third part that exceeds the other two in the fineness of its particles and thereby keeps in closer touch with the rest of the human organism. This is shown by the powers of the soul, its feelings, the ease with which it moves, its thought processes, and by all those things we lose when we die.

How do we know that the soul is a bodily or atomic reality? We do because incorporeal realities, such as the void, are "able neither to act nor be acted on." Therefore, as Epicurus argues, "if the soul were incorporeal, it would be able neither to act nor be acted on." But this is manifestly not the case, he concludes. It is the soul that is largely responsible for sensation, though the body or the rest of the human organism "provides the indispensable condition for the soul." It is the soul that feels and so moves us toward or away from things. It is the soul that thinks, that judges, that concludes and forms opinions. Most importantly, we clearly notice the soul's absence when someone dies. The body remains while that which animated the body vanishes.

Death, then, is the scattering of the soul. It is thus the loss of all sensation and all thought processes, something which is, to many of us, a frightening prospect. For Epicurus it was not. But to see why, we must move from his understanding of nature—this everlasting reality made up of atoms and the void—to his understanding of how we may live well given the time we have. For, as he states in the *Vatican Sayings* 14,

We come into being only once and will not be born a second time. Rather, we necessarily will never exist again—forever. And though you have no power over tomorrow, you put off feeling joy today. Life is consumed by such indecision and procrastination! And so, each one of us is dying without engaging in life today.

Ethics. According to Epicurus, the ethical part of philosophy answers an urgent question that every human being asks: how shall we best live? Diogenes Laertius explains that it "considers human life, that is, what is best to choose and what is best to avoid, as well as the end, or goal, of human life."³³

Happiness. As for the goal, we've already seen that it is happiness understood as an absence: freedom from pain, from disturbance, from excitement or agitation, and from trouble, disorder, and confusion. Stated positively happiness is pleasure, health, and calmness or tranquility (which, in themselves, to reiterate, are conditions of absence).

*A philosophy of choosing and doing.*³⁴ It follows from this goal that "what is best to choose" is happiness and "what is best to avoid" is the opposite. Epicurus' philosophy, then, sets before us the imperative that we must actively choose the goal of life and do whatever it takes to achieve it, getting around whatever obstacles that block the way. Part of the achievement is found in the path of knowing well (canonics) and understanding the nature of reality (physics or natural philosophy)—understanding that "blessed happiness depends on this." For Epicurus, knowledge or theory is always oriented toward practice. We know in order to do and be well. His is an active philosophy, therefore, of choosing and doing. So, advises Epicurus in

the *Letter to Menoeceus*, “We must practice those things that produce happiness since if happiness is present, we possess everything, and if it is not, we do everything to acquire it.” He goes on to say, “Do and practice those things that I have continually recommended to you, taking them to be the basic elements of living well.”

*Freedom versus destiny.*³⁵ We can only choose, do, and practice if we believe we are free to do so. In the ancient world, such a belief ran contrary to ideas spread by myth—ideas that asserted the domination of fate, chance or fortune, and necessity—and the notions of some of the “natural philosophers” that imposed “the yoke of destiny” on everything. By contrast, Epicurus argues that we should scorn “the notion of destiny that some introduce as the master of all things.” Necessity “promotes irresponsibility,” he says, whereas we should take responsibility for ourselves. As for chance or fortune, it “is unstable.” The bottom line: “our own actions are free.” Epicurus urges us on with the notion that “the wise man directly takes on chance, face to face.” As for necessity, “it is something bad,” he acknowledges, “but there is no necessity to live by means of necessity.”

*Limiting the emotions.*³⁶ Believing that we are free, then, we must take action to actively limit the scope or reach of the emotions we experience. These emotions are “certain irrational tendencies” that are not based on the criteria of reality and the judgment of reason. In other words, Epicurus suggests that by letting our minds run away from the evidence, we come to fear one thing, feel anxiety about another, or experience despair relative to a third. The proper limitation of these emotions, by contrast, must be solidly based on the facts of a situation. Do the facts truly merit fear, anxiety, or despair? In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus explores two situations in which and ways by which we may properly limit our fears. The two have to do with the gods and death.

