CHAPTER ONE

THE REFUGE OF PHILOSOPHY—EPICURUS AND FRIENDS

We must not pretend to study philosophy, but study it in reality; for it is not the appearance of health we need, but real health (Epicurus)

Background: The Greek World

In volume three of his trilogy on Greek Civilization Andre Bonnard points out that civilizations follow the same progression as all natural things: They germinate, spring to life, reach their zenith, after which they fade, decline and die. For Bonnard it is the ***decline*** of any civilization that holds the greatest interest:

> In the first place because such periods show clearly—more clearly than the beginnings, the births, which always are wrapped in obscurity—for what reasons and under what conditions, human communities create cultural values, and what they lose when they disappear.[1]

In the year of Epicurus' birth (341 B.C.E.) the Greek city-states were in full decline. Incessant wars had destroyed the ties which existed between them. Athens' maritime empire, solidified after the miraculous victories over the Persians at Marathon and Salamis, had been shattered by the long, disastrous Peloponnesian War with Sparta (431-401). The Classical Age, that brief time of full flower in the fifth century, was long gone and only now might citizens realize this fact. Life had become so different that, as H.D.F. Kitto put it, "to

those who were born at the end of the (fourth) century the Age of Pericles must have seemed as remote mentally as the Middle Ages do to us."[2]

Sparta, in her turn, proved utterly inept at maintaining a hegemony over the other states. Her eventual defeat at the hands of Thebes (371) signaled the end of her power, and when the Theban hero of that war, Epameinondas was killed later at the battle of Martineia in 362, Xenophon ended his ***History*** with the pessimistic coda: "After this battle confusion and disorder were greater than ever in Greece. For me let me have written so far; what follows shall perhaps concern another."[3]

The apogee of Greek classical splendor had lasted barely fifty years from the Victory at Salamnis (480) to the beginning of the war with Sparta (431) when Athens began to exhaust her resources. But during that time, an explosion of creativity occurred that was unprecedented, an outpouring of genius in every field—politics, commerce, drama, philosophy, history, sculpture. The Greek notion of ***arete*** on all levels, that ideal of the whole person, came to fruition here, all within the context of the ***polis*** which in Athens saw the birth of democracy. Here was a new idea of government lying in the hands of the citizens which required,according to Pericles, the highest development of which every free citizen is capable.

So central to Greek thought was the ***polis*** that later on neither Plato nor Aristotle could envision the full growth of the individual without the context of a healthy city-state as correlative. But even by the time of Plato, well into the fourth century, Athens had fallen prey to corruption. Hadn't she put his master, Socrates, to death? Hadn't her assemblies dissolved into disputations based on convenience rather than principle? Weren't paupers now flooding the streets? We must remember, however, that Plato was critical even of fifth century Athens and of Pericles with his imperialist ambitions. He also had disdain for the leveling process of democracy where freedom is honored to such a degree that "all opinions are equal, and all impulses and fancies are one as good as another."[4] Out of exasperation over his native city, Plato created ***The Republic***, that first and most famous utopia where wise philosopher-kings ruled and everyone knew their proper place; where opinion took the lowest rung on the ladder of ascent to truth.

However, one did not have to be an idealistic Platonist to see where things were heading by the middle of the fourth century. Disorder and lethargy were increasing, and it wasn't just the entropy that comes from exhaustion. A different attitude to life was emerging, one in which people had lost that sense of wholeness where public and private were wedded. This was reflected in the arts where individual traits and domestic themes replaced concern with the ideal and the universal. The condition was also reflected in the ***polis*** which had once served as focus for communal commitment, but was now perceived by the citizens merely as a source of private benefit.[5] The famous inaugural words uttered by a presidential leader in our own times, "Ask not what your country

can do for you, but what you can do for your country" could easily have been spoken to the Athenian citizenry around 340 B.C.E.

In fact, they were. The great orator, Demosthenes, tirelessly tried to rouse an apathetic Athens whose army and navy now was filled with paid mercenaries rather than the citizenry which had fought so well at Marathan, and whose Assembly was more interested in putting funds toward free seats at the theater than contributing to national defense in such a critical time.[6] He urged them to look beyond their own comfort by invoking the past:

> There was a spirit, men of Athens, a spirit in the minds of the people in those days that is absent today—that spirit which vanquished the wealth of Persia, which led Hellas in the path of freedom, and never gave way in the face of battle by sea or by land; a spirit whose extinction today has brought universal ruin and turned Hellas upside down.[7]

Demosthenes was at last able to move his fellow Athenians. But they had tarried too long. The Macedonian victory in 338 at Chaeronea completed Philip's conquest of Greece and marked the end of the free city-state. Upon Philip's death there followed the whirlwind of Alexander, and with it the Hellenization of the world. Though Athens lay defeated, never to return to her glory, the Greek cultural heritage would be spread east and west with Alexander's victories. He enlarged his father's conquests beyond imagining and with amazing speed. In the space of fifteen months he stamped out insurrection in Thessaly, razed Thebes, and eliminated the long-standing Persian menace. After he subdued Egypt he turned eastward and crossed into Asia through Afghanistan and on into India. Within eleven years the whole known world lay at his feet. The Greek states were now part of this new empire, which stretched from the Aegean to the Indus river basin. Had he lived longer perhaps Alexander would have solidified his holdings and created a more permanent order, for he sought a unified civilization where men could view each other as brothers.[8] As it was, he died at thirty-three and the new empire with him. The ensuing struggles among his generals created a maze of intrigues, temporary alliances, more strife and instability. Chunks of the empire were parceled out, then fought over. Such grasping and clawing, interspersed with periods of calm, would be the state of things until the triumph and consolidation of Rome in the first century B.C.E.

