THE CASE FOR
EPICURUS

Champion of Truth and Pleasure

...and Not These Other Guys

A Response to the Charges of the
Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Skeptics,
the Abrahamic Religions, Humanists and Buddhists

By

Cassius Amicus

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First Edition, October 30, 2026

First published in October 2026 as *Why You Should Choose EPICURUS To Be Your Guide*.

This book is a free publication of EpicurusToday.com. The latest version of every chapter is available at EpicurusToday.com, where the source texts quoted in it can be read in full. Comments and corrections are welcome at EpicureanFriends.com.

Citations to the Epicurean texts and other original works were gathered with the assistance of ClaudeAI. All opinions, editorial decisions and judgments as to content are solely those of Cassius Amicus, who is solely responsible for everything presented here.

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...eaque ipsa, quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt, explicabo.

...and I will explain the very things that were said by that discoverer of truth and architect of the happy life.

— *Cicero,* On Ends *I.32, spoken by the Epicurean Torquatus*

And so with his discourse of truthful words he purged the heart and set a limit to its desire and fear, and set forth what is the highest good, towards which we all strive, and pointed out the path, whereby along a narrow track we may strain on towards it in a straight course; he showed what there is of ill in the affairs of mortals everywhere, ... he showed from what gates it is meet to sally out against each ill.

— *Lucretius,* On the Nature of Things *VI.24–32, tr. Cyril Bailey*

IN THE COURT OF NATURE

The Platonists, the Aristotelians, the Stoics, the Skeptics, the Abrahamic Religions, the Humanists and the Buddhists,

Accusers,

v.

EPICURUS OF SAMOS,

Defendant.

On the evidence of the senses, the preconcepts and the feelings

Diogenes Laertius X.31

Brief of Cassius Amicus, *Amicus Curiae*, in Defense of Epicurus and of Nature

Marcus Tullius Cicero, of the firm of Plato, Paul, Kant & Associates, *for the Prosecution*

"If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false."
— Principal Doctrine 23

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Introduction: What This Book Contains

The Case and the Charges

This book is arranged like a case at law, and the arrangement has a reason. Many of the charges that have been brought against Epicurus for more than two thousand years come down to us from Marcus Tullius Cicero, the leading advocate of Rome, who attacked Epicurus as if he were prosecuting him in court. In his dialogue *On Ends* he let the Epicurean Torquatus state the case for Epicurus in Book I, and then answered it himself in Book II, point by point, as an advocate answers the other side. In his speech *Against Piso* he mocked a Roman consul for his Epicurean philosophy. Later critics, from the Church Fathers onward, repeated his charges for centuries.

Epicurus stands accused because he championed this world: nature, and the faculties nature gives us, the senses, the preconcepts and the feelings. To defend him is to defend nature as well, and the case is heard in nature's own court, which is reality, the only world there is.

So this book answers in kind. It first sets out the case for Epicurus, and then answers, one at a time, the charges brought against him by seven traditions: the Platonists, the Aristotelians, the Stoics, the Skeptics, the Abrahamic religions, the Humanists and the Buddhists.

Several of those traditions did not exist when Epicurus lived. There were no Christians, no Muslims and no Renaissance humanists in the Athens of his day, and the teachings of the Buddha had not reached Greece. But the ideas they

would teach were already there, and Epicurus had already answered them. Nietzsche saw this. Writing of the religion that later became master of Rome, he called it "the same kind of religion on the pre-existent form of which Epicurus had waged war. One has only to read Lucretius in order to understand what Epicurus combated, *not* Paganism, but 'Christianity,' that is to say the corruption of souls through the concept of guilt, through the concept of punishment and immortality" (*The Antichrist* §58).[1] The names change from age to age, but the questions do not: what is real and how we know it, whether gods made and govern the world, whether the soul survives death, what the goal of life is, and whether men can be good if there is no world beyond this one. This book gathers the charges under those common questions, so that the reader can weigh the answers side by side and reach his own verdict.

None of this requires a knowledge of Latin or Greek, or of the law. The questions at issue are simple and clear, and they can be stated in plain words, which is how the chapters that follow try to state them. No one needs to be intimidated by foreign words or learned frameworks to understand them. Where the contents borrow the Latin names that Cicero gave to the parts of a speech, they do so only for continuity, because this book carries on an argument that was already in full course at the height of the Greek and Roman world, and it answers Cicero in the form he used himself. The reader needs none of it to follow the case. He needs only his own senses and his own judgment, which is exactly what Epicurus said he would need.

Who This Book Is For

Every philosophy offers itself as a guide to life. It tells you what is real, what it means for something to be true and how to know it, what kind of world you live in, and what you should aim at. This book argues that Epicurus is the best guide of all, because he is the champion of truth about the world we live in, and, on that truth, the architect of the happy life in this world and this life.

This book grew out of more than ten years of discussion of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where since 2015 people from many countries and walks of life have worked through the ancient texts together and tested their understanding against each other. It is not written for academic specialists, who have their own

literature, and it is not written to convert those who are already firmly committed to another philosophy or religion. It is written for educated readers who are not specialists, and especially for younger people, who need a general introduction to why Epicurean philosophy deserves their attention. Thomas Jefferson stated the case in two sentences: "I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us" (Letter to William Short, October 31, 1819).[2]

A word of caution is also needed for readers who already consider themselves knowledgeable about Epicurus and sympathetic to him, but who accept the conventional notion that the Epicurean "absence of pain" is a quiet version of Buddhism, asceticism or minimalism: want little, feel little, clear the mind and let go of desire, and wait for happiness to arise by itself. A major purpose of this book is to argue against that notion and to expose it as a fallacy that even Epicurus's worst enemies in the ancient world, such as Cicero and Plutarch, did not stoop to argue. They attacked him for making pleasure the goal of life, not for teaching men to withdraw from it.

Jefferson saw this clearly. In the same letter, answering his friend's report that he was yielding to a life of repose, Jefferson warned him: "Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and hebetude of mind ... Weigh this matter well; brace yourself up."[3] The Epicurean life is not a retreat from the world. It is the fullest use of the one life we have.

What This Book Contains

The book begins with the positive case. The first chapter, **Champion of Truth, Architect of the Happy Life**, sets out what Epicurus taught about reality and truth, nature, fate and the goal of life, and what he meant by "pleasure," a word he uses much differently and far more widely than his critics will admit. The second chapter, **The Charges**, sets out the ten charges brought against Epicurus, with his answer to each beside the positions of the seven traditions that have most often been set against him.