*Do not fear the gods.*³⁷ For many, if not most, in the ancient world, the gods could be a source of anxiety and fear. How would ancient Greeks put it? “We fear the gods,” they would say, “what they think of us, how they’ll judge us, what they’ll do to us. When we

look at the stars in the sky and experience other natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, an earthquake, or a hair-trailed star (a comet) streaking across the dark expanse of night, we feel astonished and a bothersome sense of suspicion and anxiety as if something bad is going to happen to us or the ones we love. These mysterious spectacles make us fear the gods and worry about what they might do to us. And the feeling is not only for now, during this life. We also dread what the gods will do to us after we die and sink beneath the earth. We live in terror of the painful punishments they may impose on us, horrible ones we’ll have to endure, such as those suffered by Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus in Homer. Or the ones that Plato mentions in his dialogues. Or the ones found in the poet Orpheus and others.”

Epicurus did not believe people had to feel this way if they only knew the true nature of the gods. And what is that? First, according to Epicurus, the gods *do* exist. “There are gods,” he writes. “And knowledge related to them is manifest.” The problem is that most people do not understand the true nature of the gods. Epicurus tells us that “the gods are not such as the many customarily believe since the many do not carefully guard and thus maintain a consistent view about the gods. . . . This is so because the assertions of the many about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions.”

In truth, the gods are fundamentally no different from human beings, at least in terms of their constituent nature. Rather, like everything else that exists, the gods are formed of atoms and void. Nevertheless, thanks to an ongoing renewal of their atoms, they are indestructible. Moreover, they are supremely happy, so much so that their happiness is of “the highest kind, . . . [and] cannot be increased.” How does Epicurus know that the gods are, as he puts it, “blessed and indestructible”? He does because, as he notes, “this is the commonly held understanding of the god, the common epithet in writing.” And he’s right. From Homer on, the poets commonly refer to the gods as “blessed and immortal,” which is to say indestructible.

What follows from the fact that the gods are blessed and indestructible? For Epicurus, the nature

of the gods should determine what we should not or should say about the gods. As with anything else, conclusions should follow from facts.

Accordingly, do not attribute to [the god] anything that is contrary to his indestructibility or incongruous with his blessed happiness. Instead, think about the god whatever can defend and uphold his blessed happiness and his indestructibility.

People like to think and say that the gods are busy running our world, steering the stars and other things in the sky. Or that the stars *are* gods. People imagine that the gods think about us all the time, planning our lives for better or worse, sometimes with delight and sometimes with anger. But this is not the case, and so we should not think it, says Epicurus. Rather, referring to such managerial business, he states that “a blessed and indestructible being is not bothered by troublesome business, nor does this being trouble others. Therefore, such a being is free from anger and the feeling that he is obliged to grant favors.” Accordingly, in our conclusions about the gods, “the divine nature must be kept free from the task and in perfect bliss.”

The argument may be summarized as follows: we should not fear the gods because they will never harm us. The gods will never harm us because they are too busy being perfectly happy to be at all concerned for us.

*Do not fear death since death is nothing to us.*³⁸ We are all familiar with Benjamin Franklin’s remark that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Death is a fact.³⁹ Epicurus poetically states that “each of us was poured a mortal mixture to drink at our birth.” The unfortunate truth, however, is that this fact may give rise to certain feelings of insecurity. “We may possibly provide security against other dangers, but when it comes to death, we men all live in a city without walls.” Epicurus realized that most people fear death. Consequently, most people experience considerable anxiety about death—about the pain that may come with it, or “we are in dread of the mere insensibility of death.” So what, then, should we do about these feelings?

The imperative thought and practice relative to this fear and anxiety is that we “should get used to the idea that death means nothing to us,” an attitude that follows from the nature of death itself. “Death means nothing to us,” says Epicurus, “because the body, when it breaks up into its various elements, has no sensation. And that which has no sensation is nothing to us.” Not only that but “life” by definition excludes “death” just as “death” excludes “life”; therefore, strictly speaking, death has no bearing upon the living (which is what we humans are). Here’s how Epicurus puts the point:

So then, death—that evil which most causes us to shudder—means nothing to us since when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist. In fact, death means nothing either to the living or to those who have finished living since it does not exist for the former, and the latter no longer exist.

