Epicurus

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1. Introduction

Epicurus (341-271 BCE) was one of the most prominent philosophers of the Hellenistic era. Born in the island of Samos, an Athenian colony, he founded the Garden, a combination of philosophical school and community, in Athens in 306 BCE. Epicureanism was popular throughout the Greek and Roman world for centuries following his death.

Epicurus was a "skeptic" in the sense that he denied many of the religious claims central to contemporary Greek society. He taught that the gods take no interest in human affairs and that there is no afterlife, and the Hebrew word for heretic, *apikoros*, is derived from "Epicurean." (In his theory of knowledge, Epicurus was resolutely empiricist and *anti*-skeptical: sensation is the source of all of our concepts and all of our information regarding the world, and we are able to rely on sensations to obtain knowledge about both everyday matters, such as the shape of a tower in the distance, and esoteric ones, such as the origin of our world, the causes of meteorological phenomena, and the fundamental building blocks of the universe.) In this entry, we will consider the negative side of Epicurean theology and its basis in their physics, the Epicureans' positive view of the nature of the gods and how they use it to critique popular religion, and the psychological benefits that they claim result from having correct views about the gods.

2. Epicurean theology

2.1 Epicurean physics and its influence on Epicurean theology

Epicurus' religious skepticism is based on his wider metaphysics, which holds that the world is fundamentally composed of bodies in motion through empty space. The bodies that we see are ultimately composed of invisible particles of matter which cannot in turn be broken down into smaller pieces, and these invisible building blocks are called "atoms," which literally means "unsplittables." These atoms move through empty space and interact with one another because of factors like their weight, their shape, and their reboundings and entanglements with one another. Everything that occurs, including the formation of our own world and events such as thunderbolts, earthquakes, and eclipses, is the result of atoms blindly flying through the void, and thus it is *not* the result of any sort of divine purpose or plan. (Nothing exists apart from our physical universe, Epicurus holds, and the universe has no creation, as it has always existed and will always exist.)

The Epicureans also are among the first philosophers we know of to deploy the "problem of evil" to show that the world is not the creation of a powerful and loving god or gods. While the idea that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good, as depicted in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, was not present in the Epicureans' intellectual context, philosophers such as

Plato and the Stoics did claim that god is akin to a beneficent, skillful, and powerful craftsman of our world—a claim that the manifold flaws in the world, such as natural disasters and diseases, disprove.

Because of their materialism, the Epicureans argue that there cannot be an immaterial soul that survives the death of the body and goes on to another life in a cycle of reincarnation or to an afterlife to be rewarded or punished. Instead, humans are entirely material organisms, and at death, both their body and mind fall apart and cease to function. And so, death is annihilation.

2.2 What the gods are like

Although Epicurus was often called an atheist, he vehemently denies this charge. The gods exist, he says, but the masses of people have incorrect and impious beliefs about them. The gods are blessed and immortal, and we should not believe of the gods anything inconsistent with these attributes. To feel anger, and to give trouble to others, are signs of weakness inconsistent with blessedness. In fact, to be concerned with the world at all and its administration would be disturbing. So both the squabbling, vengeful and meddling gods of Homer and Hesiod, and the craftman god of Plato and the Stoics, fall short of the divine ideal of blessedness.

Epicurus holds that the happy life is the tranquil life, and so the gods, as paradigms of blessedness, give no troubles to others and are themselves utterly at peace. The later Epicurean poet Lucretius writes that the gods must live far from our world, in calm, radiant realms with no storms, frosty snow or other disturbances. (Some sources locate the Epicurean gods in the *intermundia*, the space between the worlds.)

2.3 The benefits of Epicurean theology

The aim of Epicurean philosophy is to help people attain tranquility. It does so in part by eliminating the fears that destroy our peace of mind. The most prominent of these fears are the fear of the gods and the fear of death, and to dispel these fears, we need a correct understanding of the workings of the world. Once we understand that natural phenomena are due solely to the blind interactions of atoms in the void, and not to the will of the gods, we will shed our fear of the gods. And once we understand that we are entirely bodily and mortal creatures, we will have no reason to fear death, as nothing fearful awaits us after death. Death is not bad for living people, because they are not dead, and it is not bad for dead people, because they do not exist.

The pious Epicurean knows that she has no reason to fear the gods' wrath or to curry their favor. (Trying to appease the anger or win the favor of meddling gods is one of the great causes of evil in the world, as shown by Agamemnon's sacrifice of his own daughter to gain favorable winds to sail to Troy.) But she stills worship the gods and seeks to emulate their perfection, and in doing so, she gains the greatest benefit from her gods. In fact, a wise Epicurean, when she attains blessedness, lives like a god among humans, and such a deified human can in turn become a role model for those who follow.

3. **Open question**

Do the Epicureans believe that there literally exist immortal beings who live in the *intermundia*? This would be the default way of understanding what Epicurus says, and some of the sources on Epicurean theology point in this direction. On the other hand, such a view seems to conflict with other parts of Epicurean philosophy—for instance, their view that all compound bodies eventually fall apart. On this basis, and on the basis of other texts describing Epicurean theology, some scholars have posited that Epicurean gods exist, not as literal biological beings like you and I, but as "thought constructs," i.e., as idealizations of human perfection. Such a view may be easier to square with other Epicurean commitments, but it also seems to make Epicurus guilty of the charge of being an atheist, if the gods "exist" merely as idealizations.

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