

II - Epicurus Overcame The Terror Of Religion And Showed Us How To Live According to Nature

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The students of Epicurus considered him to be a father figure who had left them the most precious of gifts: a true philosophy which allowed them to understand how to live their lives. Key aspects of this philosophy were:

1. Religion is an oppressive and terrorizing weight which prevents mankind from studying and understanding the true ways of Nature.

2. Epicurus' life was devoted to the study of Nature, and this allowed him to discover the laws of Nature which determine what things are possible and what things are not possible.

3. Epicurus' study of the laws of Nature allowed him to see that the fears and anxiety which torment mankind can be fought successfully.

4. Epicurus therefore taught that in order to live successfully, we must see:

A) That the desire for pleasure can be satisfied, and the fear of pain can be extinguished, if we consider our natural capacities and limits as human beings. Once we understand these capacities and limits for desire and fear, we are able to see that it is possible to achieve a life of continuous pleasure in which pleasure is maximized and pain is minimized.

B) That there is in fact a highest good toward which all should strive, and it is happiness. If happiness be present, we have everything; if happiness be absent, all our actions are directed toward attaining it.

C) That Nature provides to all living things a faculty of pleasure and pain by which to assess happiness. This faculty of pleasure and pain is the ultimate guide of life by which we must intelligently decide what we should choose and what we should avoid.

D) That evil in life arises by our own actions, or by force of Nature, or by chance, and not by the actions of gods.

E) That the most reliable way to maximize pleasure and at the same time to minimize pain over our lifetimes is to study and apply the lessons of Nature so that we can better decide what to choose and what to avoid.

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References:

[Lucretius Book III](#)

THEE, who first was able amid such thick darkness to raise on high so bright a beacon and shed a light on the true interests of life, thee I follow, glory of the Greek race, and plant now my footsteps firmly fixed in thy imprinted marks, not so much from a desire to rival thee as that from the love I bear thee I yearn to imitate thee; for why need the swallow contend with swans, or what likeness is there between the feats of racing performed by kids with tottering limbs and by the powerful strength of the horse? Thou, father, art discoverer of things, thou furnishest us with fatherly precepts, and like as bees sip of all things in the flowery lawns, we, o glorious being, in like manner feed from out thy pages upon all the golden maxims, golden I say, most worthy ever of endless life. For soon as thy philosophy issuing from a godlike intellect has begun with loud voice to proclaim the nature of things, the terrors of the mind are dispelled, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things in operation throughout the whole void: the divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes which neither winds do shake nor clouds drench with rains nor snow congealed by sharp frosts harms with hoary fall: an ever-cloudless ether overcanopies them, and they laugh with light shed largely round. (Munro translation)

[Lucretius, Book I:](#)

*At a time when humanity lay prostrate upon the Earth, crushed down under the weight of religion, it was Epicurus - a man of Hellas - who first dared to lift up his mortal eyes and stand up - face to face - this hideous threat scowling down from heaven upon men. Epicurus was not discouraged by the fables about the gods, or by thunderbolts, or by any of the threatening roar of heaven. These served only to spur him on, filling him with courage and the desire to be the first among men to burst the bars holding tight the gates of knowledge about Nature. Thus the living force of his soul won the day, and through mind and spirit Epicurus traversed the immeasurable universe, far beyond the flaming walls of the world, and returned again to us - a conqueror - to relate those things that can be, and those that can not, and to tell us on what principle each thing has its powers defined - its boundary-mark set deep. By his victory Epicurus trampled the terror of religion underfoot, and in turn lifted up to the stars those who follow his example.\*\*\**

*Epicurus then looked around him and saw that mortals had attained those things which their needs required, that their lives had been established in safety, and that they abounded in wealth and honor and fame, and were proud of the good names of their children. Yet Epicurus also saw that despite this, the hearts of men were filled with anguish, and all lived with tortured minds, without respite, and raging with complaints. And then he understood that it was a false*

*understanding of Nature that wrought the disease that corrupted the vessel of life and tainted all that was gathered within it, and that this false view of life rendered the vessel so leaky and full of holes that it could never be filled.\*\*\**

*So with words of truth Epicurus purged the hearts of men, showing the limits to desires and fears, explaining the truth about the highest good toward which we all should strive, and pointing out the path whereby we may work toward that goal on a straight course. He explained the nature of evil in mortal affairs, and that these evils come to pass by chance, or by force of Nature, rather than by the will of the gods. Epicurus then showed us from what gates we must march forth to combat each of these evils, proving to us that it is mostly in vain that we toss our hearts in gloomy billows of care. For just as children tremble and fear everything in the dark, so do we - even in the light - dread things that are not a bit more to be feared than the imagination of children. These terrors and darkneses of mind must be dispelled, but not by gleaming shafts of daylight. Terrors such as these can only be scattered by study of the laws of Nature.*

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*And so Epicurus taught us to grasp the principles of things above, the principles by which the sun and moon go on their courses, and the forces by which every thing on Earth proceeds. And he taught that above all we must find out by keen reasoning the nature of the soul and of the mind, and the nature of those things that frighten us when we are under the influence of disease, or buried in sleep, or when we seem to see or hear those who are long dead, and whose bones the Earth holds in its embrace. \*\*\**

#### Letter to Menoecus:

*So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it.*

*...Therefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.*

#### Principal Doctrine 3:

The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

#### Principal Doctrine 4:

Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain.

#### Principal Doctrine 9:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/85-ii-epicurus-overcame-the-terror-of-religion-and-showed-us-how-to-live-according/?postID=120#post120>

If every pleasure could be intensified so that it lasted and influenced the whole organism or the most essential parts of our nature, pleasures would never differ from one another.

[Principal Doctrine 11:](#)

If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science.

[Principal Doctrine 18:](#)

The pleasure in the flesh is not increased, when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind.

[Principal Doctrine 19:](#)

Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures by reason the limits of pleasure.

[Principal Doctrine 20:](#)

The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time: but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short in any way of the best life.

[Principal Doctrine 21:](#)

He who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want and makes the whole of life complete is easy to obtain, so that there is no need of actions which involve competition.