Death is nothing to us, therefore, because, one, when we are dead we are not, and, two, when we are dead we do not feel—neither pleasure nor pain.

Someone may object, however, that he would prefer to go on feeling pleasure forever rather than feeling nothing at all. As a result, such a one pines for immortality. Epicurus counters that immortality is impossible for humans. We know this because we know that all human beings are mortal. Rather than looking upon this knowledge as depressing, however, Epicurus judges that it is a good thing for us. “It follows that a right understanding of the fact that death means nothing to us makes the mortal nature of life beneficial to us . . . by taking away the yearning for immortality.” How does this “taking away the yearning for immortality” work? Something like this:⁴⁰ if one truly understands that immortality is impossible (which is, for Epicurus, a fact), then the irrational yearning for it will give way to a rational acceptance of *what is* for the one who wishes to base one’s life on what reality *actually is*. Such a one will realize that pining for what is impossible merely brings dissatisfaction. Therefore, the practice of satisfaction demands that we not yearn for immortality.

How then should we face the uncertainty of the future (that includes our ceasing to exist) and the eventuality of death itself? Responding to these questions, Epicurus makes two key points. Regarding the future, we should neither presume its existence nor despair of its non-existence. “We should remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours. Accordingly, we must neither count on it as certain to come nor despair of it as certain not to come.” And when we come to die, knowing that we have lived well, we should die well with non-attachment: “When it is time for us to go,” says Epicurus, “we will depart from life, having no regard for it and for those who vainly cling to it, and proclaiming aloud in a beautiful song that we have lived well.”

*Pleasure, pain, and desire.*⁴¹ We noted above that, for Epicurus, happiness is pleasure (*hēdonē*): “pleasure is the beginning point and goal of living happily.” Pain (*algēdōn*), by contrast, may serve to denote the unhappy life. Accordingly, we have two polar feelings: pleasure and pain. But what more can be said of them?

The point of the feelings of pleasure and pain is straightforward: they naturally serve to direct all animals toward or away from things. They are the means by which all “animals either choose or avoid something.” Epicurus concluded that this bidirectional movement is entirely natural as demonstrated by how humans and other animals behave from the first moment of their birth. Diogenes Laertius reports that as evidence he “point[ed] to the fact that living things, as soon as they are born, are quite satisfied with pleasure, whereas they are naturally upset with pain—and this without rational reflection.”

We may nevertheless ponder what exactly it is that does the moving. We may do so because pleasure seems to be more of a reward, the end goal, rather than that which moves or motivates us toward the end. It is what any animal naturally shoots for. That said, Epicurus never explicitly states what the actual mover is. In fact, he seems to identify it with pleasure, as pleasure is “the beginning point and goal of living happily,” which we may interpret as meaning both that which moves us and that which is sought. Nevertheless,

Epicurus does seem to imply that desire is the underlying motivating force. Desire moves us to seek things.⁴² The problem with desire, though, is that it is not a clear-cut good like pleasure is. Rather, for Epicurus, desire has many faces.

According to Epicurus, we may categorize desire (*epithumia*), or the different kinds of desire, relative to whether they are natural or groundless, and whether their satisfaction is necessary or not.

We must consider that of the desires, some are natural, and some are groundless. Of the natural desires, some are necessary, and some are merely natural. And of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for freeing the body from disturbance, and some for living itself.

And:

Of the desires, some are natural and necessary, whereas some are natural but unnecessary. Others are neither natural nor necessary but arise thanks to groundless notions.

Let’s look at each kind of desire in turn, considering pleasure and pain as we go.

*Natural and necessary desires.*⁴³ Natural and necessary desires are those determined by human nature itself and its needs. As Epicurus counsels, “We must obey nature rather than doing violence to her. We will obey nature by satisfying the necessary desires and the natural desires, too, as long as they do no harm, but sharply rejecting the harmful desires.” According to Epicurus, the three most significant needs or requirements of human nature seem to be “living itself” (survival), “freeing the body from disturbance” (such as hunger, thirst, and even disease), and “happiness” (health and tranquility).

