

## **Epicurus--The Philosophy of the Garden of Free Friends**

Epicurus lived at the beginning of what historians call the Hellenistic Age which followed on for several centuries after the collapse of the Classical Greek World perhaps best epitomized by the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

The Hellenistic Age is generally agreed to begin with the life of Alexander "The Great" (b.356 BC-d.323) and end with the battle of Actium where in 31 BC Egypt came under the dominion of Rome. However, I think the deaths of three key men - all within a year or two of each other - truly announced the arrival of the Hellenistic Age. I refer to the deaths of Alexander The Great, Diogenes the Cynic, and Aristotle.

What each of these men represented of the prior age of Classical Greece, died with them, respectively: political power, refusal of political power, and the power of reason. The meaning of life once provided by the Classical World to its individuals - that of public service, that self-control outside of the Norm, and that of scientific or natural reason - no longer worked for the Hellenistic Age that followed the death of the Classical World.

The conditions that lead to political stability, personal moral commitment outside religion, politics or custom, and the pursuit of reason as a way of life ended with the death of these three men. Henceforth, for the Hellenistic Age to follow, politics, personal morality, and objective reason, failed to provide the basis for the meaning of life.

What rushed in to fill that void were emotional or revelatory religions and superstitions, big business of private individuals favored by the State, materialistic and hedonistic lifestyles, egotistical public power pursuits (that is, public service performed for no principal higher than the individual's self-importance) and brute force when all else failed.

Epicurus incorporated chance as well as necessity into his philosophy. He worshipped neither rebellious chance nor dictatorial necessity but the reality of material life which incorporates both in the gene and its vehicle, the body. The Hellenistic Age was one in which people felt out of control and took to worshipping Chance as Tyche as well as giving over control to dogmatic cults such as astrology. For when we worship chance it is because we feel out of control; and we feel out of control when we as Id-fants rebel against the natural order of things which we associate with the Id-Father who tries to control us and tell us what to do - and even if it is what we should do if we wish to live, we will not to do it just to spite his control and we kill ourselves rather than obey nature.

Thus people worship Tyche when the Father or Norm or God has fallen from power (or died) and when they have nothing to replace the Father with except sheer irresponsibility for one's behavior as a regressed Id-fant who refuses to grow up. And so we project our own disorder out upon the world as the worship of chance.

Or, we grow up as Epicurus did and learn as Francis Bacon said that "Nature to be commanded, it must first be obeyed" - that is, we must choose to do what is necessary to our nature and reality and therein find our freedom.

The mother principle of unconditional love where the virtue and value of existence is paramount and the father principle of conditional love where the existence of self-virtue and self-value is paramount.

Chance and necessity, change and continuity, were the unidualities with which Epicurus came to terms. In the Hellenistic Age Chance or Fortune - known as the Goddess Tyche - reigned supreme for such a time of uncertainty. It was fitting that Epicurus took his physics from Democritus who wrote, "Everything existing in the Universe is the fruit of chance and necessity."

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Epicurus was an Athenian citizen born in 341 BC on the island of Samos off the east coast of Greece. In 306 Epicurus bought a house in Athens and established a school of philosophy in its garden. Thus was his school known as "The Garden" or in Greek "Ho Kepos" and the Epicurean philosophy come to be known as "the Philosophy of the Garden".

Epicurus' school was in direct competition for students with the two dominant schools of philosophy in Athens at that time, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Epicurus from the beginning taught in an informal manner and what he taught was more a way of life than a system of ideas. He went against the grain of conventional Greek schools of philosophy by admitting women, and even one of Epicurus' slaves, called Mouse.

The Epicurean scholar John Gaskin makes the point of the appropriateness of Epicurus' ideas when he writes,

"The Epicurean idea of an infinite universe of matter and space, indifferent to human hopes and concerns but whose workings can be understood, is the predominant scientific idea with which we now live. Mankind...has no significance beyond that which we give ourselves; no final purpose, no metaphysical or religious objective. We and our world are like all other things: we form, we grow, we decay and return to the primordial store of the universe. How then shall we conduct our lives?