The main part of the book then examines those seven traditions one by one, in the order in which they entered Western thought:

1. **Against The Platonists**: Socrates and Plato were the prominent founders of the view that the world we see is only a shadow of a higher, eternal world, and that our world was made by a divine craftsman. They taught men to distrust the senses and to look for truth and goodness beyond this life, the reverse of Epicurus's trust in nature.
2. **Against The Aristotelians**: Plato's pupil Aristotle removed the divine craftsman but kept Plato's intelligent purpose in nature, holding that everything acts toward a fixed end and that the highest life is contemplation, not pleasure. His system later became the backbone of medieval theology.
3. **Against The Stoics**: Zeno, Chrysippus, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius were the great rivals of the Epicureans in the ancient world. They taught that the world is filled with a providential god and governed by fate, and that virtue, not pleasure, is the only good.
4. **Against The Skeptics**: Pyrrho, the Academic Skeptics and Sextus Empiricus taught that nothing can be known. They held that the wise man suspends individual judgment and follows custom rather than taking sides on the critical questions of life, which leaves him no ground on which to stand against error.
5. **Against The Abrahamists**: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in the words of their scriptures and authorities, made the creator god, providence and the judgment after death into articles of faith. They ask men to accept on faith what Epicurus held must be tested by the senses, and to look to another life for their reward.
6. **Against The Humanists**: The Humanists, from Boethius and the Renaissance through Kant, Comte and Feuerbach to the present day, let go of the Christian God but arbitrarily kept much of the Christian morality. They put duty, service to humanity or virtue for its own sake where Epicurus put pleasure.
7. **Against The Buddhists**: The Buddha taught, in the words of the early Buddhist scriptures, that life is suffering and that desire is its cause, so that the goal is to extinguish desire rather than to satisfy it wisely. Buddhism

reached the West last, and it is now the tradition most often confused with Epicurus.

Four of these traditions originate in ancient Greece: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Skepticism. Five of them have, more than any others, obscured or corrupted the teaching of Epicurus: Platonism, Stoicism, Skepticism, supernatural religion and Humanism. Aristotle is given a chapter of his own because, although he belongs in the Platonist tradition, he built the most complete system of it and is often mistaken for an ally of Epicurus. Buddhism arose far from Greece and owes nothing to Plato, but it is given the last chapter because it has become, in our own time, the tradition most often confused with the teaching of Epicurus.

Each of the seven chapters follows the same plan. It begins with why the tradition matters to Epicureans and with the historical record of its quarrel with Epicurus. It then takes the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy in turn: the **Canon**, or what is real and true and how we know it; **Physics**, or the nature of things; and **Ethics**, or how to live. In each, the tradition is stated in the words of its own leading writers, and the Epicurean response follows. Each chapter closes with the places where the tradition, in spite of itself, helps the Epicurean case, with its later influence, and with a list of the most important passages.

The chapters quote their sources at length, and the full texts are on EpicurusToday.com, where the reader can check the wording and read the context for himself. A concluding chapter draws the results together and returns to the choice with which the book begins, and an **Epilogue** suggests what to do next: how to learn Epicurus accurately when reliable guides are few, and how to use the information in this book as a test of any guide.

How to Read This Book

Readers who already have a deep understanding of Epicurus can go straight to the commentary on the traditions that interest them, because each chapter can be read on its own. But readers who are new to Epicurus, or who know only the domesticated Epicurus of popular literature, should start with the first two chapters, since every later chapter measures its tradition against them. Read in

order, the chapters show how a supernatural and hostile view of this world, elevated to high-sounding philosophy by Socrates and Plato, passed from school to school and from philosophy into religion and back again, and how Epicurus answered it at every stage. The final chapter traces that line and sets out what the survey shows.

All quotations come from published and reputable translations, most of them old enough to be freely available. Links in the chapters in the electronic editions go to the full texts on EpicurusToday.com, where the translator of every work is named and every quotation can be checked against its context and, in most cases, against an image of the printed page.

Champion of Truth, Architect of the Happy Life

"When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who showed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quell: they only chafed the more the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature's portals. Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore religion is put underfoot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven."[1]

— Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* I.62–79, tr. H. A. J. Munro

A Guide for This World and This Life

Before we hear from the opponents, we set out what Epicurus taught and why it deserves to be chosen. The rest of the book tests that teaching against seven rival traditions. This chapter states Epicurus on his own terms.

Epicurus was the champion of truth and of the happy life in *this* world. He fought first for the truth about nature, and on that truth he built the happy life. Nearly every one of the traditions examined in this book, in its own way, asks a man to look past the life he has toward something higher: a world of Forms, a providence, a heaven, a duty, a Nirvana. Epicurus asks him to look at the life he has and to make the most of it.

"We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies without allowing himself leisure" (VS 14).[2] There is no second life in which to make up for a wasted first one. The wise man, Epicurus says, does not seek "the longest period of time, but the most pleasant," just as "with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant" (DL X.126).[3]

The contrast with views typified by the Christian Gospel could not be sharper. In the parable of the rich fool, the man who says to his soul, "take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," is told, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."[4] The lesson drawn is "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God," and the disciples are told to provide themselves "a treasure in the heavens that faileth not" (Luke 12:19–21, 33).[5] Paul goes further: "we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).[6]

Epicurus looks at the things which are seen. That choice takes nerve. Lucretius puts the stakes plainly: "life itself would at once fall to the ground, unless you choose to trust the senses" (IV.507).[7] To trust the senses is to be invested in *this* world and *this* life. It means taking what nature gives and treasuring it, rather than laying up treasure in heaven or in some other make-believe story. "We should not spoil what we have by desiring what we have not, but remember that what we have too was the gift of fortune" (VS 35).[8]

And nature gives a great deal. Lucretius describes men who, even without gold or silver or banquet halls, "spread themselves in groups on the soft grass beside a stream of water under the boughs of a high tree and at no great cost pleasantly refresh their bodies, above all when the weather smiles and the seasons of the

year besprinkle the green grass with flowers" (II.20–33).[9] That is not the picture of a man waiting for another world. It is the picture of a man enjoying this one.

The rest of this chapter sets out the teaching on which that choice rests, in the three parts into which Epicurus divided philosophy: the Canon, or what is real and true and how we know it; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live.

The Canon: What Is Real, What Is True, and How We Know

Every philosophy presumes an answer to the question of what it means by "true" and "real," but the answers are not as obvious as they seem. Plato taught that only what is eternal and unchanging is truly real, so that the world we see "is always becoming and never is" (*Timaeus* 27d–28a), and that truth belongs to that higher world.[10] Democritus, the founder of atomism, went the other way and said "that atoms alone among existing things have true reality, while everything else exists by convention," so that the colors, tastes and warmth of the world we live in are not really there.[11] Diogenes of Oinoanda answered him: "according to your account, Democritus, it will be impossible for us even to live, let alone discover the truth" (Fr. 7).[12]

Epicurus rejected both views and tied the two questions together. What is real is what exists and acts in nature: bodies, made of atoms, and the void in which they move. The world we live in, with its colors and tastes, its growth and decay, is that real world, not a shadow of another one. And what is true is what reports the real as it is. Sextus Empiricus reports that Epicurus "asserts that all sensibles are true and existent. For there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting.'"[13] He defined truth simply: "That is true which is in the state in which it is said to be," and "False is that which is not in the state in which it is said to be" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[14] Truth does not require eternity, and reality does not require that a thing never change. A flower is no less real for fading, and a pleasure is no less true for ending.

