

Epicureism or a Philosophy of Pleasure

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Abstract

In this article I intent to go through the Epicurean thought and the role it plays in the concrete life of man. In this endeavour, I shall use some of Epicurus' maxims, and also The Poem of Nature, written by Lucretius, and thought up in the spirit of Epicureism. The idea from which the entire argument grows is sustained by the pragmatic role that Epicurus cultivates in respect to life. In fact, this is the same way that his very philosophy looks like. Another issue to be discussed here deals with the way in which Greek philosophy is brought into man's factual space by Epicureism. To conclude, we shall see the limits to which Stoicism and Epicureism merge, and which is the belt separating the two conceptions.

Keywords: *truth, pleasure, hedonism, Epicurean, Stoicism, happiness.*

In Epicurus' conception, the role of philosophy is reduced to happiness, freedom and a life without worries that could be caused or contoured by the play of the contest of circumstances. "Adept of Democritus' Atomist theory, Epicurus considers that there exists nothing in the world other than atoms and empty space, which allows them to move continuously, with an almost infinite speed, and that nothing is born out of nothing, not even through the will of the gods. In this manner he reduces the natural phenomena to their material causes. All things appear through the combination of atoms and disappear through their separation, therefore, in reality, there is no birth and death in the universe."¹ What is the aim of these specifications? We need them in order to reach the philosopher's aesthetic doctrine and find the root of his philosophy.

It is also out of the collision of atoms that man's freedom results, for it is spontaneity that which governs the soul, and not some divine reasoning. Thus, we

¹ Adriana Neacșu, *Istoria filosofiei antice* (The History of Ancient Philosophy), Universității Publishing House, Craiova, 2009, pp. 153-154.

are offered the portrait of the pleasure-led-man, the purpose of which is precisely happiness. And this happiness, in its turn, is tightly bonded to the running away from pain. As one letting himself led by pleasure, man runs from harm's way and, therefore, reaches the Good. In truth, the good is no longer transcendent; it no longer is a part of the frame that until now was organizing the entire nature, yet a simple running away from pain that presupposes in particular a bending down towards pleasure. Man's so-called autonomy is turned into the state of and seeking the lack of discomfort. Man is free only when he breaks away from those elements that give him the impression that he is corseted. In Epicurus' entire miscellany we find also a kind of typology of pleasures. Consequently, we have pleasures that are *natural* and *necessary* (those things that must be done with moderation), pleasures that are *natural*, yet *necessary* (to replace a natural pleasure with a sophisticated pleasure), and pleasures that are *unnatural and unnecessary* (vices).

In his Letter to Meneikeos, the road of philosophy is shown to us, which should be a certain one, which should not allow itself to be falsified by the fears which the crowd captures itself, which should be worthy, look upon life with the strength of one who never lets himself overwhelmed by fear. Man's prophylactic attitude is unworthy of the one engaged in philosophy; for him, a cabalistic, worthy attitude is reserved, one that leads towards the assuming of all costs. Death, the thought most frightening of them all, we are told in this letter, has nothing to do with us, it has to do with the non-being, whiles we are or have being. Out of this game pleasure arises as well, Man, after having become aware of his status, can now truly return to his real needs. After having consumed the costs, without wanting only benefits, man can reach his true essence, and this has to do with his instinct of preservation, that which is telling him to run away from pain and, hence, allow himself to be lead by pleasure. The purpose of the happy life is precisely this game that permits him to consent to being seduced by the latency of pleasure. "As a result, we note that pleasure is our foremost asset, the one that is specific to us. We take this as starting point of each preference, and of each aversion, and we turn to it appreciating any good with the aid of our affects, taken as principle. For pleasure is the first of the goods that we are endowed with, we must not select any type of pleasure, yet often renounce many, when of them a minus of pleasure even greater [than that of not having that particular pleasure – n.n.] may flow. Many a times we consider some sufferings preferable to pleasures, when the prolonged bearing of some pains eventually brings an enhanced pleasure. This is why not any type of pleasure is to be chosen, similarly to the way that not

all or any type of pain is an evil.”² And yet, despite it all, pleasure is not reduced to a continuous, boundary lacking delight.

Through pleasure we understand a purpose in life, one that presupposes precisely a running away from the sensuousness of vice. Pleasures represent the *natural* way to reach the essence of our becoming. Through pleasures, which help man know himself, we actually understand a firm possibility to oppose yourself to animal, carnal drives, those that imply lust and gluttony by means of all kinds of obscure reasons. Here is a maxim rendering precisely this game: “The gluttony which uses foul means is nefarious. If the means are rightful, it is a disgrace; for it is utmost ugly to let loose the lowering drives of avarice, even when justice is obeyed.” As long as we accept that man is the only one playing with his destiny, we must also take into account the fact that there is no principle to order for him the natural course of things. Diogenes Laertios would say that stories,³ of any kind, were denied by Epicurus.