"Epicurus' answer is simple. We shall make the very best of the life we have by seeking happiness and avoiding pain. The first necessity is that we live without fears and worries which we can avoid. The two great fears that we can avoid are religious fears...and the fear of death itself. A right understanding of the nature of the universe rids us of both these fears.

"Epicurean ideas were never intended to be difficult or esoteric or the preserve of the learned. They were addressed to mankind....We have fellow feeling with the importance Epicurus attaches to happiness in *this* life, with his desire to diminish pain and overcome irrational fears, and with the attempt to understand and come to terms with death....the content of the Epicurean Philosophy - 'the Philosophy of the Garden' as it was often called - has a more apparent relevance to the world we now know than Christianity itself."

Which I why I think Epicurus' message is a timely one and just as relevant today for us as it was for those at the end of the 4th century B.C.

Epicurus' philosophy provided a morality in a form the ordinary person could understand and practice. In his individualistic and rootless age of social uncertainties, Epicurus taught a way to develop and use one's self to achieve inward harmony by judicious relationship to one's environment. He taught self-fulfillment and social happiness in the management of personal desires by reason. He advocated as did Socrates, self-knowledge based on knowledge of natural reality.

Epicurus was as much a preacher as a philosopher. As the Epicurus' scholar Cyril Bailey wrote, "Epicurus is primarily a moralist, a preacher of the Gospel of life, who cares nothing for knowledge and learning as such. But he does care greatly...for a materialist theory of the universe, based upon a complete trust in the validity of sensation.....

The only writings of his that have come down to us are in the form of a few letters to various disciples. There are also some several hundred aphorisms recorded or recreated by others during his life and after his death. The fullest exposition of his philosophy is to be found in the philosophical poem written by the Roman Lucretius Carus around 50 B.C. called *On the Nature of Things*. Diogenes Laertius' [circa 250 BC] *Lives of the Famous Philosophers* is the main source for information on Epicurus' life.

The usual understanding of the word Epicurean is taken to be a person who delights in the material good things of life - fine food and drink and the like. The history of the word taken from Epicurus' name is instructive. In medieval times the negative meaning of Epicurean reigned.

Epicurus was cast as an "Antichrist of Sensuality". The word became synonymous with licentious behavior, gluttony and lewdness. Such an inaccurate and deceitful rendering of Epicurus' teaching began quite early on - in fact even while Epicurus was alive. It first came from competing schools of philosophy, especially the Stoics, the other main school besides the Epicureans for contenders to those disenchanted with either Plato's or Aristotle's teachings.

But it was the growth of Christianity which finally managed to most permanently damage the reputation of Epicurus. By the mid-4th century AD the Epicurean influence on the classical world was nearly extinct with the pagan Roman Empire itself soon to follow. The supernatural Christian promise of life everlasting won out easily over the natural Epicurean practice of life as defined by the terms of birth and death. Epicurus' theme of pleasure whose "aim was both to assure happiness and to supply the means to achieve it" - was to become the domain of the devil. Suffering not pleasure was the purpose of life on earth to earn redemption in the paradise to follow.

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Now let us enter, with this historical background, the "Philosophy of the Garden". Pleasure is perhaps the word most associated with Epicurus' philosophy. In today's post-industrial world pleasure is even more a problem than it was in Epicurus' day.

A popular text on behavioral psychology by Brown and Herrnstein frames the pleasure problem this way: "Drives tie behavior and the environment together in an adaptive way, promoting both the survival of the organism and its capacity for reproduction....The feeling of pleasure is not the cause for repeating a rewarding act; rather it is simply the feeling we get when the act has [been completed to obtain the satisfaction of the need]. [Thus] a given stimulus comes to call forth a given response if the sequence has been regularly followed by satisfaction or pleasure....[or] a given stimulus would cease calling forth a response if something disagreeable or unpleasant followed it....psychologists see rewards and punishments where the casual observer may miss them and because they see a more pervasive and unavoidable tie between behavior and its consequences."

