Great Philosophers 2
Lucretius
c.94-55 BCE
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Lucretius

Author of the philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) (c.50 BCE), a book-length exposition and defense of the philosophy of Epicurus of Samos (c.341-270 BCE).

Epicureanism was one of the three main schools of philosophy in the Hellenistic period (323-31 BCE)

306 BCE – Epicurus founds the Garden in Athens

Since most of Epicurus’ own writings have been lost, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* has immense scholarly value as the most extensive source on Epicurean philosophy currently available to us.
Attitudes towards Epicurus among his followers

“He was a god, a god indeed, who first discovered this way of living life that we now call Philosophy” (DRN, V. 8-10).
Epicurean Ethics

The promise of Epicureanism – to help us achieve a life so full of pleasure and free from distress and anxiety that we “might contend even with Zeus for happiness” (Vatican Sayings, 33).

Ethical Hedonism

Pleasure (ἡδονή/hedone) is the only thing that is intrinsically valuable. Other things (e.g., knowledge, virtue, friendship, and philosophy) may have value, but only insofar as they contribute to pleasure. Whatever value they have is thus merely instrumental.

Psychological Hedonism

All human action is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure for oneself.
Epicurean Ethics

Ethical Hedonism + Psychological Hedonism

**Ethical hedonism:** Since pleasure alone is intrinsically valuable, we *ought* always to pursue pleasure (whether we in fact do so or not).
[Normative claim]

**Psychological hedonism:** Our nature is such that we always *do* pursue pleasure (whether we ought to or not).
[Descriptive claim]

Pleasure both *is* and *ought to be* the ultimate goal of all our actions. We fall short of this goal largely because of mistaken beliefs about how best to achieve it and groundless fears that produce needless anxiety and disturb our peace of mind.
Epicurean Ethics

The Good News

Since most of the impediments to pleasure derive not from external accidents of fate or misfortunes that lie beyond our control, but rather from our own mistaken beliefs, we can achieve the good life by simply ridding our minds of those harmful and groundless beliefs that serve only to make our lives less pleasant than they need be.

The value of Epicureanism lies in its purported ability to help us carry out this task.
Epicurean conception of pleasure

Negative characterization
Pleasure is the absence of pain; a combined state of freedom from mental disturbance (ἄταραξία/ataraxia) and freedom from bodily distress (ἀπονία/aponia).

“The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures” (PD, 3).

Positive characterization
The ideal state of pleasure consists in (a) the awareness of having achieved a state of freedom from pain in the present, (b) a well-founded confidence that one will be able to maintain this state in the future, and (c) a feeling of gratitude for the pleasures one has experienced in the past.

Friendship is essential to (b).

(c) can help make times of distress more bearable.

“I write this to you while experiencing a blessedly happy day, and at the same time the last day of my life. Urinary blockages and dysenteric discomforts afflict me which could not be surpassed for their intensity. But against all these things are ranged the joy in my soul produced by the recollection of the discussions we have had” (Diogenes Laertius 10.22).
Impediments to a life of maximum pleasure

1. The mistaken belief that satisfying or attempting to satisfy various unnecessary and unnatural/empty desires will help us achieve happiness.

2. The mistaken belief that the gods are concerned with how we live our lives, and will punish or reward us depending on whether or not we comply with their wishes.

3. The mistaken belief that death is harmful and thus something to be feared.
The Four-part Cure

“Don’t fear god,
Don’t worry about death;
What is good is easy to get, and
What is terrible is easy to endure.”
(Philodemus, *Pherc* 1005, 4.9-14)
Impediment 1: Unnecessary desires

Since the ideal state of pleasure is thought by Epicureans to consist primarily in freedom from distress, and distress is thought by them to result from unsatisfied desires, desire understandably occupies a central place in Epicurean ethical psychology.

When we have desires that go unsatisfied, and thus fail to get what we want, this pains us. To avoid such suffering, we must, for each of our desires, either (a) ensure that we are reliably able to satisfy it, or (b) rid ourselves of that desire, so that we are no longer at risk of suffering when it goes unsatisfied.
Epicurean Taxonomy of Desire

1. **Natural and necessary desires** – desires that are innate and necessary for our survival or happiness.
   
   e.g. desire for food, shelter, warmth.