That answer leads to the next question: how do we test whether what we say is in the state we say it is? Epicurus held that we have three standards of truth that

nature gives us: the senses, the preconcepts (the general ideas that we form from repeated experience), and the feelings of pleasure and pain. "In *The Canon* Epicurus says that the tests of truth are the sensations and preconcepts and the feelings" (DL X.31).[15]

Nothing stands above these standards. "Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations ... nor again can reason, for all reason is dependent upon sensations" (DL X.32).[16] Every sensation truly reports what strikes the sense organ. Error lies in the opinion we add to it, and opinion is tested by further evidence. "If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false" (PD 23).[17]

Nor do the senses deceive us on purpose, because there is no purpose behind them. Plato pictured men as prisoners in a cave, watching shadows cast on a wall by figures that others carry behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them," and he said that "the prison-house is the world of sight."[18] But nature is not a puppeteer. It has no design, no aims for men and no wish to mislead them. It holds no opinions, so it cannot hand us false ones. A sensation adds nothing of its own: "all sensation is irrational and does not admit of memory; for it is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it."[19] Falsehood enters only with what we add, for "falsehood and error always lie in the addition of opinion."[20] Nature gives us no puppet show and no house of mirrors. That is why we can trust the senses, and by trusting them and using them properly to pursue pleasure, we can succeed in reaching a life of happiness, which is in fact a life of pleasure.

What cannot be seen is not always completely closed to us, but we can reach it only by reasoning from what *is* seen. "We must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations ... in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen" (DL X.38).[21] In this way Epicurus reasoned from the fact of motion to the existence of the void, and from the qualities of bodies to the atoms.

Nearly every rival tradition in this book begins by doubting the senses in some way, and that doubt is the first step away from this world. The Epicurean begins by trusting the senses.

Physics: The Nature of Things

"First of all ... nothing is created out of that which does not exist: for if it were, everything would be created out of everything with no need of seeds" (DL X.38).[22] Nor does anything pass into nothing. "The universe always was such as it is now, and always will be the same" (X.39).[23]

The universe is made of atoms and void, and it is infinite. Because the atoms are infinite in number, "there are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours" (DL X.45).[24] Each world comes to be from the motions of the atoms and passes away again. No god made our world, and none governs it.

As the Epicurean Velleius explains in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, Epicurus inferred from a variety of evidence that a class of beings worthy of being called gods does exist.[25] But the critical point is that these gods are entirely natural, and not at all what the many believe them to be. "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour" (PD 1).[26] "The impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many" (DL X.123).[27]

The soul is "a body of fine particles distributed throughout the whole structure" (DL X.63), and it is scattered when the body dies.[28] "Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us" (PD 2).[29] This life is the only one we will have, and that is why it matters so much.

Nor is that life fixed in advance. Fate troubled the ancient world almost as much as gods did, and it troubles many people still. The Greeks grew up on Homer and Hesiod, in whom three Fates spin each man's lot and cut it off. The philosophers replaced the Fates with necessity. Democritus, the founder of the atomic theory, held that the atoms move only as they are driven by blows, so that every motion, and every thought and choice, follows of necessity from the motions before it. Cicero reports that Democritus "preferred to accept the view that all events are caused by necessity, rather than to deprive the atoms of their natural motions" (*On Fate* 23).[30] In Epicurus's own lifetime the Stoics made fate the reason of a god running through all things.

Epicurus rejected destiny in every form. The wise man "laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things."[31] Of the things that happen, some happen by necessity, "and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame" (DL X.133).[32] Then comes one of the most emphatic sentences he wrote: "it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation" (X.134).[33] Norman DeWitt observes that in Epicurus's judgment "the crime of the physicists ... had been their failure to deal with the problem of freedom, and their offense was at its worst in the case of the atomists" (*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 175).[34]

Here Epicurus parted company with his own predecessors, and he did so on the evidence. We see that living creatures move forward "whither the will leads each," and that "the mind itself does not feel an internal necessity in all its actions" (Lucretius II.251–293).[35] Since nothing comes from nothing, that power must have its beginning in the nature of the atoms themselves, which at no fixed time and place move a little from their path. Diogenes of Oinoanda answers the follower of Democritus who says that the atoms "have no free movement": "Do you [not] know, whoever you are, that there is actually a free movement in the atoms, which Democritus failed to discover, but Epicurus brought to light — a swerving movement, as he proves from phenomena?" (Fr. 54).[36] Critics ancient and modern have attacked the swerve, and scholars still debate how Epicurus understood it. But on the main point he would not let a theory overrule what we perceive about ourselves.

Epicurus also showed that the opposite view defeats itself: "The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity" (VS 40).[37] And the stakes are practical. "If fate is believed in," Diogenes adds, "all admonition and censure are nullified" (Fr. 54).[38] A man who believes his life is already written has no reason to deliberate, to plan or to try. Epicurean freedom is not the gift of an immortal soul, granted so that it can be judged. It belongs to a mortal mind made of atoms, and Lucretius names its use: it is the

will "whereby we move forward, where pleasure leads each one of us" (II.251–262, tr. Bailey).[39] "Necessity is an evil, but there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity" (VS 9).[40]

Epicurus did not come to philosophy already sure that pleasure was the goal. He came to it with a question about where the world came from. Apollodorus reports that "he took to philosophy because he despised the teachers of literature, since they were not able to explain to him the passage about Chaos in Hesiod" (DL X.2).[41] Epicurus would not accept that the world was made out of Chaos, and he went looking for the truth.

He followed that search wherever the evidence led. He urged on others "the constant occupation in the investigation of nature," and he found his own peace "chiefly in a life so occupied" (DL X.37).[42] The work of natural science is "to discover accurately the cause of the most essential facts" (X.78), and "we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena" (X.87).[43] If the evidence had led Epicurus to a creator who issues commands on how to live, and who rewards and punishes men according to those commands, he would have been among the first to follow that path. It did not. The evidence led to atoms and void.

The same senses that show us how the world is made also show us how to live. We trust the senses, and so we trust nature, and nature tells every living thing to follow pleasure: "Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil" (*On Ends* I.30).[44] But we cannot follow that guide well unless we know how nature works. That is why we study nature: to perfect our pursuit of pleasure through the truth. Cicero's Epicurean spokesman says that "to learn what nature's real requirements are improves the moral character also" (I.63).[45] Epicurus says that "a man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that without natural science it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed" (PD 12).[46] A comforting story will not do the work. Only the truth will.