What is said for psychologists today in learning theory could be said of Epicurus: he examined pleasure empirically and rationally and came to roughly the same conclusions as science has today. But now we have, through science and technology, controlled our environment to the point where we have reversed the natural order of life. Post-industrial Man uses his life to pursue pleasure. We have reversed the means and ends of life. Instead of eating to live we live to eat. Biological Man is goal oriented and like all life forms his fundamental and ruling goal is to live and to further life and he used the means of pleasure to orient himself towards that goal.

But Western Scientific and Self-Conscious Man has confused the means for the end and his fundamental and ruling goal has become the pursuit of self-pleasure and he is using up - literally - the means of his life to achieve this impossible goal. I say impossible for the obvious reason that to pursue pleasure to the detriment of life is suicidal. Our personal pleasures can often take precedence over the very value of life itself - as in our addictions which we continue to pursue to self-destruction.

Western Man is driving himself ever deeper into this dilemma. We are coming to a point in our Western Civilization where work may not only not be necessary but not even available. Our age-old problems of adapting to our physical environment may be solved so completely as to leave us free to pursue whatever we may come up with doing when we no longer need to support our body with work.

We are entering the kingdom of pleasure and play and we are almost totally unprepared for this revolution since we do not - most of us - know what to do with our "free" time. As Thomas Huxley, the Victorian evolutionary biologist said, a man's worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes. For we often find that what we like is not good for us and that what is good for us we do not like.

Monod: p.24 "All the functional adaptations in living beings...fulfil particular projects which may be seen as so many aspects...of a unique primary project, which is the preservation and multiplication of the species.'

What we now adapt to is people as our environment. We have turned the physical uncertainties into personal ones. [see Gellner from my genius course here]

Our species is known as Homo sapiens which means literally, "Man, the thinking or wise species". The Latin word from which sapiens is derived actually meant "to have taste or flavor; to be wise, to know" and is related to the Old English word which meant "mind, understanding, insight". Our word, savor, meaning to perceive by taste and smell as well as our words for knowing and wisdom, sapient, savant, and sage, all come from the Indo-European base which meant "to taste, perceive".

In the etymology of the word used to describe our species, sapiens, lies an insight into the human nature and its condition in contrast to its animal predecessors. To have "good taste" is to possess some sort of knowledge and even, perhaps, wisdom. To be able to discriminate by our perceptions between what is good for us and what is bad for us is the essence of human wisdom and it is also what we have come to call morality. What smelled and tasted good to ancient Man is what kept him alive; what smelled and tasted bad was what could kill him. We evolved to use our pleasure as the source of our judgmental knowledge - we were motivated and moved to pursue the good tastes that gave pleasure and to avoid the bad tastes that gave pain.

But for Modern Man we evolved via our cultural science and technology beyond our biology to the point we no longer can use - at least without critical thought - our pleasure sense, our good smell and taste sense to guide us as we used to do. Epicurus can help us to retrieve our sense of good taste and smell, our native wisdom where we can choose what is good for us and have it match what we also like.

One of the three letters of Epicurus still remaining is titled "The Happy Life" and he writes in it, "For we recognize pleasure as the primary and natural desire, and we return to it in all our judgments of the good, taking the feeling of pleasure as our guide." But note well, pleasure and happiness are results or consequences of actions or behaviors, they are not objects of desire themselves, actual things to be pursued and obtained.

What Epicurus taught was that pleasure and happiness arise naturally when the conditions for living adaptively are present. How to achieve those adaptive conditions is what he is really teaching. What Epicurus saw that was keeping people from attaining this equilibrium state necessary for pleasure to operate, was best captured in the word Fear. For it was fear of the fundamentals of the human condition that drove people to pursue pleasure mindlessly and thus, paradoxically, to end in pain and self-destructive behavior. Epicurus saw - as every philosopher does who is worthy of the name philosopher - that the desire to know is what must be encouraged and focused on if we are to free of fear. The freedom that Epicurus most valued was freedom from fear which can only come when knowledge displaces the fear caused by ignorance.

Epicurus' life is an example of the wisdom that if - as is true - the unexamined life is not worth living, it is also true that the unlive life is not worth examining. Thus Epicurus emphasis on the ordinary pleasures of life as when he writes: "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties....The stable condition of well-being in the body and the sure hope of its continuance holds the fullest and surest joy for those who can rightly calculate it."

