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books

On Happiness

Epicurus

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....7

The Philosophy of Epicurus

Epicurus and Hedonism.....23

Epicurus and Atomic Theory..... 37

The Writings of Epicurus

Principal Doctrines.....57

Letter to Herodotus.....65

Letter to Menoeceus.....87

Letter to Pythocles.....93

Letter to Idomeneus.....109

Last Will.....111

Vatican Sayings.....115

Glossary.....125





THE PHILOSOPHY OF EPICURUS

ROBERT DREW HICKS

(selections from Robert Drew Hicks, Stoic and Epicurean)



EPICURUS AND HEDONISM

It is now time to inquire into the nature of Epicurus's teaching, which met with such an enthusiastic reception and was greeted almost like a revelation. Philosophy was defined by Epicurus as 'a daily business of speech and thought to secure a happy life.' Here is struck the note of intense earnestness characteristic alike of Epicurus and his age. Philosophy is a practical concern; it deals with the health of the soul. It is a life and not merely a doctrine. It holds out the promise of well-being and happiness. This is the one thing needful. Literature, art, and the other embellishments of life are not indispensable. The wise man lives poems instead of making them. Accordingly, as we have seen, Epicurus regarded with indifference the ordinary routine education of the day in grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, and music, and for mere erudition he had a hearty contempt. The only study absolutely necessary for a philosopher was the study of nature, or what we now call natural science, and this must be cultivated, not for its own sake, but merely as the indispensable means to a happy life. Unless and until we have learned the natural causes of phenomena, we are at the mercy of superstition, fears, and terrors.

We must defer to a subsequent chapter the consideration of the steps by which Epicurus was led to the conclusion that the external world is a vast machine built up by the concourse of atoms in motion without an architect or plan. Suppose, however, this conclusion firmly established; what has our philosopher to tell us respecting human life and action? In what consists the happiness which is our being's end and aim? This had, by the time of Epicurus, become the chief question of philosophy, and, strange as it may appear, the answer is no new doctrine, but one which had often been proposed and discussed in the ancient schools. He identifies happiness, at least nominally, with pleasure, and he means the pleasure of the agent. His is a system of Egoistic Hedonism. Verbally, then, he is in agreement with Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaics, with the Socrates of Plato's *Protagoras*, and with Eudoxus, whose doctrine of pleasure is criticized by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The same doctrine is discussed in more than one of Plato's dialogues, sometimes apparently with approval, sometimes with disapproval. The historical Socrates never, so far as we know, reached a final definition of Good. He knew no good, he said, which was not good for somebody or something. His teaching would serve equally well as an introduction to Egoistic Hedonism, to Universal Hedonism, to Utilitarianism, or to Eudaimonism. The difficulty at once occurs; if pleasure and good are identical, why is it that some pleasures are approved as good and others condemned as evil? Why, on this hypothesis, should life ever present conflicting alternatives in which we are called upon to choose between doing what is good and doing what is pleasant?

Every hedonistic system must face this problem. Some progress had been made by Plato in the *Protagoras*.

There his spokesman, Socrates, maintains that since every one desires what is best for himself, and since he further identifies good with pleasure, evil with pain, he avoids pleasure when it is the source of still greater pain, and only chooses pain when a greater amount of pleasure results from it. In this Epicurus heartily concurred. He never recedes from the position that pleasure is always a good and pain always an evil, but it does not follow that pleasure is always to be chosen, pain to be shunned. For experience shows that certain pleasures are attended by painful consequences, certain pains by salutary results, and it is necessary to measure or weigh these after-effects one against the other before acting. 'No one beholding evil chooses it, but, being enticed by it as by a bait, and believing it to contain more good than evil, he is ensnared.' We now get a clearer notion of the end of action, which turns out to be the maximum of pleasure to the agent after subtraction of whatever pain is involved in securing the pleasure or directly attends upon it. At this point Epicurus parts company with Aristippus, whose crude presentation of hedonistic doctrine identified the end with the pleasure of the moment.