We would like to know the truth in every case, but sometimes the evidence is not enough to show which of several explanations is correct. Lucretius gives the ex-

ample of a dead body seen at a distance. We name "all the different causes of death, in order that the one real cause of that man's death be mentioned among them" (VI.703).[47] Every explanation must fit the facts, and none may bring gods back in: "Only superstition must be excluded, as it will, if one successfully follows the lead of seen phenomena to gain indications about the invisible" (DL X.104).[48] When we have explanations that meet that test, we must not suppose that our inquiry "has not reached sufficient accuracy to contribute to our peace of mind and happiness" (X.80).[49] So long as we have at least one explanation that fits the facts and leaves no room for the supernatural, we need not go on adding to the list forever.

That approach is why Epicurean physics remains vitally important today. Much has been learned since Epicurus about the size of the sun, the causes of lightning and the structure of the atom, and some of his specific explanations have been improved upon or replaced. But Epicurus was not writing a science textbook to be outdated by better instruments. He was setting out the rules that any sound account of nature must follow: begin with the evidence of the senses; reason from what is seen to what is unseen; hold that nothing comes from nothing and nothing passes into nothing; where the evidence cannot decide, keep every explanation that fits the facts; and never bring in the supernatural. Modern science has advanced by following those rules, not by abandoning them, and any theory that breaks them, by asking us to believe that the world came from nothing or that the senses tell us nothing, deserves suspicion however impressive its mathematics. The details of Epicurean physics can be revised. Its approach remains correct. The article *The Continuing Vitality of Epicurean Physics* on EpicurusToday.com develops the point at length.[50]

Epicurus was therefore *both* things that Cicero's Epicurean spokesman called him: "that discoverer of truth and architect of the happy life" (*On Ends* I.32).[51] The order matters. His conclusions about how to live rest on his conclusions about nature, and those rest on the evidence of the senses. Without the truth about nature, his ethics would have nothing to stand on. The two goals are not in conflict. Each supports the other.

Ethics: Pleasure in the Full Sense

Happiness through Pleasure Is the Goal

Epicurus, like the other philosophers of his day, made happiness the goal of life. The Letter to Menoeceus opens by saying that "no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul," any more than it is ever too early or too late for happiness, and it sets the task plainly: "We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it" (DL X.122).[52]

But Epicurus did not leave happiness undefined and ambiguous, a word that each man may fill with whatever he likes, or that a philosopher or a priest may fill for him. He said what it is. A life of happiness is a life of pleasure. Nature has given every living thing a guide from birth, the feelings of pleasure and pain, and the same letter goes on: "We call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good" (DL X.129).[53] Pleasure is not a rival to happiness, or a step on the way to something higher. It is what happiness is made of.

Virtually every school of the ancient world agreed that the goal of life is happiness, *eudaimonia*. The quarrel was over what happiness is. Diogenes of Oinoanda, the Epicurean who in the second century AD carved his master's teaching on a wall in his city for all to read, stated the issue plainly:

> "If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunely messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means

> to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end." (Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fr. 32, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith)[54]

That is the question at issue in every chapter of this book. It is not how to reach happiness, but what happiness is. The rival traditions answer virtue, or knowledge of the Good, or contemplation, or the calm that comes from suspending judgment, or obedience to God, or duty, or the end of desire. Epicurus answers that happiness is a life of pleasure.

What Epicurus Meant by "Pleasure"

Most readers hear the word "pleasure" in its narrowest sense: a moment of bodily excitement, a good meal, a drink, a thrill of the senses. Cicero assumed the same. "Every one uses the Greek word *hēdonē* and the Latin *voluptas*," he says, "to mean an agreeable and exhilarating stimulation of the sense" (*On Ends* II.8).[55] If that were all Epicurus meant, his critics would be right to call his philosophy the philosophy of the trough.

But Epicurus's key insight was that every experience in life that we find to be desirable deserves to be considered within the term pleasure. His spokesman Torquatus explains: "The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which affects our physical being with a definite delightful feeling,—a positively agreeable perception of the senses."[56] Instead, "everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain)" (*On Ends* I.37).[57]

That takes in the whole of life, of the mind as well as of the body. Epicurus admitted "both kinds both in the soul and in the body," the pleasures of rest and the pleasures of motion (DL X.136).[58] He did not despise the body: "I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste and withdraw the pleasures of love and those of hearing and sight" (DL X.6).[59] But the pleasures of the mind are often the greater, "since the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the mind is also cognizant of the past and of the future" (*On Ends* I.55).[60] The joy of hope, the delight of a good memory, the company of friends, the thrill of a race won or a summit reached, the beauty of the world and the satisfaction of understanding it are all pleasures. "In philosophy pleasure goes hand in hand with knowledge" (VS 27).[61] Torquatus sums

up the goal as "complete freedom from pain and sorrow coupled with the enjoyment of the highest bodily and mental pleasures" (*On Ends* I.57).[62]

Cicero insisted that this is not how anyone uses the word pleasure, and in a narrow sense he was right. But Epicurus had good reason for it. Nature gives us only two feelings by which to judge what to choose and what to avoid: "The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined" (DL X.34).[63] Whatever we find desirable, a good meal, the company of a friend, the rush of a zipline ride, an hour free of pain, reaches us through the feeling of pleasure, because there is no other feeling for it to reach us through. To restrict the name to a few thrills of the senses would leave most of what we value without a name, and outside the guide that nature gave us. Norman DeWitt put it this way:

> "The extension of the name of pleasure to the normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing." (Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 240)[64]

When the Epicurean says that pleasure is the goal, then, he means the whole range of experiences, of body and mind, that make life worth living.

"Absence of Pain" Is Neither Nothingness Nor Asceticism

Epicurus also wrote that "when, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality ... but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind" (DL X.131).[65] Many modern readers take this to mean that Epicurus taught a kind of

Buddhist withdrawal: want little, feel little, and call the emptiness peace. That is the reverse of what he meant.

The key is that, for Epicurus, there is no neutral state between pleasure and pain. "Epicurus consequently maintained that there 'is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling' intermediate between pleasure and pain ... A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain" (*On Ends* I.38).[66] A life from which pain has been removed is not an empty life. It is a life filled with pleasure, and "complete absence of pain Epicurus considers to be the limit and highest point of pleasure" (same passage).[67] "Absence of pain" is a description of a full life, not a recipe for an empty one.

An old puzzle well known to the philosophers of Epicurus's day, the puzzle of the heap, or *sorites*, shows what he meant. Take a heap of grain. Where does the "heap" reside? In one particular grain, or in some number of grains? Add grains one at a time, or take them away, and try to find the point where we cross the line into a heap or out of one. No such point can be found, because a heap has no existence apart from the individual grains. "Heap" is our name for some number of grains taken together.