Epicurus counsels acceptance of life's pains and tragedies and that one can only really control one's perceptions of events and not the events themselves. Control of the self is substituted for control of the environment (at least when the environment cannot be controlled). Yet one must take this with some levity as the modern philosopher Ernest Gellner implies when he writes, "The Stoic view [actually Epicurus appeared to announce this view even before the Stoics] was that the good man (one who accepts reality and adjusts his desires to it could be happy even on the rack. As an undergraduate allegedly said to Dr Jowett [famous translator of Plato], this would require a very good man on a very bad rack."

So in our Garden we must cultivate the pleasure of wisdom so we can reap the wisdom of pleasure. Wisdom, or knowledge understood, frees us from fear since fear comes from ignorance. The etymology of the word fear is useful here. The English word comes from the Greek word meaning "trial, attempt, experience" which gave us also our words, peril, experiment, and experience.

The Greek word itself is derived from the Indo-European base which means to lead across or drive through or carry over or pass beyond. As Will Durant writes "to understand is the highest virtue [and] the highest happiness, for it avails us more than any other faculty in us to avoid pain and grief. Wisdom is the only liberator: it frees us from bondage to the passions, from fear of the gods, and from dread of death." [Durant p.648 V.2 The Life of Greece]

The "Garden of Philosophy" is about cultivating the mind as reason. The word "garden" derives as does the word hortus of horticulture from the IE base ghed- meaning to enclose, boundary, limit. This base is related to another IE base gher- meaning to seize from which our words such as comprehend and prey are derived. A garden is an enclosed place and the mind works by enclosing or grasping an event or an aspect of experience to make one's own - to cultivate and to thus understand. Life as an ongoing process of living is a continuous event and to use the mind is to define or delimit - mark out and capture - some pattern of life so it can be examined out of the flow of existence. The mind encloses a space of time - a garden in which understanding can grow.

We enclose our garden of reason and thought in order to evaluate the irrational and thoughtless elements of our life. Only by ordering by enclosure of experience can we examine aspects of life to objectively analyze and evaluate them. We can usefully examine aberrant forms of life within our garden and judge their maladaptive development by comparison to the adaptive environment established by our garden.

For Epicurus, the fear of the gods and the fear of death are the two prototypical fears of the human experience. Fear of god is really the fear of the unknown or of the "un-natural", i.e., the unexplainable and the harm it does to us is that it forces us to try and explain the known in terms of the unknown rather than the other way round; and fear of death is really the fear of loss, of abandonment, of not belonging and being valued and approved of and the harm it does us when we seek substitutes for growing up and learning to trade value for value.

What Epicurus is really teaching is that morality comes from the recognition of mortality, from an understanding and necessary acceptance of the terms of life and its natural limitation. Philodemus, a student of Epicurus summed it in four lines: "Nothing to fear in God./Nothing to feel in Death./Good can be attained./Evil can be endured."

What wisdom does for us is to lead us across and through and beyond the ignorant fears of experience - the perils of life. Wisdom allows us to learn from experience and history so as to not have to repeat the same mistakes. We learn new ways to go through life to better enjoy it and obtain the pleasures inherent in it despite the pains and griefs which are inevitable. For if we do not gain pleasure from living why live?

And pleasure only comes to the person wise enough to choose to live in such a way as to allow it to grow. For pleasure to grow, the ground of being and life must be leveled, cultivated - wisely understood. The etymology of pleasure shows its Indo-European root meaning "to smooth, make even" from which our English words, please, plain, plan, plant come.

Epicurus taught the leveling of the up and down of desire, the smoothing out of the jerky reactions to life. You can only arrive at this pleasing state through the wisdom of understanding yourself and your world as a natural process of each adapting to the other - of learning how to fit in to the order of things as they are. Epicurus knew of the "hedonistic paradox" implicit in all attempts to pursue pleasure as a way of life - that it never worked. The more we pursue pleasure the less we achieve it. True pleasure can only result from the attainment of wisdom.

