

Epicurean Ethics: A Relook

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Abstract

Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) is an ancient Greek philosopher, who holds that we should prudently take into account of all the consequences of an action in order to secure the greatest possible amount of pleasure in the whole course of life.^[1] Since such an important age-old thought of Epicurus is not visible enough in contemporary discussions of normative ethics, we here like to shed some light on his ethical thought in the hope to rescue him from oblivion.

Keywords: pleasure, happiness, tranquility of soul, atomism, prudence, utilitarianism, hedonism, justice

I

Pleasure or happiness is such a thing that each and every one of us wants to enjoy. Right from its evolution mankind kept on its discovery in every field of its civilization only for enjoying pleasure out of it. 'Pleasure' is a very important subject in the field of ethics also. In ancient Greece it is seen that pleasure in the life of mankind was widely recognized in the ethical discussions. Both Aristippus and Epicurus have discussed on this issue. Aristippus holds that ultimate end of human life is none other than pleasure. For Aristippus, the pleasure should be both "positive" and "pleasant". He did not hesitate to prize bodily pleasure above intellectual pleasure as being more intense and powerful. The issue of quality in pleasure is absent in his theory. In contrast to the Aristippus' idea of end in life, Epicurus advocates for the view that our end in life should be intellectual pleasure, tranquility of soul over the bodily pleasure. In this we find that he maintained qualitative difference in pleasure, between bodily pleasure and intellectual pleasure. Epicurus thus seems to be the first moral philosopher in the history of philosophy to speak of quality of pleasure.

In his long essay 'Utilitarianism' John Stuart Mill recognizes that their hedonistic theory of utilitarianism, of 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' has its source in Epicureanism.^[2] Too many discussions are made and reflections effected on Bentham and Mill, on their hedonistic utilitarianism, while Epicurus' ethical theory still remains in the dark of oblivion. In what follows we like to have a critical survey of his ethical thinking.

II

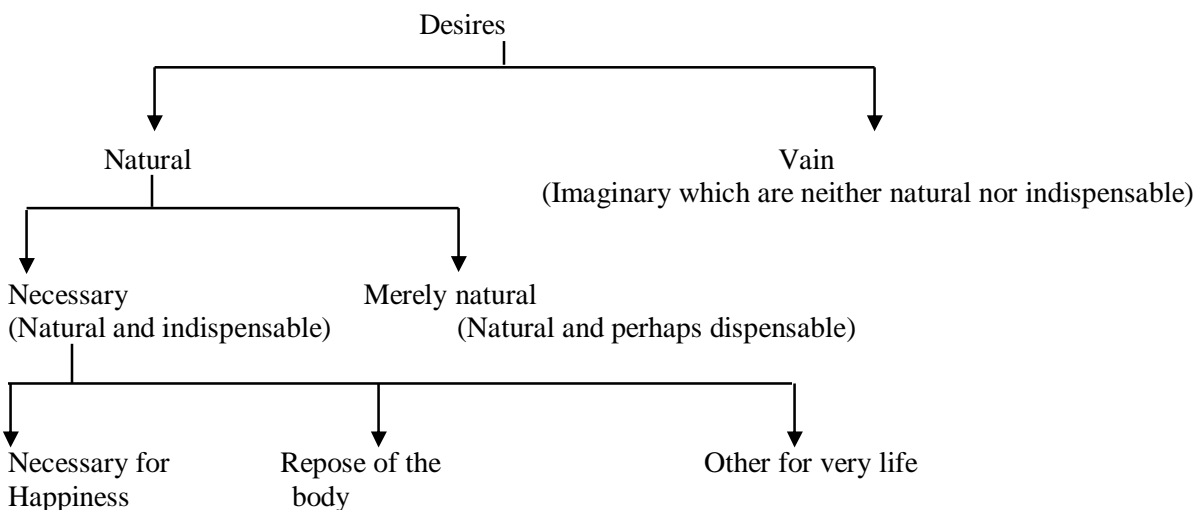
At first I would like to add a brief account of his life and works and world-view so that we can understand him properly. Epicurus (341-272 B.C.) is an ancient Greek philosopher as well as the founder of the school of Philosophy called "Epicureanism". He was born at Samos in 342/1 B.C. It seems that his father was a school teacher and he was brought up in simple circumstances^[3]. He studied at Mitylene in 310 B.C. and afterwards he transferred to Lampsacus. He went to Athens in 307/306 B.C. and opened a school in his own garden. The name of this school was "Garden". His teaching was convenient, easily understood, popular and in harmony with the spirit of the time. He had a great personal charm among his followers. He did not make high and strict demands upon the life and thought of his audience. He was the head of his school till death in 272 B.C. Epicurus never married. He was most likely a vegetarian. According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus was a voluminous writer. He wrote about 300 works. But most of those are lost. Diogenes Laertius has given us three didactic letters. Among them, the letters to Herodotus and Menoecus are considered authentic, while that to Pythocles is considered to be an extract from Epicurus' writings made by a pupil. Fragments of his chief works have been preserved from the library of the Epicurean Piso. H. Usener has published a notably complete and orderly collection, named 'Epicurea' (Leipzig, 1887).