2. **Natural but unnecessary desires** – desires that are natural to us, but directed towards things that are not necessary for our survival or happiness.
   
   e.g. sexual urges, desire for fancy food, expensive clothes, an unnecessarily large house.

3. **Unnatural/groundless desires** – desires that are not innate, but acquired through a process of social conditioning whereby we come to see the possession of certain unnecessary things as essential to our happiness.
   
   e.g. the desire for wealth, power, or fame.

“I am grateful to blessed Nature, because she made what is necessary easy to acquire and what is hard to acquire unnecessary” (Stobaeus, 3.17.22).
Ascetic hedonism

Contrary to the popular conception of the hedonist lifestyle, for the Epicureans, the path to greatest pleasure consists primarily in minimizing rather than gratifying our desires, so that we may rest calm in the assurance that the few desires we retain will be easily satisfied.

“O miserable minds of men! O hearts that cannot see! Beset by such great dangers in such obscurity you spend your little lot of life! Don’t you know it’s plain that all your nature yelps for is a body free from pain, and, to enjoy pleasure, a mind removed from fear and care? And so we see the body’s needs are altogether spare – only the bare minimum to keep suffering at bay, yet which can furnish pleasures for us in wide array” (DRN II. 15-22).
...but hedonism nevertheless!

Still, for the Epicureans, all pleasures are intrinsically good, even those that derive from the satisfaction of unnecessary desires. It is just that some pleasures are more dangerous than others, in that by indulging in them, we are prone to develop an unnecessary desire to experience similar pleasures in the future, thereby making it more difficult for us to maintain a state of mental tranquility.

“I spit upon the pleasures of extravagance, not for their own sake, but because of the difficulties which follow from them” (Stobaeus, 3.17.33).

“No pleasure is a bad thing in itself. But the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasures” (PD, 8).

“[B]ecoming accustomed to simple, not extravagant, ways of life...puts us in a better condition for the times of extravagance which occasionally come along” (Letter to Menoeceus, 131).
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Epicurean Physics/Metaphysics

Materialist metaphysics
All that exists are (or are composed of) atoms and void; i.e., tiny, solid, indivisible bits of matter, and the empty space through which they move.
Atoms are infinite in number, and the void is infinite in spatial extent.
The movement of each atom through the void is determined entirely by (a) its own natural downward motion (deriving from its weight), (b) the “blows” it receives upon making contact with other atoms, and (c) certain unpredictable/random “swerves” in its trajectory.
The mind is a certain system of atoms located in the body.

Empiricist epistemology
All knowledge (including knowledge of the aforementioned metaphysical principles) is derived from the senses.
The “swerve”

Lucretius postulates a random “swerve” in the motion of atoms (a) to ensure that atoms will come into contact with one another, and (b) to allow for the existence of free will.

“[W]hen bodies fall through empty space straight down, under their own weight, at a random time and place, they swerve a little. Just enough of a swerve for you to call it a change of course. Unless inclined to swerve, all things would fall right through the deep abyss like drops of rain. There would be no collisions, and no atom would meet atom with a blow, and Nature thus could not have fashioned anything, full stop” (DRN, II. 217-23).

“Again, if every motion is connected, and we hold new motions that arise, arise in due course from the old, and atoms do not swerve a little and initiate the kind of motion which in turn shatters the laws of fate...where does that freewill come from that exists in every creature the world over?” (DRN, II. 251-7).
The “swerve”

Questions about the adequacy of Lucretius’ solution to the problem of free will:

Are we able to produce the swerves that initiate our free actions at will?

If not, then how does positing such swerves make us any freer than we were before?

If so, then (a) how exactly are our desires and intentions able to initiate these swerves, (b) how is this to be made consistent with the claim that the swerves are “random”, and (c) what caused us to have those desires and intentions in the first place?
Impediment 2: Fear of the Gods

Solution: Rejection of Divine Teleology

Since all atomic motions can be fully accounted for without any appeal to divine intentions, and all objects in nature are made up entirely of atoms, it follows that all natural phenomena can be explained without any reference to the plans or intentions of a deity. It is thus mistaken to conceive of the gods as having any influence over, or indeed any interest in, human affairs.