Now, how do we cultivate our own Garden, level out our lumpy, difficult to manage bed of competing and upsetting desires and attain the blooms of our efforts: tranquil pleasure and fulfilling happiness? Let us cultivate the flower of the Pleasure of Wisdom and the Wisdom of Pleasure, our Pansy.

PANSY from French *pensee* 'thought, pansy' of *penser* 'to think' from Latin *pensare* 'to weight carefully, examine, ponder, consider'; so called because it is regarded as the symbol of thought or remembrance. Pendant: L. *pendere* 'to hang down' related to L. *pendere* lit. 'to cause to hang down, hold in suspension' when 'to weigh, weigh out; to value, esteem'

Epicurus has some specific guidance for us here. And really his advice to us is not much different than what science has discovered in learning theory of human behavior. And that is: if we wish to control ourselves to obtain true pleasure (naturally sustainable) then we must relate our behavior to consequences and use the feedback implicit in adapting to our circumstances - the feedback of experience subjected to reason grounded on the value of life as the mediating event.

What's the matter with matter, Epicurus asked. Banish the projections of the mind: spirit - and you banish most of the fears of Man. That we have happened by the chance movement of atoms and come to be by necessity of the 2nd law, should not be taken to mean we are therefore without meaning because without a cosmic purpose. What is it that makes us so

afraid of being only matter? Is the only way we can matter to ourselves is to imagine we are not matter but only bodiless spirit?

Science destroys spiritual meaning and purpose which must be taken on faith and continued in ignorance. To reduce Man to the movement of matter in space is to subject all his projective, subjective meanings to objective analysis which breaks down that synthetic coverup of divine ignorance to natural laws of chance and necessity.

As Gellner writes, "Reductionism...is the view that everything in this world is really something else, and that the something else is always in the end unedifying. There is no escape: it is not the content, the kind of explanation which dehumanizes us; it is any genuine explanation, as such, that does it....[those who can't accept such a view] invent a variety of...inherently absurd dogmas...forces or realms which are beyond the reach of explanation...to protect their world from erosion by science."

Monod, p.108 "...the entire system is totally, intensely conservative, locked into itself, utterly impervious to any 'hints' from the outside world. By its properties...between DNA and protein, as between organism and medium, an entirely one-way relationship, this system obviously defies 'dialectical' description. It is not Hegelian at all, but thoroughly Cartesian: the cell is indeed a machine....there is no conceivable mechanism in existence whereby any instruction or piece of information could be transferred to DNA."

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"The Philosophy of the Garden" - Epicurus and the Epicureans

Epicurus was an Athenian citizen born in 341 BC on the island of Samos off the east coast of Greece. In 306 Epicurus bought a house in Athens and established a school of philosophy in its garden. Thus was his school known as "The Garden" or in Greek "Ho Kepos" and the Epicurean philosophy came to be known as "the Philosophy of the Garden".

Epicurus' school was in direct competition for students with the two dominant schools of philosophy in Athens at that time, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Epicurus from the beginning taught in an informal manner and what he taught was more a way of life than a system of ideas. He went against the grain of conventional Greek schools of philosophy by admitting women, and even one of Epicurus' slaves, called Mouse.

The age that Epicurus lived in - called by historians the Hellenistic age - was one of great change and uncertainty. The Greek City States were conquered by the "barbarian" Macedonian, Alexander.

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After the death of Alexander in 323 B.C. and Aristotle in 322, as Bertrand Russell wrote in his History of Western Philosophy,

"...the Hellenistic world was sinking into chaos, for lack of a despot strong enough to achieve stable supremacy, or a principle powerful enough to produce social



cohesion....there was no longer any incentive to take an interest in public affairs. There was widespread social discontent and fear of revolution.

"The new cities...had not the same traditions as the old. Their citizens were not of homogeneous origin. The influence of non-Greek religion and superstition...was mainly, but not wholly, bad. 'Astrology,' says Professor Gilbert Murray, 'fell upon the Hellenistic mind as a new disease falls upon some remote island people....the majority of even the best philosophers fell in with the belief in astrology. The general confusion was bound to bring moral decay, even more than intellectual enfeeblement. Ages of prolonged uncertainty...are inimical to the prosaic every-day virtues of respectable citizens.