A 14th century manuscript discovered in 1888 from the Vatican library included many more sayings by Epicurus and is entitled “Pronouncements of Epicurus”. Other “Fragments” are quotations of Epicurus from other classical writers. This has been published in the “Wisdom Bible” as a book. An immediate disciple of Epicurus was Metrodorus of Lampsacus. The best known disciple of the school is the Latin poet, T. Lucretious Carus (91-51 B.C.) who expressed the Epicurean philosophy in his poem “De Rerum Natura”.

As to his world-view, Epicurus considers that universe is based on three fundamental principles: a) materialism, b) mechanism, and c) atomism. He has chosen the atomistic theory of Democritus. According to Democritus the universe is composed of an infinite number of indivisible units, which are called atoms. They are material and in motion in empty space. They are too small for perceiving by senses. The atoms are different in shapes and sizes. They are innumerable. They are different in quantity in different things. Since these indivisible units have no quality, all the actual qualities of objects must be due to the arrangement and position of atoms. They move in void. According to Democritus, there was no "top" or "bottom" or "middle" in the void. Every event is a mechanism of atoms. They possess a motion peculiar to themselves and get impact in themselves, then push by contact with one another. From this process of union and separation come about the beginning and destruction of things is happened. Everything of this world including human body and soul, are the result of combination of the atoms. Death means dissolution of atoms, so immortality is impossible. He accepted this theory with some modifications. He explained the whole constitution of physical universe in a purely mechanical manner by this theory. He proclaimed that the things of our experience are composed of atoms. Destruction of the things of experience is nothing but their transformation into ultimate constituents of the universe, viz. atoms. Epicurus took atoms to have different size, form and weight. They are indivisible and infinite in number. At the time of the beginning of the universe the atoms rained down through the void or empty space. He maintained that the constituent parts of human soul are also atoms which are smooth and round. The human soul is different from animal soul because it has a rational part in it which is situated in the breast. At the time of death the atoms of soul are separated. Teleology is here strictly excluded. Interference of any ordering intelligence is rigorously rejected in his theory. He reiterated that a person should know and understand the nature of the universe and have knowledge of natural sciences, and only then he/she can attain pleasure unspoiltly. He did not deny the existence of the gods. He believed in innumerable gods. His theory of the gods as the blessed and incorruptible beings removes the fear of the wrath of gods. The dread of death, Epicurus argues, is due to a mere illusion of thought. Death appears to us dreadful because we confusedly conceive ourselves meeting it; “When we are, death is absent from us; when death is come, we are no more”^[4]. As these two types of fear removed it is possible for human beings to live pleasantly.

III

Let us now come to his ethical views. The first and foremost thing in Epicurus’ theory is the recognition that pleasantness is the highest good. The ethical teachings of Epicurus are summarized in his ‘Letter to Menoeceus’ and his forty ‘Authoritative Doctrines’. Epicurus’ letter to his follower Menoeceus has the best statement of his views regarding the Good or Pleasant life^[5]. In this letter we find discussions about ‘desire’. At first, he divided desires into two classes: Natural and Vain.



Accordingly, without satisfying the “necessary” desires man cannot live, and obviously these include oxygen, or water or food, etc. Again, without satisfying the “merely natural” desires a man cannot be happy, and these are luxurious dresses or ornaments, etc. For the “vain” or imaginary desires, according to Epicurus, are to be disregarded. Epicurus holds that a particular pleasure is characterized by the feeling it involves. If we want to assess among pleasures, we look into their relative consequences produced. But he does believe that we all are equally able to estimate pleasures. The estimation of pleasures is possible only for the ‘wise man’ through his rational insight.

Anyhow, according to Epicurus, the right understanding of this classification helps us in choosing anything for the health of the body. It can also free the soul from disturbances. He holds that the aim of human life is to avoid pain and fear. According to him, living creatures should not wander for searching something which is missing. The creature has to search for such things which are good for his soul and body. When we are in need for pleasure and we feel pain, we should look for pleasure. But when we do not feel pain, we should not look for pleasure. For this reason Epicurus called pleasure as “the beginning and end of the blessed life”^[6]. Epicurus holds that “we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance”. He thought that, after enjoying many pleasures greater discomfort may come as the result of them. Similarly, many pains are better than pleasures, if these can be the cause of greater pleasure.