Epicurus

Epicurus was eighteen when Alexander died in 323, and had newly returned to Athens for the standard military duty. The great city-state fared badly during the latter half of the fourth century. At Alexander's death an Athenian revolt was

suppressed and a Macedonian guard stationed in the area. A large number of citizens were exiled, while only the rich were enfranchised. A period of relative peace ensued, but after a decade this collapsed with more quarreling among Alexander's former generals. From the time Epicurus returned to Athens to stay in 307 and until his death in 269 he lived among wars and uprisings. The Hellenistic Age was now in full decline. Bonnard sums up the scene well:

> In the public life of the cities, the parties or what remained of them fought for a semblance of power. Four times in Athens, the foreigner intervened, occupied the city, and modified a phantom constitution which was never put in force. Three times there were insurrections, four times the city stood a siege. Blood, fire, slaughter, pillage—such was the moment of Epicurus.[9]

Epicurus had not been born in Athens, but on the island of Samos where his father, a poor schoolmaster, had emigrated along with other Athenians during the "hard times" after the Macedonian conquest. Samos was a rugged, but lovely island, "such an island," as Henry Sedgewick puts it, "perhaps might influence a sensitive boy by the beauty of its contours, its sinuous beach along the sea, its flora, its temples, as much as the slope of Mount Pentelicus, and the view across the plain of Attica."[10] His first interest in philosophy came at age fourteen when his teachers were unable to answer his question about the origins of chaos. By eighteen, as we have noted, he had come to Athens and was admitted to citizenship, but had to flee almost immediately after. He joined his father's family which had been expelled from Samos during the Athenian uprising when the island was given back to its original inhabitants whom the Athenians had dispossessed.[11] For the next twelve years our information on Epicurus is scanty. He moved from place to place, reflecting, integrating his philosophical ideas and probably teaching. Somewhere in this space of time Epicurus discovered the inner secret to living which he was to later share with his friends. At age thirty he moved to Mytilene on the island of Lesbos where he found himself at odds with the followers of Plato and Aristotle, but also found a life-long friend in Hermarchus. Together they left the hostile atmosphere of Lesbos and moved to Lampsacus on the Hellespont where Epicurus began his own school of philosophy and initiated the friendships with Idomeneus, Leonteus and his wife, Themista, Polyaenus and Metrodorus which would endure to the end of his life.[12]

When in 307 the political situation had stabilized somewhat Epicurus returned to Athens with his pupil friends. But economic conditions had not improved. Slave labor had overtaken that of the free citizen, with society now polarized between the very rich landowners and the increasing number of poor—both slaves and freemen. The small landowner had been ruined by the

gradual concentration of wealth in fewer hands, while many of the families of those who had been free in former days were now destitute. For a time the government organized doles of food and wages, but the effort proved to be useless and eventually impossible since the state had become so poor it even had occasionally to suspend salaries for its own officials. Athens was forced to export her unemployed, but most of them could find nothing better to do then enlist in the armed bands that roamed through the Hellenistic world looting at random.[13]

Such was the society which Epicurus and his friends encountered—one where a disintegrating economy left existence very uncertain, and where the old idea of the complete life within the ***polis*** was little more than a memory. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that a new cult appeared, that of the goddess Tyche(Luck) since people saw life itself as a random affair. She would reign into the last days of the Roman Empire.

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Epicurean Withdrawal

All philosophers, no matter how abstract their thinking, are rooted in a living environment. Of no one is this more true than of Epicurus. Western philosophy itself had begun in the Aegean with speculation as to the real nature of the cosmos. It had advanced with the relentless ethical questioning of Socrates and reached a high point when Plato and Aristotle used an idealized Athens as backdrop for their great philosophical systems. By 307 B.C.E conditions had reached such a state of disintegration that a viable Athens wasn't even an ideal, it was but a vague dream. The revolution of Alexander had destroyed the elitist notion of the city-state. Now "barbarians," along with Greeks were incorporated into a cosmopolitan universe. But the immediate consequence was not so much a sense of world citizenship (though this would become central to the philosophy of Stoicism) as that of radical individualism set apart from traditional social bonds. Among Greeks this fragmentation was reflected in all areas of contemporary life from art to politics. The resulting sense of disillusionment made civic commitment impossible, even for the sake of practical gain. There was only a turning away from the outer world to seek some kind of comfort in the private realm.[14]

Thus, Epicurus, viewing the conditions of his own time in 307, could not opt, as did Socrates in his philosophy, to be the moral conscience of a dulled and misled citizenry. Nor would he write about an ideal society rooted in the ***polis*** which in effect no longer existed. Things were too far gone even for the mockery of a Diogenes.[15] Society was beyond reform, and Epicurus knew it. And since collective salvation was no longer possible in this new, fragmented

world one could only appeal to individuals. Bonnard muses: "Assuredly, this was a great retreat in Greek thought and civilization . . . But the pressure of misery and suffering was too heavy—men wanted simply to be saved, each one and now."[16]

Neither would Epicurus set out any other-worldly agenda as saviors often do during times of great difficulty. Even Plato had spoken of an afterlife where one's deeds were rewarded or punished through a transmigration of souls.[17] To Epicurus this solution seemed an escape from dealing with the here and now, and one guaranteed to cause even more anxiety. He was the most practical of all philosophers because he would teach and recommend a way of life immediately accessible to the troubled individual. According to Bonnard:

> The peculiar greatness of the philosophy of Epicurus was to offer, not like Plato and like Christianity, an escape into heaven, but a project for this earth. From this stems a wisdom that is eminently practical, but moves straight toward the goal he has most deeply at heart—the happiness of the individual.[18]

Such a goal may seem rather narrow when compared to the comprehensive philosophies of an Aristotle or a Plato, or Stoicism, for that matter. Nevertheless even commentators who have been critical of certain aspects of Epicurean philosophy, assure us that Epicurus had a perfect understanding of the times and of the men and women who lived in them. The Hellenistic scholar A.A. Long observes:

> At a time of political instability and private disillusionment, Epicurus saw that people like atoms are individuals and many of them wander in the void. He thought he could offer them directions suggested by evidence and reason to a way of being, a way of living, a way of relating to others, other individuals.[19]

What was that way, a way that could bring happiness in the midst of a disintegrating world? As we shall see, the teaching is a far cry from the stereotype of Epicureanism which has come down to us through the centuries. To appreciate the wisdom of that philosophy we need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that it represents a directive to live a superficial life of dissoluteness, gaining all the sensual pleasure one can in the words of the familiar cliche: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This desperate admonition represents a distortion of what is ultimately a most sensible, sane and healthy way to live at any time, but particularly in adverse circumstances. Yet, of all philosophies, Epicureanism has been the most maligned by other sects—Stoic, Jewish, and of course, Christian—for reasons that will become apparent.

The real Epicurus took issue with the troubles of his age by ***withdrawing***. He sought to create a living inner space where one could develop in the self what is most truly humane. And to find that inner realm he procured an external space, a physical refuge in the midst of the world. As Sedgwick puts it:

> He turned his back on religion and politics, and bought a garden where he gathered his friends and disciples about him and talked with them concerning right and wrong, concerning the means of avoiding pain and obtaining pleasure, and how to cultivate the art of life.[20]

A garden is the most humane of environments. If Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum have their analogues in the college or research institution, the community which Epicurus founded was more like a society of friends living according to common principles in retreat from civic life.[21] One must not think of the word "garden" in the American sense of a plot of ground on which to grow fruits and vegetables, but rather something more encompassing like an English garden or an enclosed arboretum with living quarters on sight. It lay outside of Athens to the northwest of the city and most probably was procured or at least managed with the financial aid of friends.[22] Within its walls they discussed a practical remedy for human ills because for Epicurus the whole purpose of being human was not merely to endure or submit to fate or even wait for another life, but to learn how to find tranquillity and happiness now. Paul Kristeller, in his 1989 lectures on Hellenistic philosophy, put it squarely:

> The center and goal of the philosophy of Epicurus is the tranquillity and serenity of the soul, which is the product of a concrete moral experience that is renewed and repeated every day in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. All the philosophical doctrines of Epicurus, including his epistemology and physics, are subordinate to this end.[23]

Within the fertile refuge of the garden estate Epicurus and his friends cultivated the fruits of philosophical wisdom. What follows is a daring prescription for dealing with an extremely troubled age.

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The Four Part Cure

Though Epicurus wrote voluminously, none of his major works has come down to us in its entirety. While we have some crucial primary documents, much of his teaching survives in abbreviated form and summaries.[24] The

most succinct expression ever given of Epicurus' teaching is found in a later Epicurean, Philademus of Gadora:

> Don't fear god(s),
> Don't worry about death;
> What is good is easy to get,
> What is terrible [painful] is easy to endure.[25]

These are striking words, and at first glance counter to human experience. Yet as the four parts are elucidated one by one we will see why Epicurean philosophy made such eminent sense for the members of his community.

Don't Fear God. For Epicurus the fundamental task of philosophy was practical: to relieve ***fear*** or ***anxiety*** which keep happiness and tranquillity from becoming paramount in our lives. Tranquillity can never be found as long as one believes that there are supernatural beings who involve themselves in our lives. The philosopher noted how his countrymen agonized about divine retribution, about petitioning and appeasing the gods (by this time mostly local gods). He saw enormous amounts of energy being sapped by these activities, yet no permanent satisfaction ever ensued. It seemed the gods were insatiable in their demands; or at least our anxieties in their regard never ceased. The result was a constant source of insecurity, a running hither and yon leading away from inner calm and peace.

Like any thorough physician Epicurus performed radical surgery; he took the step of cutting the cord completely between gods and men. At the same time, he did not deny that the gods existed. Both a consensus hominum and his philosophy of sensation allowed for their presence. His master-stroke was to deny them any concern or involvement with humankind. They exist, as the Greeks often said, in a state of perfect bliss and immortality, needing nothing, wanting nothing, asking nothing. Thus, they had no care for human sacrifices or prayers. To think differently is superstition and ignorance. We are left alone to our devices. At most, we should emulate the gods in their blessedness within the limits imposed by nature.[26]

The question of who made the world and its suitability for human habitation Epicurus answered by positing chance or accident—a response which earned him ridicule from critics in his own time, but which has a distinctively modern ring. Epicurus' philosophy of nature was rooted in the Atomism of the pre-Socratic, Democritus, who propounded the first coherent system of a universe governed by laws of matter (and energy). But Epicurus rejected the determinism of Democritus and taught a species of existentialism in regard to human action.[27] For it was the ethical implications of the theory that were important to Epicurus,

the conviction that one's life is one's own to live, that there is no superior being whose creature we are, no script for us to follow:

> That it's up to us to discover the real constraints which our nature imposes on us. When we do this, we find something very delightful: life is free, life is good, happiness is possible, and we can enjoy the bliss of the gods rather than abasing ourselves to our misconception of them.[28]

Thus, Epicurus eliminates one of the two chief causes for anxiety: Why fear the gods? It's a waste of time, they don't care. But he was wise in not denying their existence and in public respected people's religious observances, though in private he often pointed out their inconsistencies: "If God listened to the prayers of man," he said, "all men would have perished, for they are always praying for evil to fall on one another."[29] Epicurus had no desire to stir up the animosity of the multitudes which might shatter the quiet and peace of his community. But it was clear to him and his friends that it was less impious to deny the gods' existence than ascribe to them human attributes which cause evil and good in the world, and thus become a source for anxiety. By this time myth had lost its primal power:

> It is for this reason that we should make ourselves acquainted with the workings of nature in order to learn that the stories about the gods are myths, especially as many of these myths cause fear.[30]

Don't Worry About Death. Epicurus now sought to eradicate the second cause of anxiety, the fear of death itself. He did this not by denying the fact that we die, but by denying death's ability to hurt us in any way. Socrates had earlier argued at his trial that we should never fear death since it is one of two things: annihilation or a migration to another state of existence. If the former then it resembles a dreamless sleep which we know is painless and peaceful. If death is the latter then we continue our quest for truth and justice. Like Epicurus, Socrates simply refused to allow for bad things happening after death if one has lived a good life: " . . . this one belief, which is certain—that nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods."[31]

We really don't know for sure what happens after death. Thus, there is no cause for fear since it is irrational to fear the unknown. Unfortunately, most humans are not as supremely rational as Socrates and we fear the unknown for precisely that reason. The unknown, the uncertainty, is what causes such anxiety. Epicurus cancels out this fear by eliminating the unknown: "Get used

to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense experience and death is the privation of sense experience."[32] Epicurus teaches that only the first of Socrates' two options is the case. We simply cease to exist after death. Again, Epicurus' philosophy of nature comes into play. The soul is not incorporeal—it is similar to the body, only much more finely composed. Body and soul are inextricably joined, and when the body dissolves the soul dissolves with it, thus eliminating the possibility of retribution after death.[33]

Epicurus' teaching here can be compared to the Buddhist doctrine of "no soul" (Anatta) according to which the idea of an individual soul or self subsisting after death is a projection created out of the ego's need for self-preservation. In fact, Buddhist teaching comes very close in places to Epicurean philosophy of nature or sensation. Buddha said that it is better for one to take his or her physical body as a self rather than mind, thought or consciousness, because the former seems more solid than the latter which change constantly day and night faster than the body. Yet if this physical body dissolves at death how much more mind, thought, consciousness which is fleeting even now.[34]

The problem here, of course, is not that of being dead, a state in which there is simply no existence, but rather the realization ***while we are living*** that death will be the end of us. It is the thought and fear of annihilation that causes acute anxiety in human beings. This would be even more true in societies where individualism is emphasized over social bonding. Such was certainly the case in Epicurus' time where the social fabric had been fragmented and individuals were on their own. Yet his teaching moves directly into the teeth of such anxieties, the straightest road to the truth of our situation—sheer common sense:

> Thus he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present, but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist.[35]

What Epicurus summons for his followers is a presence of mind which is constant, one that scatters phantoms and false imaginings while letting in the clear sunlight of reality. What is here now, Epicurus says, is life itself and it should be enjoyed. Eliminating fear both of the gods and death allows one to do so while one lives. This to him is the only wisdom.

It should also be pointed out that the modern perception of death as the most personal and lonely of experiences did not exist in Greek thought. Neither

the Greeks nor the Romans had a concept of the ego in the sense that we do. Thus, the intense fear amounting to panic with which the ego contemplates its own demise would not have occurred to them.[36] Nevertheless, the loss of an integrating social fabric in the ***polis*** would have thrown people back upon themselves in ways unfamiliar to them. So the availability of a meaningful communal life such as the one Epicurus supplied would be crucial to the more sensitive.

What Is Good Is Easy To Get. Epicurus' teaching on pleasure is at the core of his philosophy and illuminates all the other aspects. At the same time, it has led to unfortunate misinterpretation. For all the Greek philosophers the goal of human life is to be happy.[37] The word ***eudaimonia*** is impossible to render into English with all its nuances. The closest we can come is perhaps the notion of "that which enhances life," "health giving" or that overall well-being which ensues when our faculties or natural powers fulfill their ends. To be happy in this sense is to be richly alive.[38]

For Epicurus the essential element in happiness was ***pleasure***. For other philosophers pleasure is a indirect effect of using one's faculties well. But Epicurus taught that pleasure is to be directly sought, or more properly, absence of pain and emotional turbulence. Pleasure prudently sought and enjoyed constitutes the sweet, pleasant life—what Lucretius called the "jucundus sensus." Epicurus said that in so far as we can freely choose "one should always take the path that leads to pleasure."[39] For this is natural to the human organism and what is natural can never be wrong. Man is born for joy, and when obstacles to that joy are removed it will come up in us like a pure spring.[40]

The Epicurean notion of pleasure is not what we understand when we use the term one-dimensionally. For it is both subtle and refined, beginning with the physical and reaching to the highest mental states. Thus, it is all-inclusive. Hedonism (***hedone***) does not mean the wild pleasures of orgiastic experience which Epicurus eschews:

> When we say that pleasure is the end of life, we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate, or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul.[41]

So much for traditional views of Epicureanism. At this point it becomes apparent that the term "Hedonistic ethics" is not a contradiction. Pleasure will be rationally sought in line with what brings tranquillity of soul(***ataraxia***). For the good life is one of balance. Thus, a kind of prudence or foresight, even wisdom, accrues in the choosing of pleasure. Sedgwick has put it well:

> Wisdom, the wise exercise of choice and avoidance, depends upon knowledge; the wider and deeper our knowledge, the more likely we are to make wise choices and wise avoidances.[42]

What we view here is a discipline that had to be gradually learned and practiced through the teaching and example of a master. Philosophy for an Epicurean community is an integral way of life, a life brought into clearer focus through the eradication of false beliefs.[43]

Discernment in Desire:

Epicurus begins by taking into account human desires and classifies them on three levels: those that are natural and necessary (basic); those that are natural, but not necessary (optional); those that are neither natural or necessary (groundless or empty). The first must be satisfied; the second can be satisfied if they foster health of body and tranquillity of spirit; the third are to be avoided at all costs because while they may provide immediate enjoyment, they bring in their wake pains and vexation of every sort. Thus, we must learn to choose well, to calculate what is necessary to, or at least in keeping with happiness, to learn discernment in regard to fulfillment of desires:

> The unwavering contemplation of these enables one to refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from disturbance, since this is the goal of the blessed life.[44]

The implications of Epicurean teaching here are twofold: First, one can find the most pleasure and tranquillity if he or she fulfills those desires which are natural and moderate. Thus, a simple life of frugality is the best since ***basic*** desires are most easily satisfied and deal with the most available things—food, drink, adequate shelter, safety from hostile invasion, and so on. Epicurus praised this kind of life and lived it himself:

> Therefore, becoming accustomed to simple, not extravagant, ways of life makes one completely healthy, makes a man unhesitant in the face of life's necessary duties, puts us in better condition for the times of extravagance which occasionally come along, and makes us fearless in the face of chance.[45]

Secondly, a frugal life allows one more self-sufficiency and hence, a genuine inner freedom regardless of external circumstances. Indeed, the master said that self-sufficiency is the greatest of all riches because it brings freedom, as well as a diminishing vulnerability to the randomness of the outside world:

> The man who has made the best arrangements for confidence about external threats is he who has made the manageable things akin to himself, and has at least made the unmanageable things not alien to himself.[46]

It should be clear why the philosophy of Epicurus was so adaptable to individuals living in very troubled times. One could take refuge with others of like mind in a small living space, find human companionship there, enjoy the basic necessities; and in so doing be in charge of one's life no matter what the external conditions. One was no longer a lost atom wandering in the void with no compass or direction. One had what is needed to be happy. "What is good is easy to get."

More than anything, one had the supreme pleasure of using the senses to see and enfold the world around us. For Epicurus the life of the senses was not, as in Plato, a shadow of some higher, more permanent type of existence, but rather a life in itself which revealed the riches of the world to the alert observer regardless of circumstance. Perhaps it's because Epicurus grew up on Samos with all of its lovely variety or lived for a time in the village of Gargettus on the slope of Mt. Pentelicus where, as Sedgwick says, "one could see the Attic plain wrap itself in a violet mist at twilight" that he was so moved by the delights of nature.[47] Whatever the case, he found the enrichment of the senses, the contemplation of natural beauty, pleasure enough for any human being. And it was all free. Bonnard has called this Epicurus' boldest step, his most striking act of deliverance:

> Nothing could be simpler; he seems to take us by the hand and say, "Look around you at the world, look at it in the light of the all illuminating sun . . ." "Look," he says, "open your eyes and listen to the voices of nature . . . this world of sense which enfolds you multiform, authentic, irrefutably proven, this world which will last as long as you do—what will you believe in, if you do not believe in this unique and self-evident reality?"[48]

What could be more sensible and obvious! "Our basic grasps are clear."[49]

And in the soft beauty of the Garden. Within its walls, Epicurus and his companions experienced sensual delights of every kind, where nature presented herself in endless array of fruit and flower. One must perhaps be a gardener to know the pleasures that both tending and contemplation bring, how such activity is both limiting and liberating. One could argue that civilization reaches its apogee of form, not in great buildings or works of art, but in its well cared for gardens. One can never be at war or argue with his neighbor and garden at the

same time. With its sundry and controlled fruits the garden is an analogue for wisdom. And friendship prospers in the shadow of the garden walls.

The Bond of Friendship:

It was human companionship that knitted together the golden web of Epicurus' philosophy. He authored the wonderful phrase: "Friendship dances around the world announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness."[50] Epicurus had put his finger on the quality that makes civilized life most precious to us—the nurturing of mutual regard and affection among true friends. Epicureans became famous in antiquity for the quality of their friendships. Even Plutarch, who in other matters was quite critical of Epicurus (for biased reasons), commented that "it is marvelous how Epicurus' brothers loved him."[51] Life never seems richer than when we exist amid a circle of mutual, caring friends. Bacon has said in his famous essay "On Friendship" that solitude is miserable if it wants true friends, "without which the world is but a wilderness."[52] Epicurean teaching makes clear the indispensability of friendship for pleasure in this passage from Cicero:

> Without friendship it is not possible for us to have solid enduring pleasure, and we cannot conserve friendship unless we love ourselves, and this we do in friendship and therefore friendship is bound up with pleasure.[53]

The identification with one's friend as another self will show itself during the Renaissance in Montaigne's feelings for La Boetie. But in the case of Epicurus it extends to more than one friend, rather to a circle of friends—the community itself is a circle of friendship. And the lengths to which the bond of friendship is willing to go can be illustrated in this remark from the Vatican Collection of Epicurus' sayings:

> The wise man feels no more pain when he is tortured than when his friend is tortured, and will die on his behalf; for if he betrays his friend, his entire life will be confounded and utterly upset because of a lack of confidence.[54]

The equating of loyalty in friendship to life itself perhaps explains why Epicurean communities were so unique and long—lasting.

The glue of friendship, of course, has always been conversation as opposed to mere talk; just as dining which mixes food with companionship is opposed to mere eating, a solitary activity. It should be noted that conversation through discussion was vital to Greek life in ways we can't understand today. The Assembly in the ***polis*** carried on endless debates in regard to decisions needing to be made. Plato

himself always wrote dialogues; it was through discussion that Socrates sought to know the nature of virtue and justice, how they came about. He sought to define things by a process of dialectic in which discussants searched together for the truth. So, too, Epicurus and his friends conversed, not in an agonistic way, but to rejoice in the life they shared. One sees a similarity here to the tenor of early Christianity, and indeed Bonnard points out that some of Epicurus' letters to young people have the tone of Paul's letters to the Romans and Corinthians.[55] Letter writing, a rather new genre, was important for Epicurean communities who were isolated from one another, and the extent letters of Epicurus show an engaging warmth and intimacy when they expound on the teachings or give practical advice and encouragement.[56] In fact, his last letter written on his deathbed fondly recalls the conversations which friendship had brought.