The same reasoning applies to the good itself, and Epicurus's own words show it. Cicero quotes his words from "that book which contains all the doctrine of your school," hoping to embarrass him with them: "Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses" (*Tusculan Disputations* III.41).[68] Cicero thought this exposed Epicurus as a sensualist. Read in the light of the heap, it says something else. Take away the pleasures of taste, then those of hearing, then those of sight, then every other pleasure of the senses and of the mind, one at a time, and look for the point at which "the good" is left standing by itself. That point never comes. When the last specific pleasure is gone, nothing is left, because the good was never anything apart from the pleasures, just as the heap was never anything apart from the grains.

The words "pleasure" and "happiness" do not mean the same thing, but both must be viewed from this same perspective. "Pleasure" has no existence apart

from the specific pleasures of mind and body that we actually feel, and happiness is our name for a way of looking at our pleasures taken together. When we add pleasures or pains to our experience, or take them away, we never reach a separate thing called "pleasure" or "pain" or "happiness" or "unhappiness." We always find specific pleasures or specific pains. So removing pains can never leave a zero, or a neutral blank. There are only two kinds of feeling, pleasure and pain (DL X.34), and when the pains are removed, the only thing that can remain is pleasure.[69]

Which pleasures remain, and which we should choose, is a different question. That depends on the circumstances and on each man's own choices: one man spends a painless hour with friends, another in study, another ziplining down a mountain, another racing a sailboat, another at a good meal, and another working toward the day he will fly to Mars. Epicurus did not answer that question for everyone, and he did not need to. The point of "absence of pain" is to identify the conceptual goal of life, which is happiness, not virtue or piety or logic, and to show how to reach it: by acting so that our lives hold as much pleasure and as little pain as possible.

Nor did Epicurus teach that desire itself is the enemy. The Buddhist scripture says: "Let, therefore, no man love anything; loss of the beloved is evil ... From pleasure comes grief, from pleasure comes fear" (*Dhammapada* 211–212).[70] Epicurus says the opposite: "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (PD 27).[71] He teaches us to satisfy our desires wisely, not to extinguish them.

Happiness Does Not Arise by Letting Go

One of the most widespread modern versions of Epicurus comes from no single ancient school, though it borrows from several. It holds that if we clear the mind, meditate, "just breathe" or "get out of our own way," we can set aside our desires and concerns, and that happiness will then arise of its own accord. Its practical form is minimalism: own less, want less, do less, and treat the emptying of life as the road to contentment. Minimalism is offered as a kinder, gentler asceticism, without the hair shirt but headed in the same direction. Henry David

Thoreau gave it its American motto: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand," for "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (*Walden*, 1854).[72] The same advice runs through the traditions examined in this book. The Dhammapada says "there is no happiness higher than rest."[73] Epictetus says that freedom "is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire."[74] The Gospel says "Take no thought for your life," and that it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."[75] Sextus Empiricus says that the Skeptic's calm followed his giving up the search for truth "even as a shadow follows its substance."[76] The chapters on each tradition take these up in turn.

Epicurus taught none of this, and his advice does not amount to the same thing.

First, happiness does not arise by itself. It is the result of choice, and choice requires thought. The pleasant life is produced by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance," and "of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence" (DL X.132).[77] When Epicurus told his students to meditate, he meant the opposite of emptying the mind. "We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness" (DL X.122), and "meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day" (X.135).[78] Epicurean meditation fills the mind with the truth about nature and with the reasons for choosing one pleasure over another, until they are fixed in memory and ready for use. It does not clear the mind of them. "We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties" (VS 41).[79]

Second, Epicurus did not teach us to want little. He valued the ability to live on little, but he said exactly why: "not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it" (DL X.130).[80] Self-sufficiency is insurance, not the goal. The man who knows he can live well on little has nothing to fear from the loss of much, and so he can enjoy much the more when he has it. The minimalist turns the insurance into the goal. Epicurus also wrote that "he who has learned the limits of life knows that that which removes the pain due to want and makes the whole of life complete is easy

to obtain" (PD 21), but that is a reason for confidence, not a ceiling on pleasure: the necessities are easily secured, so a man need not live in fear of losing them, and he is free to pursue whatever further pleasures are worth their cost.[81] "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is in like case with him who errs through excess" (VS 63).[82]

Third, the Epicurean's confidence rests on knowledge, not on the absence of concern. "The stable condition of well-being in the body and the sure hope of its continuance holds the fullest and surest joy for those who can rightly calculate it" (Fragment 11).[83] To "rightly calculate" a man has to understand how the world works and what it can be relied upon to provide. The let-go approach is much closer to the Skeptic, who stopped looking for the truth and found that a kind of quiet came to him "as it happened," than to Epicurus, who found his happiness through the search for the truth and not by giving it up.

The difference lies in the reason. The minimalist reduces his desires because he thinks desire itself is the problem. The Epicurean measures each desire against what it will cost him, and he pursues every pleasure whose cost is worth paying, whether it is a quiet evening with a book or the long work of building a business, climbing a mountain or flying to Mars. The first is a rule for wanting less. The second is a method for getting more of what makes life worth living.

Choosing Among Pleasures

Pleasures are chosen by measuring them against each other and against the pains they bring. "By a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters" (DL X.130).[84] Desires are of three kinds: "some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination" (PD 29).[85]

Torquatus states the principle behind this classification: "the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered" (*On Ends* I.45).[86] The classification is a tool for predicting how much pain the pursuit of a desire is

likely to bring. It is not a fixed list. Epicurus never set out exactly how to decide which desires belong in which category, and a desire that falls in one category for one man may fall in another for a different man, or for the same man in different circumstances.

What the classification does make plain is the danger of desires that come from idle imagination. Because "no bound or limit can be discovered" for them, they can never be satisfied, and a desire that can never be satisfied is likely to bring more pain than pleasure.[87]

But Epicurus never said, or implied, that we should limit ourselves to what is natural and necessary. He said the opposite: "We must not violate nature, but obey her; and we shall obey her if we fulfill the necessary desires and also the physical, if they bring no harm to us, but sternly reject the harmful" (VS 21).[88] The desires that are not necessary are those whose craving "is easily dispelled, when the object is hard to procure or they seem likely to produce harm" (PD 26).[89] When they are within reach and bring no harm that outweighs the pleasure, there is nothing to dispel. A feast with friends, a mountain climbed, a company built, a voyage to the far side of the world, or one day to Mars, is as much a part of the Epicurean life as a quiet evening with a book, whenever the pleasure is worth its cost.

The pleasant life is not a life of drinking bouts and luxury but of "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit" (DL X.132).[90] Sometimes we accept a pain for the sake of a greater pleasure, and sometimes we pass over a pleasure that would bring a greater pain. The measure is always the whole life, seen from its widest perspective, and the purpose of that measurement is to help us fill our lives with the greatest pleasure possible.