“Nature, rid of harsh taskmasters, all at once is free, and everything she does, does on her own, so that gods play no part” (*DRN*, II. 1091-3).

Acceptance of this view of nature as free from the governing influence of divine intentions and driven solely by the mindless motion of atoms in the void was thought by the Epicureans to cure us of the fear that we might fail to live up to divine expectations and would consequently be punished by the gods in this life or the next.
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Materialist Theory of Mind

The Argument from Mental Causation

1. The mind causally interacts with the body.
2. Nothing can causally interact with a body unless it is itself material.
3. Therefore, the mind is material.

“[T]he nature of the mind...is a physical one – for [it] propel[s] the limbs,...and change[s] the expressions of the face, and steer[s] and govern all the range of movement in a person, [and] it is obvious that such actions can be brought about only by means of touch. And since what ‘touches’ must be material, isn’t it true, that mind...must be physical in nature too?” (DRN, III. 161-8).
The Mortality of the Soul

The mind or soul is composed entirely of atoms. Thus, like any other complex body made up of atoms, it too is subject to dissolution when the atoms that constitute it break apart from one another and go their separate ways. This is precisely what happens to us when we die.

“Thus when the body is destroyed, you must admit the soul passes away, shredded through the body as a whole” (DRN, III. 798-9).

Counterintuitively, the Epicureans thought that the best way to overcome our fear of death was to fully accept that death is final.
Impediment 3: Fear of Death

Solution: Accept that there is no life after death

?!?!?

How is accepting that there is no life after death supposed to *alleviate* our fear of our mortality? Such a course may prove helpful for those whose fear of death stems from the worry that they will be punished in the afterlife for certain misdeeds, but for many others, the thought that death is or may be final is precisely what makes death so frightening!

For Lucretius, however, such worries stem either from a failure to think through the full consequences of death’s finality, or from a lingering attachment to the idea that we will still be around after our death to regret the fact that we are no longer alive.

“He resents he was created mortal, for he does not descry that in true death, no part of him will stay alive to mourn” (*DRN*, III. 886-7).
“Death is nothing to us” (*LM*, 124).

The No Subject of Harm Argument

1. A thing should only be feared if it harms us.
2. Death doesn’t harm the living, for they aren’t dead.
3. Death doesn’t harm the dead, for they don’t exist.
4. Therefore, death harms no one, and hence should not be feared.

“For if someone will ail and suffer at some future day, he must *exist* in that time when the maladies beset. But Death removes the possibility, since Death won’t let the man exist for whom these ills are hoarded up. It’s clear, therefore, that Death is absolutely nothing we need fear” (*DRN*, III. 862-6).
Is death really “nothing to us”? 

Even granting that death can’t harm me after I die (since I’ll no longer exist to be harmed), can’t my awareness of the fact that I will die cause me psychological pain now, and not merely because of some irrationality on my part, but rather for the valid reason that I am saddened by the prospect of missing out on all of the future pleasures that death will deprive me of?
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The (Instrumental) Value of Philosophy

Like everything else besides pleasure, the value of philosophy is merely instrumental: philosophy has value and is hence worth doing only to the extent that it makes life more pleasant.

Epicurus holds that philosophy can indeed have such value, since (when used correctly) it helps us discover certain metaphysical truths (viz. the absence of divine teleology and the material and hence destructible nature of the mind/soul), the knowledge of which relieves us of ungrounded fears and empty desires that keep us from living a life of maximum pleasure. There would be no point in philosophizing, though, if this weren’t the case.

“If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all..., then we would have no need of natural science” (PD, 11).

(If the metaphysical truths that philosophical inquiry revealed to us turned out to be anxiety-inducing rather than anxiety-alleviating, would the proper role of philosophy then be to conceal these truths from us, and persuade us of comforting falsehoods?)
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