In his introduction to ***The Epicurean Reader***, D.S. Hutchinson points out that we know very little about the exact organization of Epicurean communities except that they did not require their members to give their private property to the commune and that they probably involved regular discussions of Epicurean philosophy. Thus, friendship and philosophy were the greatest resources available "to help us live our lives in confidence and without anxiety."[57] From the loyalty and devotion of Epicurus' followers we can gather some idea of the consolation they must have shared. This was an alternative to a dismantled city-state, a refuge where master and disciples could in common cultivate a life whose centerpiece was humane and enduring friendship. Only in such a life, Bonnard declares could human life find healing:

> So friendship was wisdom itself, not simply the means to wisdom. It was in the heart-to-heart dialogue of the master with disciples that they would find at last the peace of soul which was not merely "atarxia" (freedom from what disturbs), but full serenity, perfect bliss and supreme harmony.[58]

Epicurean communities, unlike the Pythagorian associations or Plato's Academy, were not restricted to men. Against the social norm, they were open to anyone desiring a life of "atarxia." We know from surviving letters that women and even household servants lived on equal terms with men. Both wives of disciples and friends who were known as "free women" were welcomed into the community. Even some women who had been slaves were admitted to the group—a victory, as Bonnard points out, over that most tenacious ancient prejudice, one brought about by equality in friendship.[59] Naturally, since it went against the social norm of the time, allowing women into the community led to scandalous rumors spread by those hostile to the Epicurean philosophy. This, coupled with Epicurus' emphasis on bodily satisfaction as the basic form of pleasure, could add fuel to tales of orgies in the Garden.[60]

Yet, Epicurus was in no way a libertine in regard to sex. He advocated marriage and family for those who were ready. And in fact, true to his teachings on desire, he distrusted sexual love, not because he found anything intrinsically wrong with it, but because initial pleasure so often led to immoderate desires and unnecessary entanglements.[61] For this reason it was far inferior to friendship. Thus, again we observe the difference between the stereotype of Epicureanism and the real nature of those communities.

Social Implications:

The Epicurean social ethic flows from an existence free of anxieties and immoderate strivings. When we eliminate, or at least reduce these, and attend to our own authentic needs we do good to ourselves. Such behavior is opposed to an altruistic attitude which puts the good of society before the individual. Yet when the individual finds inner peace he or she cannot help but indirectly benefit others. Actually, the two are coextensive. Thus, the maxim, "He who is free from disturbance within himself also causes no trouble for another."[62] We must remember, also, that the idea of social commitment beyond the circle of friends had long since died out by this time in Hellenic Greece—just as it seems to be dying out today.

Justice, for Epicureans, was based on a "naturalistic" contract forged through mutual promise. When that contract is not present, then neither justice nor injustice exist (an anticipation of Hobbes and Rousseau here.)[63] In the Epicurean community justice was the outcome of agreement since that agreement itself comes from an untroubled life and freedom from pain. The wise person resists all those entanglements in the larger world that cause upset or confusion, which means he or she will especially prefer a hidden life (***lathe biosas***) and avoid publicity, seeking refreshment and solace with members of the community. The quiet life, away from the public realm, is essential to the Epicurean philosophy:

> The master said, ***Lathe biosas***, live unknown. We must free ourselves from the prison of affairs and politics. Both affairs and politics involve competition, which means contention, rivalry, the fanning of prejudice, the suppression of truth, the exaltation of partisanship, and an appeal to the many who are the least fitted to judge.[64]

Within this ambit even the goddess Tyche casts a very limited net, as the following maxim of Epicurus shows:

> Chance has small impact on the wise man, while reasoning has arranged for, is arranging for and will arrange for, the greatest and most important matters throughout the whole of his life.[65]

What Is Terrible Is Easy To Endure. Finally, we come to the fourth of the brief maxims and the one that seems most counter to human experience. Given what has gone before, it would be easy to view Epicurus as one of those fortunate individuals who lived a life relatively free from the physical suffering that assails most of us, a man like Socrates, of robust health and natural vigor. Thus, it would be easy for him to espouse a life of bodily pleasure free of pain since he had so little experience with it himself.

Yet, looking at what is known of his life we are startled to find the exact opposite to be true. Epicurus was apparently ill from the time he was young with a stomach and bladder disorder that had no known cure.[66] As he was sensitive to sensual beauty, so too, he was probably equally sensitive to physical pain. He had to come to terms early with his condition and it helped shape his philosophy. Bonnard sees a kind of preparatory ascesis, as with many great spirits, one taking place over more than a decade: "Slowly, he shaped his doctrine: twelve years of solitary meditation, with his cruel bladder trouble, twelve years of frugal living, and he began to teach."[67] Seen in this light, Epicurus' teaching has an integrity that would be lacking had he not been forced to address his own physical pain. His experience of joy "had been wrested from the day to day pain of his body."[68]

The actual teaching on bearing with difficulty is again straightforward. Epicurus does not deny that illness and pain are disagreeable, but says that the discomfort we experience is either brief or chronic, mild or intense. For suffering to be both chronic and intense is unusual: "Every pain is easy to despise. For [pains] which produce great distress are short in duration; and those which last for a long time in the flesh cause only mild distress."[69] Consequently, we need have no anxiety with the prospect of unbearable suffering; it can be endured and thus need not interfere with tranquillity of soul.