"Menander [a Greek poet], who belongs to this age, says: 'So many cases I have known/Of men who, though not naturally rogues,/Became so, through misfortune, by constraint.' This sums up the moral character [of the Hellenistic age]...except for a few exceptional men. Even among these few, fear took the place of hope; the purpose of life was rather to escape misfortune than to achieve any positive good. 'Metaphysics sink into the background, and ethics, now individual, become of the first importance. Philosophy is no longer the pillar of fire going before a few intrepid seekers after truth: it is rather an ambulance following in the wake of the struggle for existence and picking up the weak and wounded.' [C.F. Angus]

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The historian, Will Durant, adds to our picture of this time:

"Superstition spread while science reached its apogee....people took it for granted that the stars were gods who ruled in detail the destinies of individuals and states....everywhere the Hellenistic world worshipped Tyche, the great god Chance....neither faith nor patriotism survived in the educated Greek....the growth of knowledge had secularized morals, marriage, parentage, and law....the pursuit of pleasure consumed the adult life of the upper classes.

"Education spread, but spread thin...it stressed knowledge more than character, and produced masses of half-educated people who, uprooted from labor and the land, moved about in unplaced discontent like loosened cargo in the ship of state. Sexual morality was relaxed even beyond the loose standards of the Periclean age. Homosexuality remained popular; the youth Delphis 'is in love,' says Theocritus' Simaetha, 'but whether for a woman or for a man I cannot say.'

"The courtesan still reigned: Demetrius Poliorcetes levied a tax of \$750,000 upon the Athenians, and then gave it to his mistress Lamia on the ground that she needed it for soap; which led the angry Athenians to remark how unclean the lady must be. Dances of naked women were accepted as part of the mores...Athenian life was portrayed in Menander's plays as a round of triviality, seduction and adultery.

"The partial emancipation of woman was accompanied by a revolt against wholesale maternity, and the limitation of the family became the outstanding social phenomenon of the age. When a child came it was in many cases exposed [left to die outdoors]. Only one

family in a hundred...reared more than one daughter. Families with no child, or only one, were numerous.

"Philosophers condoned infanticide as reducing the pressure of population; but when the lower classes took up the practice on a large scale, the death rate overtook the birth rate. Religion, which had once frightened men into fertility lest their dead souls be untended, no longer had the power to outweigh considerations of comfort and cost. 'In our time', wrote Polybius [Greek historian], 'Greece has been subject to a low birth rate [and] the cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit....For as men had fallen into such a state of luxury, avarice, and indolence that they did not wish to marry, or, if they married, to rear the children born to them....' "

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This then is the anxious, superstitious, post-rational, birth-barren age that Epicurus came into and in which he founded his school. Such a time helps explain the slant of his philosophy and its popularity. There was a crying out for a sense of identity and moral guidance to give order to the social chaos. Doesn't this Hellenistic age sound familiar? I think it parallels in many ways our modern Western society as we near the end of the 20th century A.D. Which is why I think Epicurus' message is a timely one and just as relevant today for us as it was for those at the end of the 4th century B.C.

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For those of us who have suffered the "Death of God" as Nietzsche predicted, let us be grateful that we have Epicurus as our Free Friend to live with in the Garden of Responsible Freedom where we may grow our unique, Self-Actualized blooms to share with each other.

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One of my favorite ancient Greek philosophers was **Epicurus**. He was known as the "**Friendly Garden Philosopher**" because he taught in a garden that was behind his house and in an open, informal manner. My current goal is to find

somewhere in the world a **Community of Free Friends** who will help me grow a **Garden** in which to **FreeEach**. So if there are any **Patrons-Resources** of philosophers-poets reading, let me show you that I can earn our **Garden** and make our human flowers bloom! I conclude with this one line from **Epicurus**, thinking of all the wonderful Chinese friends that have been bestowed on me since in China: ***Friendship** goes dancing around the world proclaiming to us all to awake to the praises of a happy life.*



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