So soon as conditions and consequences are taken into account, pleasure tends to become an ideal element capable of being realized in a series of actions, or in the whole of life, but not to be exhausted at any given point of the series. More important, however, for determining the exact significance of this conception is the incursion which Epicurus makes into the psychology of desire. Desire is prompted by want; unsatisfied want is painful.

When we act in order to gratify our desires, we are seeking to remove the pain of want, but the cessation of the want brings a cessation of mental trouble or unrest, and this must carefully be distinguished from positive pleasure which is itself a mental disturbance. Experience shows a succession of mental disturbances, painful wants, the effort to remove them, and the pleasurable excitement which attends their removal. But all this shifting train has for its natural end and aim a state which is neither want nor the pleasurable excitement of satisfying want. All of them are fugitive states as contrasted with the resultant peace and serenity in which they end. The former agitated sea, whether swept by storms or tempests in gentle, equable motion, the latter to the profound calm, waveless and noiseless, of a sheltered haven. Beyond this neutral state of freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance it is impossible to advance. We may seek new desires; we are only returning to the old round of painful want, desire, and pleasurable excitement of removing the want. There is only one way to escape from this round, and that is to be content to rest in the neutral state. After all, this is the maximum of pleasure of which we are capable: any deviation from it may vary our pleasure but cannot increase it. 'The amount of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain. Wherever there is pleasure, so long as it is present, there is neither bodily pain nor mental suffering, nor both.' The consideration of these elementary facts should regulate preference and aversion. Prudence demands the suppression of all unnecessary desires. Epicurus does not carry renunciation so far as the Buddhists, who hold that to live is to suffer, and explain the will to live as that instinctive love of life which, partly

conscious, partly unconscious, is inherent in all living beings. They look for their rest in Nirvana. Certain things, says Epicurus we must desire, because without them we cannot live, and life to Epicurus is worth living; and yet the repose which consists in the cessation of desire is, after all, not altogether unlike the Nirvana of the Buddhists.

In this negative conception of happiness as freedom from pain, whether of body or mind, Epicurus must have been influenced by the ethical teaching of Democritus, who also made happiness in its essential nature consist in the cheerfulness and wellbeing, the right disposition, harmony, and unalterable peace of mind which enable a man to live a calm and steadfast life. Democritus also exalted mental above bodily pleasures and pains, and laid stress upon ignorance, fear, folly, and superstition as causes of those mental pains which tend most to disturb life. With Epicurus the great obstacle to happiness is neither pain nor poverty, nor the absence of the ordinary good things of life; it is rather whatever contributes to disturb our serenity and mental satisfaction, whatever causes fear, anxiety – in a word, mental trouble. To be independent of circumstances is his ideal; that a man should find his true good in himself. He is ready with practical suggestions for realizing this independence. Groundless fear must be removed by the study of nature, which shows that the fear of death, the fear of the gods, belief in Providence and in divine retribution are chimeras; desire must be regulated by prudence and the virtues cultivated as the indispensable means to a pleasant life. Fatalism is not true any more than the doctrine that all things happen by chance. The future is not in our power;

our actions alone are in our power to make them what we please. The letter to Menoeceus sets forth the ethical doctrine of Epicurus in a convenient summary (see page 91).

In this document, scientific ethics, as the term is now understood, is overlaid with a variety of other topics. The practical exordium, the dogmatic inculcation of moral precepts, the almost apostolic fervour and seriousness of tone find their nearest counterpart in the writings of religious teachers. We are reminded by turns of the Proverbs of Solomon and of the Epistles of St Paul. The rejection of the popular religion and the denial of divine retribution are coupled with an emphatic affirmation of the existence of blessed and immortal gods. The instinctive fear of death is declared to be groundless; and here the writer enlarges upon a theme, first started by the sophist Prodicus, that death is nothing to us. Incidentally, the value of life is vindicated and the folly of pessimism exposed. The limitation of desire is seen to involve habituation to an almost ascetic bodily discipline, in order that the wise man may become self-sufficing, that is, independent of external things. Lastly, the freedom of human action is stoutly maintained in opposition to the doctrine of natural necessity first promulgated by the earlier Atomists Leucippus and Democritus, but at the time of Epicurus developed with the utmost rigour and consistency by the Stoics. On the main question there is no uncertainty. The pleasure of the agent is the foundation upon which Epicurus, like many after him, sought to construct a theory of morality which would explain scientifically the judgments of praise and blame passed by the ordinary man. All systems allow that there are self-