The alert reader will probably find two problems with this reasoning. The first is in regard to the words "easily endured." We are not accustomed to viewing pain, especially persistent chronic pain, in this manner. Chronic pain which is more than just a nuisance lowers the quality of life for most of us. Simply put, there is a definite difference between living with pain and a life relatively free of pain. It is hard to see how one could equate them, especially in espousing a philosophy based on pleasure. However, one must remember that the overriding good Epicurus sought to procure for himself and his disciples was "ataraxia"—freedom from disturbance. And this ultimately involved a mental adjustment, the kind of coming to terms with things that creates psychic equilibrium. A life of healthy frugality spent among caring friends would most likely reduce the physical factor, especially when one considers the many ways life can still be enjoyed. Perhaps, one has to have spent some time coping with chronic pain to decide whether the proper mental attitude enables one to live in a way that does not substantially reduce the enjoyment of life. At least it

became possible for Epicurus. Here the Epicurean doctrine resembles the Stoic philosophy regarding endurance under adversity.[70]

But Epicurus' reflections on pain are actually more subtle than this:

> The feeling of pain does not linger continuously in the flesh; rather the sharpest is present for the shortest time, while what merely exceeds the feelings of pleasure in the flesh lasts only a few days. And diseases which last a long time involve feelings of pleasure which exceed feelings of pain.(71)

I think the underlying point here is that the experience of pleasure is one that is natural to our beings, a part of that ***eudaimonia*** which for the Greek philosophers was the purpose of human living, that for which we are made—and the interruption of that natural functioning by ***dis***ease (an interesting word), whether in body, or psyche, is bound to be temporary since the organism seeks to return to its natural state as water seeks its own level. It does so by overcoming pain with pleasure: "Whenever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together."[72] Adjusting to one's circumstances reintroduces pleasure into the equation and thus goes beyond the Stoic admonition of mere endurance.

Still, one has to seriously wonder whether such an argument adequately addresses the issue of chronic pain which can infiltrate one's being to such an extent that we find ourselves in a state which seems endless. Emily Dickinson's striking verse puts the matter well:

> Pain—has an Element of Blank—
> It cannot recollect
> When it begun—or if there were
> A time when it was not.[73]

Those who suffer from chronic pain—whether it be that of severe arthritis or from a injury too deep and destructive to have allowed adequate healing—know all too well how it can come to dominate one's existence. Surely, Epicurus himself was familiar with this kind of chronic pain. Whether his solution to the problem is adequate enough to create the equilibrium necessary for ***atarxia*** is open to question, at least in our time.

It must also be pointed out, however, that pain is never purely physical, and physical pain is always endured within a particular culture where attitudes toward pain are as important as the pain itself. As David B. Morris has put it in his excellent study, ***The Culture of Pain***, "Pain is never simply a matter of nerves and neurotransmitters, but always requires a personal and cultural encounter with meaning."[74] Our minds and cultures continually reconstruct the

experience of pain for which we must look beyond the medicine cabinet. We know that in our own time we have so split off the body from the mind that we tend to rely entirely on physical medicines and if they fail to provide relief we are often at a loss to cope with the pain. Whereas in cultures that hold a more integrated view of mind and body other "voices" than the purely medical can help us interpret pain. Morris points out that pain exists only as we perceive it. If you shut down the mind then the pain also stops. He continues:

> Change the mind (powerfully enough) and it may well be that pain too changes. When we recognize that the experience of pain is not timeless but changing, the product of specific periods and particular cultures, we may also recognize that we can ***act*** to change or influence our own futures.[75]

So though we may find Epicurus' statements incredible by the standards of our own culture, we must remember that he is speaking out of the context of his own times where one's attitude toward pain may reveal a dimension we have indeed lost.[76] Even in our own times we have the witness of individuals like Victor Frankl, the Viennese psychotherapist, who found meaning and a degree of equanimity in his three years of continual suffering in a German concentration camp during World War II. It was a victory accomplished by the kind of huge mental adjustment mentioned above, though Frankl also relates that many other prisoners were either incapable or simply unwilling to make such an adjustment.[77]

The second problem in regard to pain lies with the issue of intense or sharp pain. Is such pain by its very nature brief (or at least intermittent) as Epicurus says? We certainly know a lot more about pain today. In the medical field journals exist devoted entirely to the subject.[78] The upshot of the research indicates that pain, even acute pain, is highly subjective. People have differing thresholds; what is intense for one person may not be so for another. I recall a doctor friend telling me of how an old Estonian woman who had had her belly cut all the way around for a kidney removal, when asked how she felt the next day, astounded the doctors by sitting up and taking two deep breaths without any apparent pain.

Still, people can be driven out of their minds with severe pain, or pain can become so unbearable that we black out. In this sense its duration is short. Perhaps one could interpret Epicurus' statement of brevity in this manner. We know this from people who have experienced torture. Of course, more sophisticated torturers will bring a person right to their threshold, then stop and repeat the process again and again. But the question remains whether intense pain is by its very nature short in duration. Epicurus says it is. Again, intense

pain may be different than unbearable pain which is brief simply because it can't be borne continuously. We do know that Epicurus himself died in excruciating pain from kidney failure after two weeks of pain caused by kidney stones. Anyone who has endured the passing of kidney stones can verify the painfulness of this condition, as we will see with Montaigne. Perhaps the greatest validation of Epicurus' teaching was given by the cheerful manner in which he died, as attested to in his last formal letter to his friend, Idomeneus:

> On this last, yet blessed day of my life, I write to you. Pains and tortures of body I have to the full, but there is set over against these the joy of my heart at the memory of our happy conversations in the past. Do you, if you would be worthy of your devotion to me and philosophy, take care of the children of Metrodorus.[79]

Epicurus equalized his suffering and death with the memory of active friendship, and his solicitation for the young at such a point in his life is touching. He seems to have died in the happy state that his philosophy had secured.