In this context we can find that Epicurus put an emphasis on mental pleasure over merely sensual pleasure. From this it seems that Epicurus makes a qualitative difference between pleasures. According to Epicurus, “Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us in good, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided”^[7]. He advised us to use a scale of comparison and consideration to understand the advantages and disadvantages and then make judgment on all these matters. “For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good”^[8].

In the “Letter to Menoeceus” Epicurus explains, the assertion that “pleasure is the end” in life means “freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind”^[9]. But, he is emphatic in maintaining that mere sensual pleasures or luxurious diets or pleasures from profligates are not conducive to our ultimate end in life. To him, pleasure is “sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due to the greatest disturbance of the spirit”^[10].

All these illustrate that, for Epicurus, the removal of all pain is the greatest pleasure. To him, when we feel pleasure and as long as we feel it, there is neither physical pain nor mental stress both. He holds that “Pain does not continue for many days”^[11]. According to Epicurus, no pleasure is bad in itself, but sometimes some things which produce pleasures bring more disturbances than pleasure, such as, pleasure from intoxication may give joyful feelings to a person for sometime, but the addiction itself is not good, it is bad for the health of the person as well as for the society.

The greatest good among everything of this world is “prudence” to Epicurus. He even thought that prudence is more precious thing than philosophy. According to him “prudence” is the source of all other virtues and we cannot live a pleasant life without prudence, honor and justice. In his Authoritative Doctrines he says that obtaining prudence is a natural good. It gives courage to people. It is the ability to balance pleasure against pain or unhappiness. Epicurus speaks of a ‘wise man’ who has the right conception about the world or life. Prudence is the insight of the wise man, which according to Epicurus is the highest virtue. Virtues such as simplicity, moderation, temperance, cheerfulness, are much more conducive to pleasure than profuse luxury, high ambition and so on. Prudence is most valuable among all other virtues. Epicurus’ opinion is that all other virtues spring from it and it is essential for one’s own good. But in Judeo-Christian tradition, self-love regarded as immorality. Butler said that prudence cannot be the moral institution of life. Kant also agreed with this. Butler holds that prudence is “a much better guide than passion”^[12]. He thinks that the prudential point of view is not the moral one, but it is non moral. “Security” from pain, suffering and death also is a natural good to Epicurus. Prudence is essential for this “security” Again, Epicurus thought that he who is “just” is free of any trouble, but he who is unjust has the biggest load of trouble. His opinion is that “natural justice is a contract of expediency”, i.e. natural justice is a contract of something helpful or useful in a particular situation. It is necessary “to prevent people from harming or being harmed by another”. He came to the conclusion that “injustice by itself is not bad but sometimes it brings punishment”. As for example, somebody registers all his paternal property only in his own name in the court of law cheating all of his other lawful successors. This is injustice. It may become good for him for a while, but it may be risky: he may be arrested for deception and get punished.

In order to punish or reward somebody moral evaluation of his/her activities is essential. And freedom of will is an essential component of our moral behavior. As we have already noted, Epicurus was a supporter of mechanism. Then the problem crops up: if we are pre-determined to act in dotted lines, then our activities are not free acts which can be judged morally. A detailed study of Epicurus's works available, of course, reveals something different: he does not deny our freedom of will. According to him, human beings have power of determining events. He divides "events" into three types, some are necessary, some are by chance, and some are within our control. Among them, we are only responsible for the events which are within our control. Praise and blame are attached to these events. Accordingly, only this type of actions is "moral actions". The events which are "necessary" will happen inevitably. The events which occur "by chance" are accidental. These are beyond our control. Only the actions which are done freely by human beings are worthy of being morally good or bad, right or wrong. The events which are in our control are subject to praise and blame.

Epicurus speaks of "the sage", for whom it is possible to redress the balance by mental pleasures and bring out a net result of present good if only his mind be kept duly free from the disturbance of idle fears for the future. Epicurus, again, lays great emphasis on "friendship". "Of all the things which wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship" ^[13]. An unselfish feeling of liking arises in friendship. A wise man loves his friend as he does himself. In his teaching Epicurus said that a wise man should not get involved in politics, as this interrupts tranquility of soul. There are two exceptions. First, the person can take part in politics for his own security, and second, a person can take part in politics who has an urge towards a political career. So we can say that social theory of Epicurus is egoistic in character. In course of discussion we can refer to Plato's theory of State, in which he passed from the ethics of individual life to the ethics of the common people. He wants to establish the state upon reason. His opinion is that the end of the state is the virtue and happiness of the citizens. The state is founded upon reason, so its laws will be rational. These rational laws can be made by philosophers. Then it is clear that Plato holds that the wise person should be involved in politics. Aristotle also agrees with Plato that the end of the State is the virtue and happiness of the citizens. According to him "man is a political animal by nature". Plato and Aristotle's connection of morality was a social one. They represented individual man as a member of a community or state and held that the individuals can achieve happiness through rational and intellectual involvement in politics. But Epicurus never considered individual human beings from the perspective of state or society. It seems that he only considered individual's own well being which is not harmful to others. When Epicurus discussed about 'just' action he declared that only those things are 'just' which are useful to society. He recognized no natural community in mankind, but recognized all the mutual relations of individuals as 1) those which are dependent on individual will and 2) those which are dependent upon rational consideration of useful consequences. Epicurus regarded the state as a union that has arisen out of the need of mutual protection and by rational relation of the 'individual'.