These natural and necessary desires go after simple satisfactions rather than the kind pursued by other desires. Simple satisfaction is pleasure. In fact, even though Epicurus does not explicitly do so, we may confidently define Epicurean pleasure as “simple satisfaction.” This is why Epicurus declares that “we have the need for pleasure only when we feel

pain due to the absence of pleasure. When we feel no pain, however, there is no need for pleasure.”

In this way, the absence of pain is the yardstick or the measure of the pleasure we require for happiness—for health and tranquility: “The standard measure for the greatest amount of pleasure is the removal of every pain. Whenever pleasure is present, as long as it lasts, there is neither pain nor distress nor both together.” And: “We resort to pleasure when we use feeling as the measure for judging every good.” Accordingly, if we imagine a sharp dividing line between pleasure and pain, pleasure is just *this side of* pain. Seen in this light, the following defense by Epicurus against some of his detractors makes perfect sense:

When we say that pleasure is the beginning point and goal of life, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent men or the pleasures of sensuality, as some ignorant persons believe, or those who do not agree with us, or those who have willfully misrepresented our position. Rather, by pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.

It is in this way—as the absence of pain—that pleasure is simple satisfaction (or simple satisfactions). “The flesh cries out, ‘No hunger! No thirst! No freezing cold!’ Whoever confidently has what it takes to satisfy these desires may rival even Zeus for happiness.” We may announce our happiness as soon as hunger is satisfied. Or as soon as we are not thirsty. Or as soon as we are properly clothed, which is to say necessarily clothed. Diogenes Laertius recounts, “In his own letters, Epicurus declares that he was content with inexpensive bread and water alone.” Here’s what Epicurus says in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Simple food gives just as much pleasure as rich food does as soon as the hunger pains are gone. A barley cake and water offer the highest possible pleasure when they are given to a hungry man. Getting used to simple and inexpensive food, therefore, aids the health of a man and enables him to perform the necessary requirements of life with resolution.

*Natural and unnecessary desires.*⁴⁴ The first point to note about these desires is that they are natural, which is to say they do actually correspond in some sense to human nature. The problem with them is that they demand and offer satisfactions beyond the needs or requirements of human nature. To give the example of one ancient commentator, simple water or an inexpensive wine both satisfy thirst. By contrast, costly, outstanding wines or ultrapure bottled water, we might say, are unnecessary. Why? Because we will experience no pain if we do not have them. “Unnecessary desires are those that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied. They involve an appetite that is easily relieved whenever its satisfaction is hard to procure or when it seems likely to cause harm.”⁴⁵ The same may be said of sex. While the pleasure or satisfaction of sex is certainly natural, it is, strictly speaking, unnecessary to obtain or experience. “A man never gets any good from sexual pleasure; rather, he is content if he is not harmed.”

Rather than pursuing simple satisfactions, natural and unnecessary desires seek a variety or diversity of satisfactions, things that are not necessary—again, strictly speaking—to support human nature and provision human needs. Given the dividing line separating pleasure and pain we imagined a moment ago (that pleasure is just *this side of* pain), these unnecessary desires drive us further into the realm of pleasure—that of complex and varied pleasures. “Pleasure in the flesh will not increase after need-based pain is removed. After that, pleasure may only be varied.”

The same may be said about mental pleasure, though Epicurus does not directly make the point. While the very activity of doing philosophy brings pleasure (“in doing philosophy, delight coincides with the investigation”), there is a limit to what we should seek to know and therefore study. We study in order to understand just enough about the nature of things to avoid the fear and anxiety that may arise from ignorance (either the ignorance of simply not knowing or that of accepting false or unfounded conclusions). Epicurus asserts, “The function of the study of natural phenomena is to understand clearly the cause of the most important things,” rather than, we might say, *all* things. He concludes, “We must

hold that blessed happiness depends on this.” Elsewhere he states that “knowledge of celestial phenomena . . . has no other purpose than tranquility of mind and resolute conviction and confidence.”