Virtue, Justice and Friendship

Virtue is not the goal but the means. "Virtue is preferred for the sake of pleasure, and not for its own sake, just as the doctor's art is employed for the sake of health" (DL X.138).[91] Yet "it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly" (X.132).[92] Justice is not a heavenly form or a divine command but "a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from

harming one another and save them from being harmed" (PD 31).[93] And friendship, the greatest instrument wisdom provides, is the setting in which the pleasant life is lived.

The Good in This World

Nearly every rival tradition in this book makes the same charge: that men will not be good unless they believe in something higher and truer than this world, a world of Forms, a providence, gods who watch them and will punish them, a life after death, or a moral law above nature, so that the belief must be kept alive even if it is a myth. Nietzsche saw the motive behind it: "There is no sense in spinning yarns about another world, provided, of course, that we do not possess a mighty instinct which urges us to slander, belittle, and cast suspicion upon this life: in this case we should be avenging ourselves on this life with the phantasmagoria of 'another,' of a 'better' life" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" §6).[94] Plato let the rulers of his republic tell a "royal lie," and Cicero warned that without piety toward the gods "justice itself, the queen of all the virtues" would disappear (*On the Nature of the Gods* I.4).[95]

Epicurus answered that the good is found in this world, and that the fear of gods is neither the source of justice nor its safeguard. Justice is a compact for mutual advantage, and men keep it because they see its benefits and because the unjust man can never be at ease. "Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions" (PD 34).[96] "It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if, at present, he escapes a thousand times" (PD 35).[97]

Diogenes of Oinoanda put the argument in plain terms. Wrongdoers who do not fear the laws do not fear the gods either, "for if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]."[98] The wise are just "on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death," and ordinary people, so far as they are just, are held to it "on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them."[99] As for the gods of the myths: "On account of what kind of gods, then, will human be-

ings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?" (Fr. 20).[100]

Lucretius added that the punishments of the underworld are idle tales, but that the guilty already punish themselves in this life: "the conscience-stricken mind through boding fears applies to itself goads and frightens itself with whips" (Lucretius III.1014–1023).[101] Religion, for its part, has driven men to crimes of its own. Lucretius's example is Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter to win a fair wind for the fleet: "So great the evils to which religion could prompt!" (Lucretius I.101).[102]

Confidence, Not a Guarantee

Epicurus did not promise anyone happiness. A promise would mean that the outcome is fixed in advance, and as we have seen, Epicurus denied that our lives are fixed. Some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some are within our control (DL X.133).[103] Our choices are our own. Chance can still strike even the wise man, though "in but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters reason has ordained and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain" (PD 16).[104] And so Epicurus "thinks it better to be unfortunate in reasonable action than to prosper in unreason" (DL X.135).[105]

What Epicurus offered was not a guarantee but a reasoned confidence. "The flesh cries out to be saved from hunger, thirst and cold. For if a man possess this safety and hope to possess it, he might rival even Zeus in happiness" (VS 33).[106] "The stable condition of well-being in the body and the sure hope of its continuance holds the fullest and surest joy for those who can rightly calculate it" (Fragment 11, *On the End of Life*).[107] The man who meditates on these teachings "night and day," Epicurus wrote, "shall live like a god among men" (DL X.135).[108]

That expectation does not look to a reward after death, or in another world, or for obedience. It looks to this life, here and now. Some things will always be beyond our control, but how we choose is not, and the man who has the nerve to

trust the senses that nature gave him, to learn the truth about the world, and to take hold of the pleasures that life offers can face the future with confidence that he is following the best path to happiness that life allows.

The chapters that follow show how seven traditions answered the same questions, and what they asked men to give up in exchange for their answers. The final chapter returns to the choice this one began with.

The Charges

Epicurus stands accused, and the charge is that he erred in championing this world: nature, and the faculties nature gives us, the senses, the preconcepts and the feelings. Most of the charges brought against him are therefore charges against nature itself, and to answer them is to defend nature as well as Epicurus, in nature's own court, which is reality, the only world there is.

The seven traditions in this book bring ten charges again and again. This chapter sets them out one by one. Under each charge comes Epicurus's answer first, and then the positions of the seven accusers side by side, so that the reader can see at a glance where each parts company with him. Not every accuser joins in every charge: Aristotle denied that our lives are fated, and the Skeptics affirm nothing at all. The chapters that follow then answer each accuser in the words of its own leading writers.

Charge I: That the Senses Nature Gave Us Cannot Be Trusted, and That Truth and Reality Lie Beyond This World

Before we ask how we know the truth, we have to ask what we mean by "true" and by "real." Most people assume the meaning is obvious, but the traditions give very different answers. Sextus Empiricus, who collected the ancient arguments, reports that "some say that there is not, others that there is, something true; and of the latter, some have said that only intelligibles are true, others that only sensibles, and others that both sensibles and intelligibles alike are true" (*Against the Logicians* II.4).[1] Epicurus tied the two questions together. "There is

no difference," he held, "between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting,'" and "That is true which is in the state in which it is said to be" (II.9).[2] What is real is what exists in nature, and what is true is what reports it as it is. Only then comes the question of the standard by which we test it.

- **Epicurus:** the real is what exists and acts in nature: bodies, made of atoms, and the void in which they move. The true is what is "in the state in which it is said to be."[3] Nature has no design and no intent to deceive, so we test it by the senses, the preconcepts and the feelings, and reason works from them and is tested by them.
- **Platonists:** the truly real is "that which always is and has no becoming," the eternal Forms, and the world we see "is always becoming and never is."[4] The mind alone knows the Forms. The senses deceive: men are like prisoners in a cave who see only shadows of puppets carried behind a screen, and learning is the soul's recollection of what it knew before birth.
- **Aristotelians:** Aristotle defined the true almost as Epicurus did, "to say of what is that it is."[5] But the highest reality is form and the eternal unmoved mover, true knowledge is of universal forms grasped by the intellect, and demonstration from first principles outranks the evidence of the senses.
- **Stoics:** only bodies exist, but the true is an "incorporeal judgement," so that sensations are true only "by reference to the intelligibles associated with them."[6] The test is the "comprehensive" impression, which the sage alone can recognize, and the good is judged by reason, not by feeling.
- **Skeptics:** whether anything is true at all is in dispute, and "if nothing true exists, the criterion of truth also disappears."[7] Every appearance can be opposed by an equal appearance, and the wise man suspends judgment.
- **Abrahamists:** the highest reality is the unseen God, and "the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."[8] The truth is revealed and received by faith: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."[9]
- **Humanists:** many doubt that the senses reach reality at all. Kant placed the "thing in itself" beyond experience, and Russell wrote that "the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience."[10] Reason

and conscience become the standard, with a "sacred" dignity of man that feeling cannot establish.