IV

The theory of Epicurus is known as ethical hedonism in the history of ethics. He holds that in our ethical life intellect plays an important role. Summum bonum of human life is pleasure. But the pleasure cannot be obtained by any ordinary means. Wisdom is necessary to obtain pleasure. He wants to say that every human being should be careful to obtaining pleasure and avoiding risks and uncertainties. He explains pleasure from negative standpoint. Pleasure is absence of physical pain and mental anxiety. Pleasure is a mental state which cannot be spoiled by any material things. It is a state of tranquility. He did not mean bodily enjoyment or voluptuousness as pleasure, but he meant pleasure as liberation from pain, an indifferent mental state. He differentiated between bodily and mental pleasure. Intellectual pleasure is superior than bodily pleasure to him. J.S. Mill also maintained qualitative differences between various types of pleasures. Like Epicurus he also meant tranquility as pleasure. Mill understands pain as sorrow and absence of pleasure. Epicurus did not stress upon transitory pleasure, he laid emphasis on long-standing pleasure. According to Bentham pleasure should be long standing. He introduced a measuring scale of pleasure which has seven points [viz. 1) intensity, 2) duration, 3) certainty, 4) propinquity, 5) fecundity, 6) purity, 7) extent]. In this scale duration of pleasure is an important factor. Bentham and Mill brought forward the tradition of Epicurus. But the difference is that they laid emphasis on maximum happiness of the maximum number of people in the place of one's own happiness. Bentham laid stress on the quantity of happiness or pleasure but did not recognize qualitative differences and Mill laid stress on quality of pleasure and recognized the quantity also. But assessing the quality of pleasure Epicurus recognized the purity and duration of pleasure but he did not speak about pleasure of maximum number of people or pleasure of all.

V

We now turn to its continuity. The tradition of Epicureanism is long, flowing till now. Many writers, socialists, economists, politicians as well as philosophers have been inspired by Epicureanism from the ancient times to the modern age. Roman writer Amafinius was a supporter of Epicureanism. Poet Hores, Lucretious and Virgil – all were prominent Epicureans. The Roman emperor Julius Caesar also was an Epicurean. In modern times notable Epicureans were Thomas Jefferson, Gassendi, Walter Charleton, Francois Bernier, Saint Evermond, Ninon D L'Enclos, Denis Diderot, Frances Wright and Jeremy Bentham. In France Michel Onfray is developing a post – modern approach to Epicureanism. Karl Popper also argued that the principle of maximizing pleasure should be replaced by the principle of ‘minimizing pain’.

Epicurean hedonistic utilitarianism has its application in various fields of contemporary applied ethics. For instance, Peter Singer and many animal right activists have continued to argue that the well-being of all sentient probing ought to be seriously considered. According to hedonistic utilitarianism, pleasure or happiness is the ultimate end. Singer suggests that rights of happiness are conferred according to the level of a creature’s self awareness, regardless of their species.

VI

Though Epicurus’ moral theory *prima facie* seems to be egocentric and selfish, practically it is not so. Epicureans hold that "it is really pleasanter to do a kindness than to receive one" ^[14]. He laid stress on the concept of friendship, which should be exercised by every individual. The notion of friendship as envisaged by Epicurus is valuable not only for circumstantial advantages, but also for an unselfish love. Epicurus accepts pleasure as the end of life, and defines pleasure as painless experience and tranquility and calmness of the soul. We like to conclude by pointing to the fact that, although it is often claimed that it is J. S. Mill who first introduces the component of quality into pleasure, we find Epicurus to emphasize on mental pleasure over merely sensual pleasure. Epicurean hedonism would not result in extravagant and luxurious life but in a calm, refined and painless life .Happiness is perfectly mental phenomena which can be achieved by wise man who is perfectly happy during even undergoing bodily fortune. Thus Epicurean ethics is a ethics of moderate asceticism, self control and independence^[15]. Though epicurean philosophy is not an altruistic philosophy, it is not an immoral one. It is a delicate and refined egoism.

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