What happens to us if we do not satisfy these unnecessary desires? Epicurus’ answer: *nothing at all*. Again: “Unnecessary desires are those that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied.” Rather, if we recognize them for what they are—unnecessary—they will simply vanish. On the other hand, if we continue to hang on to them, seeking their satisfaction as if such were necessary, then they will not vanish. “If one’s zeal is intense in the case of those natural desires that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied, then such desires arise thanks to groundless notions. And when they do not vanish, it is not because of their own nature but thanks to those groundless human notions.” This idea of “groundless human notions” leads us to the final category of desire.

*Unnatural and groundless desires.*⁴⁶ Unnatural and groundless desires are the product of faulty judgments. They are groundless or empty opinions about what human nature requires. We may earnestly believe we require more and more money or wealth. On the contrary, Epicurus responds, “Natural wealth is both limited and easy to get. But the wealth based on groundless opinion grows without limit.” We may urgently feel that we need more and more food, not to mention a greater variety or complexity of dishes. Epicurus explains, however, that “the belly is not insatiable as the many declare. Instead, the opinion that the belly’s satisfaction is without limits is false.” (Note: Epicurus was no foodie; he was no modern epicurean.) When we have these kinds of desires, he says, we’re just confused, mistaken about what we actually need:

A pleasant life is not produced by stringing together one drinking party after another, or by having sex with young boys or women, or by enjoying fish and other delicacies set on a luxurious table. Instead, it is produced by sober reasoning that examines what is responsible for every choice and avoidance, and expels those beliefs by which the greatest confusion lays hold of the soul.

*The point of understanding the desires: satisfaction, simplicity, self-sufficiency, happiness.*⁴⁷ Stating what he does about the different desires, Epicurus concludes that such a knowledge (knowing which desires are natural, necessary, and grounded in knowledge versus groundless, unnecessary, and even unnatural) will help us to better choose and practice happiness:

He who has a firm understanding of these things knows how to direct every choice and every avoidance toward securing bodily health and mental tranquility since this is the goal of a blessedly happy life. Everything we do is for the sake of being free from pain and from fear. The soul’s storm scatters as soon as we achieve this condition. Then we have no need to go around looking for anything that is lacking or seeking something else by which the good of the soul and the good of the body will be fulfilled.

Epicurus’ point is not that we should be a bore. Rather, his goal is to guarantee a life of ongoing satisfaction or a constant fulfillment. Such a life is accomplished by means of focusing on simple satisfactions rather than complex ones. It is the practice of simplicity that allows for a radical kind of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), which is, for Epicurus, a state of affairs that is fundamentally valuable. “We regard self-sufficiency as a great good. This is not so that we may enjoy just a little in every case, but so that when things are scarce, we may nevertheless be satisfied with little.”

The happy person is the one who is satisfied with *enough*—that is, with what human nature requires. The great news is that what is enough is easy to obtain. Epicurus tells us that “he who understands the limits of life knows how easy it is to procure what it takes to remove the pain of need and make the whole of life complete.” He understands “that everything natural is easy to get, but whatever is groundless is hard.” By contrast, unhappy (dissatisfied) persons are not satisfied with enough since they demand more and more. “Nothing is enough for someone for whom enough is very little.” The problem is that this more and more is hard to get. But, says Epicurus, “there is no need for things that can only be procured

by means of struggle and troublesome business.”

One more point regarding simplicity and self-sufficiency. Epicurus argues that the person who is satisfied with little will actually enjoy plenty and variety more when they happen to appear (without any effort or trouble on his or her part) than the person who demands much and variety. Finishing his remark that self-sufficiency is “a great good,” he states that the person who is “satisfied with little” is “genuinely persuaded that the ones who derive the greatest pleasure from luxury are the ones who need it the least.”

A life of simplicity and self-sufficiency is accomplished by the judicial pursuit of pleasure, one that will often forgo some pleasures or endure some pains if such acts will result in greater overall or long-term pleasure. Epicurus expresses the point this way:

Even though pleasure is our first and inborn good, we nevertheless do not choose every pleasure. Rather, we oftentimes forgo many pleasures when a greater annoyance will follow from choosing them. And oftentimes we acknowledge that many pains are better than many pleasures when an even greater pleasure follows from patiently enduring these pains for a long period of time. And so, even though every pleasure is naturally good and fitting, not every pleasure is to be chosen.