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Impact of Teachings

Thus, we have the basic teachings of Epicurus, bolstered by a life that left its mark on others for centuries to come. It is true that other philosophical schools existed in antiquity, all based on bonds formed between men who accepted the guidance of a master. But the bonds formed in the Epicurean communities were of a special order. First of all, they were neither elitist nor exclusive to males. Second, as we have seen, even those hostile to the philosophy admitted that Epicureans maintained an allegiance to the teachings that other schools could not match. Hutchinson tells us that Epicureans almost never switched their allegiance to other schools while they, in turn, regularly lost students to the Epicureans.[80] Thirdly, the communities lasted for five hundred years until the end of antiquity and claimed thousands of followers in the Mediterranean world.

Though of exceedingly gentle disposition, Epicurus did not hesitate to lash out against rival schools. But this was a common practice, and as Howard Jones points out, must be taken within the context of the times. Philosophy during the Hellenic period was a competitive profession in which a place was reserved for invective. Patrons and pupils were important for financial support and while Epicurus lived he did not allow criticisms against his community or teachings to go unanswered.[81] In this he was very much a man of his times. But within the Garden, away from the stressful atmosphere of a troubled society, Epicurus never

used his rhetorical tools as weapons to create animosity or strife. A gentleness emanated from him and in all things he was a caring master and friend.[82]

Criticisms of Epicureanism

In the light of the real teachings we can readily dismiss that perennial critique of Epicureanism—profligacy. However, there are two other criticisms we need to address which are based on a truer assessment of the philosophy. The first of these is that the teachings, when properly understood, allow for too meager an existence to be appealing to most people. The pleasure Epicurus advocates, one of reflective calculation, pales in comparison with the richness of life that is possible for those who have the courage to explore the extremes. In wishing to create ***ataraxia***, to diminish the friction of life to a minimum, one cuts out many of life's greatest pleasures, regardless of whether we must pay for those pleasures afterward. As Sedgwick has put it, there is a touch of renunciation in the air; pleasure is whittled down too much. Epicurean frugality is actually more akin to the Stoic teaching on virtue.[83]

Yet to those sensitive souls living in the chaos and uncertainty of the larger world the appeal of a philosophy that observes boundaries and moderation in life's pleasures would be great. Epicurus called for a disciplined sensuality, for cultivating happiness as an art in order to procure true enjoyment.[84] The metaphor of a Garden is most appropriate, for it too must be tended, pruned and cared for so one can control, and thus improve, the quality of one's fruits. Having done so we can enjoy their bounty. But always within limits, for Epicurus—ever the realist—said that time, pleasure, life itself, are limited. And philosophical reflection alone can create this moderating force. Within such limitation dwells a special kind of fulfillment, as the following difficult passage illustrates:

> The flesh took the limits of pleasure to be unlimited and [only] an unlimited time would have provided it. But the intellect, reasoning out the goal and limit of the flesh and dissolving the fears of eternity, provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited time.[85]

Such is the kind of thoughtful skill in living required by the Epicurean philosophy, especially in the darkest of times.

All the stranger, then, that Epicureanism has been considered immoral and reprehensible through the centuries down to our time. More vituperation has been visited upon this philosophy than on any other in the history of the West. The Stoics were the first, then Platonic Idealists, later Judaism and, finally Christianity, energized initially by the condemnation of the Church fathers during the first four centuries of the Christian era. According to Sedgewick the

cause of such hostility lay not only in a distortion of the original teaching, but in the Epicurean doctrine of ***moral egoism*** which even upon an accurate reading of Epicurus and his disciples cannot be denied. Moral egoism has always had a bad press when compared to the "noble selfishness" of altruism propounded by Western religious and philosophical morality.[86] An entire social code has embraced us over the centuries requiring that we sacrifice our individual desires to the common good—which can often mean social control. Yet our attempts to fit into this system have not brought happiness or a more qualitative life. We have only the satisfaction that we have "done our duty." Rather, it seems we have been slowly ground down by a leveling process masquerading as social obligation, only to be replaced in our time by a bogus individualism which neither liberates nor ennobles—especially since it springs from instruments of social control like the media which enslave us to a new conformity. Authentic individuality is more rare, and arises from a healthy self-respect and an interest in genuine self-development.

Mass production in the twentieth century has insured social conformity in ways the earlier proponents of altruism could not have envisioned. Sedgwick notes that Epicurus himself could not have foreseen all the consequences of altruism, but even in his time he sensed the danger. So he preached the virtues of egoism "by teaching the duty of the individual to fulfill the purpose of his life and give it a meaning through the attainment of personal happiness."[87] As we have seen, a person who is truly happy cannot but share that pleasure with friends and associates. Might our society be an altogether more pleasant one if we were taught early on to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit needs, and then attend to the former? Thus, moral egoism, for all its negative press, may not be such a bad thing after all. It is true that egoism and altruism may coincide regarding certain aspects of behavior. But, when they disagree as they often do Epicurus teaches that one should not hesitate to choose the former since it is more intrinsic to our nature.[88] This kind of hedonistic ethic is altogether different than the superficial practice of "doing one's thing" which has been much in the air during our time. Seeking a life of imperturbability through the disciplining of one's pleasure is moral egoism guided by intelligence—not an easy goal to achieve in any age.[89]

The poet, Lucretius, who lived in Roman times, was perhaps Epicurus' most eloquent spokesman. His long epic poem ***De Rerum Natura*** is the most expansive treatment of the philosophy of Epicurus that we have. He delivered the following peon to the master:

> . . . he was a god, a god I say, who first disclosed that principle of life we now call wisdom, and who by his skill rescued us from the

> seas that engulfed us and the thick darkness and brought us into still waters and a clear light.[90]

Such was the refuge provided individuals until the end of antiquity. And then, as Bonnard puts it, "Epicureanism fell asleep for a long time to come."[91] The gods came back down into human affairs and death once again gave out her calling card.