- **Buddhists:** the world of the senses is impermanent, the self is "a mere name," and "All forms are unreal."[11] Truth is reached by insight in meditation. The senses and every sensation are "on fire," and the disciple conceives an aversion for them.

Charge II: That Nature Could Not Have Produced the World Without a Divine Maker

- **Epicurus:** it was not made. The universe is eternal and infinite, and our world is one of countless worlds formed by the motions of atoms.
- **Platonists:** a good divine craftsman made the world, the only world, as a living creature with a soul, on the pattern of an eternal Form.
- **Aristotelians:** the world is eternal and unique, and everything in it moves toward ends, set in motion by an unmoved mover who is pure thought.
- **Stoics:** the world is a living, rational god, made and governed by divine reason, and it will be burned up and made again in an endless cycle.
- **Skeptics:** we cannot know, and so we follow the opinions of our city.
- **Abrahamists:** God created it out of nothing by his word.
- **Humanists:** they rarely say. Many accept whatever the latest scientific theory may say while keeping a view of man's place in the world that depends on the older, created one.
- **Buddhists:** the Buddha refused to say whether the world is eternal or not, because such questions "profit not."

Charge III: That Gods Govern Nature and Care What Men Do

- **Epicurus:** no. Gods are blessed and immortal, and they neither cause trouble nor suffer it.

- **Platonists:** yes. Gods care for men, and the man who denies it must be re-educated or punished under the law of impiety.
- **Aristotelians:** Aristotle's god does not govern by command, but he is the supreme cause on which "the heavens and the world of nature" depend.[12]
- **Stoics:** yes. Providence governs every part of the world for the sake of gods and men, and reveals the future through divination.
- **Skeptics:** we cannot know, but "following the ordinary view" we reverence gods and ascribe to them foreknowledge.[13]
- **Abrahamists:** yes. Not a sparrow falls without the will of God, and the denial of providence is the mark of the heretic.
- **Humanists:** the old providence is replaced by Humanity or Progress, which give the individual his duties.
- **Buddhists:** there is no creator, but the law of karma rewards and punishes every deed, in this life or the next.

Charge IV: That the Soul Does Not End with the Body, and Will Be Judged

- **Epicurus:** the soul is scattered, and death is nothing to us. This life is the only one we have, and it is to be enjoyed, not spent preparing for another.
- **Platonists:** the soul is immortal, existed before birth, and will be judged.
- **Aristotelians:** the soul is the form of the body and perishes with it, but the active intellect is "immortal and eternal."[14]
- **Stoics:** the soul survives for a time, or until the burning of the world, and is then reabsorbed into the whole.
- **Skeptics:** we cannot know.
- **Abrahamists:** the soul survives, or the body will be raised, and every man will be judged and sent to everlasting life or everlasting punishment.
- **Humanists:** most deny the afterlife, but many keep the moral weight that belief in it once carried.
- **Buddhists:** there is no self, yet there is rebirth, to hell or to heaven, until desire is extinguished.

Charge V: That Nature Acts for a Purpose Set from Above, and That Man Has a Place in That Purpose

- **Epicurus:** no. "Nothing was born in the body that we might use it, but that which is born begets itself a use."[15] The order of nature comes from the nature of the atoms and from the survival of what works.
- **Platonists:** yes. Everything was designed by the craftsman for the best.
- **Aristotelians:** yes. "Nature makes nothing in vain," and plants exist for animals and animals for men.[16]
- **Stoics:** yes. The world was made for gods and men, down to the pig whose soul serves as salt.
- **Skeptics:** we cannot know.
- **Abrahamists:** yes. The invisible things of God are "clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."[17]
- **Humanists:** many deny cosmic purpose but give man a purpose and a dignity that only a purposeful world could supply.
- **Buddhists:** nature is not designed, but it is ordered by karma, a moral law that weighs every deed.

Charge VI: That Our Lives Are Fated, Decreed or Settled Before We Choose

- **Epicurus:** no. Some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some are within our control, and "that which is in our control is subject to no master."[18] It would be better to follow the myths about gods "than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers."[19] The freedom to choose is part of nature, seen in our own experience, and the man who says that all things happen by necessity refutes himself.
- **Platonists:** each soul chooses its life before birth, but "the life which he chooses shall be his destiny," made "irreversible" beneath "the throne of Necessity."[20] In this life, "no man is voluntarily bad."[21]

- **Aristotelians:** no. Aristotle defended deliberation and held that "virtue also is in our own power, and so too vice."[22] But his freedom rests on a nature full of purposes, under heavens that move by eternal necessity.
- **Stoics:** yes. Fate is "a certain order and series of causes," and the willing soul "Fate leads, but the unwilling drags along."[23]
- **Skeptics:** we cannot know. Carneades argued against fate, but for Sextus the question of "what is in our power" is "still unsettled."[24]
- **Abrahamists:** God has decreed all things, yet he judges men for their deeds. "Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us."[25] "Everything is foreseen; and freewill is given."[26]
- **Humanists:** many accept a nature of strict necessity and keep freedom only outside it, in Kant's moral law or in Russell's "thought."
- **Buddhists:** the Buddha rejected open fatalism, but karma from former lives "allots beings to meanness or greatness."[27]

Charge VII: That Pleasure, the Guide Nature Gives Every Living Thing, Is Not the Goal of Life

Nearly every ancient school agreed that the goal is happiness, *eudaimonia*. The question is what happiness is. As Diogenes of Oinoanda put it, the issue is not "what is the means of happiness?" but "what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?" (Fr. 32).[28]

- **Epicurus:** pleasure, judged by the feeling of pleasure itself. Pleasure is not only bodily excitement. Every experience in life, of body and mind, that we find to be desirable deserves to be considered within the term pleasure, because pleasure and pain are the only two feelings nature gives us to judge by. A life free from pain is not an empty life but a life full of pleasure, because there is no neutral state between the two.
- **Platonists:** virtue and the knowledge of the Good, and "to become like God." The life of pleasure is the life of "a leaky jar."[29]

- **Aristotelians:** happiness as the activity of virtue, and above all contemplation. The man who makes pleasure his goal chooses "a life suitable to beasts."[30]
- **Stoics:** virtue, the only good. Pleasure is "the good of cattle."
- **Skeptics:** quietude, which comes when the search for truth is given up.
- **Abrahamists:** obedience to God and the reward of the world to come. The love of pleasure is a vice of the last days.
- **Humanists:** the perfection of man, the good of Humanity, and duty for duty's sake. Pleasure is at best a by-product.
- **Buddhists:** Nirvana, the extinction of craving. Life and birth are suffering, desire is their cause, and "From pleasure comes grief, from pleasure comes fear."[31]

A modern blend of several of these answers is now often presented as Epicurus's own: clear the mind, meditate, let go of desire, own less, and happiness will arise by itself. It takes the Buddhist's meditation, the Stoic's removal of desire, the Skeptic's quiet that follows giving up, and the Christian's "take no thought for your life," and it calls the mixture minimalism.[32] Epicurus's answer is different. Happiness is a life of pleasure, and it is reached not by emptying the mind but by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance" (DL X.132).[33] He valued the ability to live on little "not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things," but so that we need not fear the loss of many (DL X.130).[34]

Charge VIII: That Virtue Must Be Chosen for Its Own Sake

- **Epicurus:** virtue is the means to the pleasant life, as medicine is the means to health.
- **Platonists, Aristotelians and Stoics:** virtue is chosen for its own sake. For the Stoics it is the only good.
- **Skeptics:** virtue is good only "by belief," and the Skeptic follows the customs of his country.