For Epicurus, the judicial pursuit of pleasure is a matter of judging how things will play out if one desire is satisfied versus another. He counsels that “We must present the following questions to all our desires. What will happen to me if the desire I wish to satisfy is fulfilled? What will happen if it is not?”

Whatever the answer to these questions, and however complex the calculus, the key thing to keep in mind is nature. “If at any moment you do not direct each of your actions to the goal of life indicated by nature, but, instead, you turn aside to some other goal in the act of pursuing some object [pleasure] or avoiding it [pain], your activity will not be consistent with the conclusions drawn from reason.” What, then, does nature call for? If nature itself could act, what would nature do?

A hierarchy of pleasures. Aside from what we’ve observed above about natural and necessary desires, one last note on pleasure will help us to know what nature would seek in any given situation. Diogenes Laertius reports that Epicurus believed that “pleasures of the soul are greater than those of the body” just as “pains of the soul are worse” (than those of the body).⁴⁸ The imperative, then, is clear. In terms of need and therefore our attention and activity, soul pleasure takes precedence over bodily pleasure. This makes sense given the fact that Epicurus strongly emphasizes soul or mental tranquility (*ataraxia*). If we have that, the body’s needs are very small indeed.

*Practical wisdom and the virtues.*⁴⁹ When Epicurus mentions “conclusions drawn from reason” or “judgment,” he’s really talking about what the Greeks and he himself called “practical wisdom.” Practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), he declares, is “the greatest good.” It is “the foundation of all these things”—that is, the means by which we may judiciously choose pleasure and avoid pain.

Yet more. Practical wisdom is essential because it gives rise to every other virtue or excellence of life, which makes living happily or pleasantly possible. “Every other virtue (*aretē*) is produced from practical wisdom, teaching us that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, nobly, and justly—just as we cannot live wisely, nobly, and justly without living pleasantly.” Again: “The virtues have become one with living pleasantly. Living pleasantly is inseparable from the virtues.” Epicurus offers the example of the just man who has peace of mind in contrast with the unjust man who is greatly troubled.

Nevertheless, virtue, despite its significance, is not an end in itself as it is in other ancient Greek philosophies of life. Instead, it is a means to an end. According to Diogenes Laertius’ telling, Epicureans “choose the virtues for the sake of pleasure and not on their own account, even as we take medicine for the sake of health.”

*Friendship, the social covenant, and justice.*⁵⁰ Aside from the virtues, wisdom also points us in the direction of others and friendship. “Of all the means that are procured by wisdom to ensure blessed happiness

throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship.” And: “Friendship dances around the world of men calling out to all of us, ‘Rise up to happiness!’” Why is friendship such a wise move and so happy-making? The answer is two-fold. One, there is the delight that arises from interacting with friends. The other reason, however, is even more essential. Friendship is one of the most important ways to have a sense of “personal safety” and “confidence,” both of which are key components to a tranquil life.

Related to friendship on a larger social level is the compact (contract or covenant) that humans make with one another when they come together. The basic understanding of the compact is that they will not

harm one another. For Epicurus, this is justice. “Natural justice is a pledge of reciprocal advantage neither to harm one another nor to be harmed.”

According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus himself cared about and was a good friend to others. “There is an abundance of witnesses who attest to his unsurpassed goodwill and kindness to all men.” Consequently, he had many friends, so many, Diogenes Laertius reports—though not without exaggeration—“that they could hardly be measured by whole cities.” We see an instance of this friendship in what Epicurus writes to Pythocles: “In your letter that Cleon brought to me, you continue to show me an affection that matches my own devotion to you.” So it was that he practiced what he preached.

So ends Item 3. See you in **another reading or item**.

NOTES

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.30 and 136.

² See *ibid.*, 10.133, where Epicurus contends that the better man “has considered the natural goal of life . . .”

³ The translation is that of R.D. Hicks.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7.1.