With Epicurus, ancient philosophy is set in a new perspective – The transcendent good would now become the mundane good. Epicurus sets aside the cloth with which the intelligible good dresses itself and lowers it into the factual space of man. A great number of commentators see in this type of interpretation a perspective that brings forth Hedonism. Yet, for sure, in a first stage, were we to look upon things as limited as possible, we could say that we are dealing with a kind of Hedonism. Nonetheless, were we to look closer and try to truly grasp the sphere of his thinking, we can see that that which he intended on doing consisted of, in fact, set aside the air of hiddenness that was part of the ideal world and, thus, to put in its place something lively, palpable. Wishing and fearing are functions that are linked to pleasure. Although antagonistic, they hold that spontaneous game that means to show the real sphere of man. Through pleasure we reach the supreme Good, it being the only one that can wreck us or make us rise. “The Epicurean Hedonism does not lead to libertinage and excess, yet to a tranquil life; for men’s misery springs either out of fear, either out of limitless or vain desires, and if these can be refrained, only then can the pleasures of reason be tasted. The wise man

² Epicur, “Trei scrisori, Maximele fundamentale, Gnomologicum Vaticanum” (Three Letter, Essential Maxims, Gnomologicum Vaticanum), *Epicurea*, Științifică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 85-86.

³ Cf. Diogenes Laertios, *Despre Viețile și Doctrinile Filozofilor* (On the Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers), Academiei Române Publishing House, Bucharest, 1963, pp. 490-506.

shall not multiply his desires, for this means to multiply his sources of pain, yet he shall reduce his desires to a minimum.”⁴

Epicurus develops his thinking in the form of maxims and even aphorisms. He was well known for the simplicity with which he would certify and present all dialectical and even philosophical issues. He was clear and precise, so must that his disciples had no means of completing his thinking. In other words, Epicurus would speak himself, as well as speak for those around him. According to his own words, the previous philosophy would only discard the human soul, would drive it away from true knowledge. It is common knowledge that Lucretius is the one to present Epicureism in an elaborate way, at least one close to that of Epicurus. Out of the sea of works attributed to Epicurus, only very little have come down to us. What is true, we are left with the three letters (*Letter to Meneikeos*, *Letter to Pythokles*, *Letter to Herodotus*) and a number of essential maxims. Yet, his philosophy can also be known from Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* (“Also it is not to be thought that anywhere in this wide world / The gods might have their wholly dwelling / For the nature of gods and goddesses is frail / And farther away from our senses: barely our mind might grasp it.”)⁵ *On the Nature of Things* pictures the spirit of Epicurus and Lucretius’ cunning artfulness of writing the former’s thoughts in verse. In this sense, the poem reveals precisely the idea of play and naturalness with Epicurus had accustomed us in his letters.

Freedom, from the present perspective, is latently detached from the fire of spontaneity. In truth, the natural way of things gains consistency in the space of spontaneous movement. Any fact is just and natural if it follows the channel of genuine freedom. “There is no such thing, Epicurus would often say, as the necessity to live in necessity; out freedom appears not from the exterior, yet it is sowed in nature itself. In nature, the necessary order of movements is completed by random movements, spontaneous; otherwise we would have to continue ahead on the unbroken chain of causes and effects until a last cause, which is also the final cause, as the Stoics would claim.”⁶ Nevertheless, natural ordering is given by the firm position between good and evil. Something is good only when evil is defeated. The game that might set us on the space of the melange could be the equivalent of a state of unbalance, a path that would ultimately produce pain. It is

⁴ Frederick Copleston, *Istoria Filosofiei - Grecia și Roma* Roma (The History of Philosophy – Greece and Rome), All Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 365.

⁵ Cf. Lucrețiu, *Poemul naturii* (On the Nature of Things), Bucovina Publishing House, Bucharest, 1947.

⁶ Marin Constantin, *Ethos elenistic - Cunoaștere și libertate* (Elenistic Ethos – Knowledge and Freedom), Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, p. 41.

paramount to see Epicurus' ethic as an *island* of dynamics. Happiness, according to the hypothesis that we are working with, is a status that presupposes equilibrium; for any force necessarily comes to dismantle another while everything overflows equally prudently and calculatedly. "Happiness depends on this prudence which, in its turn, depends on man's free will."⁷ The accent falls on man's will who no longer lets himself seduced by ascetic ideal, as Nietzsche would say. "Man is in a state of freedom, for he is thinking nature, who deliberately advances towards something, who wills and opts and acts towards the reaching of his goal."⁸

Similar to Epicureism, Stoicism sees in philosophy a means of reaching happiness. Virtue is that which sets man in accordance with divine will and with the entire nature. To live in accordance with nature is, for the Stoics, to let oneself led by logos and thus reach that authentic behaviour of being into divinity. If, for Epicureism, the purpose of life is happiness as well, yet the one that is given by the concrete life of the individual, with all its costs and benefits included, for the Stoics, happiness is related to the virtue with which one opposes pleasures. Thus, what we have here is a type of common root of the two conceptions, with the amendment that Epicureism remains concrete nonetheless, while Stoicism primarily acclaims divinity. "This is why the purpose can be defined as a life in accordance with nature or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature, as well as that of the universe, a life in which we abstain from any action forbidden by the common law of all things, that is the rightful reason that lays in all things and is identical to that leading Zeus who orders all there is."⁹

To conclude, disregarding whether we speak of Epicureism or Stoicism, the idea that must prevail has to do with the way in which philosophy begins to take interest in the quotidian life of man. Epicureism, even if it resembles Stoicism, to a larger or lesser extent, intends on being more than a simple utilitarian theory through which man must calculate his costs or benefits, it in fact brings philosophy in the factual space of man and obliges him to be in accord with his own needs.

⁷ C. A. Vicol, *Epicur - Omul, gândirea, opere alese* (Epicurus – The Man, His Thought, Selected Works), Fundației Regelui Mihai Publishing House, Bucharest, 1947, p. 88.

⁸ Gh. Vlăduțescu, *Etica lui Epicur* (The Ethic of Epicurus), Științifică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, p. 53.

⁹ Cf. Diogenes Laertios, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

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