regarding virtues and self-regarding duties, and when he has given his peculiar interpretation of pleasure, Epicurus has no great difficulty with these. But the case is different when we come to the social virtues and the duties which a man owes to his neighbour. In a system which makes self-love the centre of all virtues, and in which all duties must be self-regarding, if we accept, as he did as a psychological truth that by instinct and nature all are led to pursue their own pleasure and avoid their own pain, how can any conduct savouring of disinterestedness find rational justification? This was the great problem of the English and French moralists in that age of enlightenment, the eighteenth century. As then, so two thousand years before in Greece, extreme individualism was the order of the day. The primary fact is individual man as he is given by nature, and all that lies outside this, all that he has been made by institutions like the family and the state, all the relations that go beyond the individual are subsequent, secondary, derivative, requiring to be explained from him and to justify their validity to the reason. Take a concrete instance. Whence came the rules of justice? What makes actions just and how is my obedience to such rules, enjoined by Epicurus, an indispensable means to my own happiness? In short, how does disinterested conduct arise under a selfish system? The answer given to this question was often repeated later. It reappears in Hobbes and Rousseau. Before dealing with it, it is necessary to consider briefly the Epicurean conception of the growth of human civilization from the earliest times.

Epicurus on the origins of political communities and the demands of justice

Looking back at the past history of our planet, Epicurus derives all organisms, first plants, then animals, from mother earth. The species with which we are familiar are those which, being adapted, to their environment, prospered in the struggle for existence. They were preceded by many uncouth creatures and ill-contrived monsters, many races of living things, which have since died out from lack of food or some similar cause. Apart from the undeniable suggestion of one feature in the doctrine of evolution, the account of the origin of life is in its details wholly unscientific and even repulsive. But with surer insight primitive man is described as hardier than now: destitute of clothing and habitation, he lived a roving life like the beasts with whom he waged ceaseless warfare, haunting the woods and caves, insensible to hardship and privation. The first step in advance was the discovery of fire, due to accident. Afterward man learned to build huts and clothe himself with skins. Then the progress of culture is traced with the beginnings of domestic life through the discovery and transmission of useful arts. As comforts multiplied, the robust strength of the state of nature was gradually impaired by new disabilities, particularly susceptibility to disease. Language was not the outcome of convention, but took its rise from the cries which, like the noises of animals, are the instinctive expression of the feelings and emotions. Experience is the mother of invention and of all the arts. They are all due to the intelligent improvement of what was offered or suggested to man by natural occasions. None of the blessings of civilization are due to the

adventitious aid of divine agency. Man raised himself from a state of primitive rudeness and barbarism and gradually widened the gulf which separated him from other animals. From the stage when men and women lived on the wild fruits of the wood and drank the running stream, when their greatest fear was of the claws and fangs of savage beasts, to the stage when they formed civic communities and obeyed laws and submitted to the ameliorating influences of wedlock and friendship, all has been the work of man, utilizing his natural endowments and natural circumstances. Religion has been rather a hindrance than a help in the course of civilization. Next to the use of money, the baleful dread of supernatural powers has been the most fruitful source of evil.

In this historical survey, where shall we find the origin of law and justice? Epicurus was fully convinced that in the present state of society 'the just man enjoys the greatest peace of mind, the unjust is full of the utmost disquietude'; and yet injustice is not in itself an evil, and in the state of nature man is predatory.

Why should the wise man observe it if he find secret injustice possible and convenient? Epicurus frankly admits that the only conceivable motive which can deter him is self-interest, the desire to avoid the painful anxieties that the perpetual dread of discovery would entail. Even if the compact could be evaded, prudential considerations forbid it, since the risk of detection is enormous and the mere possibility of discovery is an ever-present evil sufficient to poison all the goods of life. That such motives do not weigh with criminals is irrelevant; we are dealing now with the wise and prudent man. Justice, then, is artificial, not natural.