⁵ See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.122.

⁶ For Homer’s understanding of happiness, and a brief summary of what other Greeks thought, see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life* (Sugar Land: EuZōn Media, 2015). See also *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

⁷ The point comes from Diogenes Laertius, who tells us that “in his letters [Epicurus] replaces the usual greeting, “May you be glad,” with “May you do well” and “May you live earnestly.” See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.14.

⁸ *Vatican Sayings* 54: “We must not merely pretend to practice philosophy; rather, we must actually do it. For we do not merely need the appearance of health, but true health.”

⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.128.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.128.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 10.127.

¹² *Galēnismos* comes from *galēnos* (calm), which oftentimes refers to the calm of the sea. It appears in Epicurus as *engalēnizō*, “to spend life calmly” (see *ibid.*, 10.37), and *galēnismos*, “calming [of the mind]” (see *ibid.*, 10.83).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.133. Italics added.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.29-30.

¹⁵ For “*Canonics* . . .,” see *ibid.*, 10.78, 85, 104, 134-135, 143.

¹⁶ We might also add, “Without the study of nature, there is no enjoyment of pleasures unmixed with fear and worry” (*ibid.*, 10.143).

¹⁷ For “*Reality* . . .,” see *ibid.* 10.31-32.

¹⁸ For “*Sensations*,” see *ibid.*, 10.31-32.

¹⁹ B. Farrington, *The Faith of Epicurus*, 108.

²⁰ Although Epicurus does not use this example, it is useful for us since we understand what is going on in terms of light, whereas Epicurus likely would have only had the barest grasp of some distortion.

²¹ We must be careful here as Epicurus does not make an explicit distinction between appearance and actuality. Even so, it does

seem to be what he is getting at, even if he does not believe we can get at the being of a thing.

²² For “*Preconceptions*,” see *ibid.*, 10.33.

²³ For “*Feeling*,” see *ibid.*, 10.34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.123.

²⁵ For the discussion of the various “*Principles or methods of knowing*,” see 10.32, 34, 38, 63, 82, 86-87, 94-95, 102, 104, 146.

²⁶ Think, for instance, of a candle shining in a dark room and the face of a friend that also shines, though with the borrowed light of the candle’s flame.

²⁷ Regarding the origin of “falsehood,” Epicurus states that “falsehood and error . . . are always based on judgment added to a presentation that awaits confirmation, or, at least, no contradiction.” Further, he says that “error would not have occurred if we had not experienced some other movement in ourselves conjoined with, but distinct from, the apprehension or perception of what is presented. Falsehood results from this movement—if it is not confirmed or if it is contradicted. By contrast, if it is confirmed, or if it is not contradicted, then truth is the result” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.50-51).

²⁸ For “*Physics or natural Philosophy*,” see *ibid.*, 10.30, 85, 143.

²⁹ For the “*Four initial points* . . .,” see *ibid.*, 10.38-39, 44, 41.

³⁰ Arbitrary in the sense that the cosmos is based on God or gods who choose for whatever reason and by some inexplicable power to create rather than a cosmos based on always-existing things (atoms and the void) that necessarily form things, including whole worlds, when the atoms move through the void and become entangled.

³¹ For “*Bodies and place; atoms and void*,” and related points, see *ibid.*, 10.39-43, 56-57, 61, 63-64, 66-67, 86, 88-90. Sometimes Epicurus (or Diogenes Laertius) simply speaks of “void.” Sometimes the definite article “the” is used, as in “the void.”

³² Compare an atom’s speed to Homer’s description of Hera’s speed in the *Iliad*: she moved “as fast as the thoughts of a man” (*Iliad* 15.80).

³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.30.

³⁴ For “*A philosophy of choosing and doing*,” see *ibid.*, 10.78, 122-123.

³⁵ For “*Freedom versus destiny*,” see *ibid.*, 10.120, 133-135, and *Vatican Sayings* 9.

³⁶ For the general idea and method of limiting the emotions, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.81-82. “Disturbances also arise thanks to the anticipation or suspicion of some everlasting evil—either because of the myths, or because we are in dread of the mere insensibility of death, as if it had to do with us. People are reduced to this state not because of conviction but because of a certain irrational tendency. Accordingly, if men do not *set limitations on their terror*, they must suffer as much or an even more intense anxiety than the man whose views on these matters are quite vague. But mental tranquility means being released from all these troubles and keeping in mind the general and most important points. Therefore, we must attend to present feelings and sensations, whether those of mankind in general or those peculiar to the individual. We must also attend to all the clear evidence available to us as given by each of the criteria. By paying attention to these, we will correctly and fully be able to explain the source of the disturbance and the fear, banishing it . . .”

³⁷ For the discussion of the gods and why we should not fear them (“*Do not fear the gods*”), see *ibid.*, 10.77 (where Epicurus declares that the stars are “no more than globular masses of fire”), 97, 121, 123-124, 139. Further, we should “liberate the divine nature from troublesome duties” (see *ibid.*, 10.113). In reference to the idea that animals indicate coming weather, Epicurus states that “no divine being sits observing when these animals go out and afterwards fulfilling the signs that the animals have given” (see *ibid.*, 10.115).

³⁸ For the discussion of death and why we should not fear it (“*Do not fear death since death is nothing to us*”), see *ibid.*, 10.31, 64-65, 81, 124-125, 127, 139, and *Vatican Sayings* 30 and 47. See Epicurus’ brief *Letter to Idomeneus* as an example of how to die well (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.22).

³⁹ The fact was acknowledged from Homer on. For instance, in the *Odyssey* 3.236-238, the goddess Athena says to Telemachus, “Death that is common to all men is certain. Not even the gods have the power to defend a loved man against it when the destructive fate of death finally drops a man to the dust.” In the *Iliad* 18.117, 121, Achilles observes that, “not even was the mighty Heracles able to flee death.” So, he says, “I will lay asleep when I die.”

⁴⁰ “Something like this,” because Epicurus does not explicitly work out the point.

⁴¹ For “*Pleasure, pain, and desire*,” see *ibid.*, 10.34, 127, 137, 149.

⁴² We must be careful here not to read too much into Epicurus. An example may suffice to explain the difference between desire and pleasure. Thirst (the desire-for-water but also the pain, however slight, experienced simultaneously with or as the desire-for-water) motivates us to drink water to experience the quenching of thirst or the pleasure of non-thirst. Water (that which

represents non-thirst, and so pleasure and the absence of pain) moves us from ahead. Desire-for-water (pain and so the absence of pleasure) moves us from behind.

⁴³ For “*Natural and necessary desires*,” see *ibid.*, 10.11, 127 (“And of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for freeing the body from disturbance, and some for living itself”), 128-131, 139, and *Vatican Sayings* 21 and 33.

⁴⁴ For “*Natural and unnecessary desires*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.27, 78, 85, 148-149, and *Vatican Sayings* 51.

⁴⁵ There is a significant implied point here—that the “satisfaction” of any appetite should involve benefit rather than harm. Therefore, if satisfaction (pleasure) involves immediate or future harm (“when it seems likely to cause harm”), then one should avoid it. If it entails benefit, however, whether some present or future good, or if the result is neutral (one is merely “not harmed”), then one can choose it.

⁴⁶ For “*Unnatural and groundless desires*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.32, 144, and *Vatican Sayings* 59.

⁴⁷ For “*The point of understanding the desires . . .*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.128-130, 144, 146, 148, and *Vatican Sayings* 68 and 71.

⁴⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.137.

⁴⁹ For “*Practical wisdom and the virtues*,” see *ibid.*, 10.132, 138, 144. To understand what the Greeks from Homer on thought and said about virtue or excellence (*aretē*), see *Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

⁵⁰ For “*Friendship, the social covenant, and justice*,” see *ibid.*, 10.9, 84, 148 (wisdom, here, is *sophia*), 150, *Principal Teachings* 31 (see also *Principal Teachings* 33: “Justice is an agreement neither to harm nor be harmed that is made when men gather together from time to time in various places”), and *Vatican Sayings* 52.

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“O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! . . . For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. . . . You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. . . . I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!” —Titus Lucretius Carus

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