- **Abrahamists:** virtue is obedience to God's law, rewarded and punished after death.
- **Humanists:** virtue is the fulfillment of duty and of human dignity, owed regardless of its consequences.
- **Buddhists:** virtue is the path to the end of desire and of rebirth.

Charge IX: That Justice Is an Eternal Law Above Men, Not a Compact Men Make for Their Mutual Advantage

- **Epicurus:** justice is a compact for mutual advantage, and a law that does not serve that advantage "no longer has the essential nature of justice."[35]
- **Platonists:** justice is a Form, known to the philosopher-kings, who may lie to the citizens for their good.
- **Aristotelians:** justice is in part natural, and some men are slaves by nature.
- **Stoics:** justice is the law of the world-city, written by the reason that governs all things.
- **Skeptics:** whatever the laws and customs of one's country require.
- **Abrahamists:** the law revealed by God.
- **Humanists:** the rights and duties that follow from the dignity of man, binding on every rational being.
- **Buddhists:** the law of karma, built into nature: "Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a man might be freed from an evil deed" (*Dhammapada* 127).[36]

Charge X: That Men Cannot Be Good If There Is No World Beyond This One

The rival traditions repeat one charge more than any other: that a good life and a just society cannot last unless men believe in something higher and truer than this world, whether the belief is true or only useful. The higher world may be a realm of Forms, a providence, gods who watch and judge, a life after death, a

moral law above nature, or a law of deeds that follows a man from life to life. Gods are its commonest form, but not the only one. Nietzsche named the pattern: "The 'true world' has been erected upon a contradiction of the real world" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "'Reason' in Philosophy" §6).[37] Cicero put its religious form in his own voice: if piety toward the gods disappears, "loyalty and social union among men" will disappear as well, "and justice itself, the queen of all the virtues" (*On the Nature of the Gods* I.4).[38]

- **Epicurus:** yes. The good is found in this world, in the pleasure and pain that every living being feels, and justice in the compacts men make for their mutual advantage. The fear of gods restrains no one whom the laws do not already restrain. The wise are just because they reason correctly about pain and death, and ordinary men, so far as they are just, are held to it by the laws and their penalties. "On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades" (Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fr. 20).[39]
- **Platonists:** no. The true world is the world of the Forms, and the good is known by turning away from this one. "No one who believes, as the laws prescribe, in the existence of the gods has ever yet done an impious deed voluntarily."[40] The rulers may tell the citizens a "royal lie," and unbelief is punished by law.
- **Aristotelians:** the stories of gods in human form were added to the ancient belief "with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to its legal and utilitarian expediency" (*Metaphysics* XII.8).[41]
- **Stoics:** no. The world is a city of gods and men, governed by providence, and "Injustice is impiety" (Marcus Aurelius IX.1).[42]
- **Skeptics:** they keep the ancestral religion as a custom of the city. The critic Critias, whose verses Sextus preserves, said openly that "some shrewd man first ... Discovered unto men the fear of Gods, Thereby to frighten sinners."[43]
- **Abrahamists:** no. "Fear God, and keep His commandments," for "God shall bring every work into the judgment," and without that judgment, says Lact-

antius, "it is the part of the wise man to do evil, if it is advantageous to him, and safe."[44]

- **Humanists:** More's Utopia barred from office anyone who denied providence and the immortal soul, lest men "seek after pleasure by all possible means, lawful or unlawful."[45] Kant kept the higher world as a moral law above nature, and Nietzsche described what remained of it in Kant: "The true world is unattainable, it cannot be proved, it cannot promise anything; but even as a thought, alone, it is a comfort, an obligation, a command" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Ultimately Became a Fable").[46] Modern Humanists keep the morality while doubting the beliefs that once enforced it.
- **Buddhists:** the law of karma enforces morality across lives: there is no spot in the whole world "where a man might be freed from an evil deed."[47]

Against The Platonists

Why Plato Matters to Epicureans

Of all the philosophers Epicurus argued against, Plato did the most to build the world that Epicurus set out to overturn, and Plato's arguments against pleasure are still the ones most often turned against Epicurus. An Epicurean who wants to understand what Epicurus was fighting, and why so many of the charges against him miss the mark, needs to know Plato.

Plato (about 428–347 BC) was an Athenian and a follower of Socrates. After Socrates was put to death in 399 BC, Plato wrote the dialogues in which Socrates is the chief speaker, and in about 387 BC he founded a school in a grove outside Athens, the Academy. Aristotle studied there for twenty years. How far Plato's Socrates is the real Socrates, and what the other witness, Xenophon, adds, is taken up below in the historical record.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was born six years after Plato's death. When he came to Athens at eighteen, Plato's pupil Xenocrates was head of the Academy (DL X.1), and one ancient report says that Epicurus had earlier been "a disciple of Pamphilus the Platonist in Samos" (DL X.14).[1] Epicurus therefore knew Platonism from the inside, and much of his own philosophy can be read as a rejection of it.

Plato matters to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, Plato built the world that Epicurus rejected. In Plato's dialogues the things we see and touch are only shadows of a higher reality, the eternal Forms, which can be known only by the mind. The senses deceive us. The soul is im-

mortal, existed before birth and will be judged after death. The world was made by a divine craftsman who "desired that all things should be good and nothing bad," and the stars are gods.[2] Pleasure is not the good. "Those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead."[3] This is the world that Epicurus denied.

Second, Plato's world outlived Epicurus's. The Platonic tradition passed into the Stoics, who took over Plato's creator god, into the later Platonists, and through them into Christianity. Saint Augustine wrote that of all the philosophers the Platonists came nearest to the Christian faith (*City of God* VIII). For most of the Middle Ages Plato's *Timaeus*, with its account of the creation of the world, was the only dialogue of Plato widely read in the Latin West. Much of what Epicureans today must argue against reaches us in Plato's words.

Third, many of the later arguments against Epicurus come from Plato's arguments against pleasure. The charge that pleasure is the good of "a leaky jar," that the absence of pain is only a "neutral state," that a life of pleasure is a life fit for cattle, that virtue cannot be "an exchange of pleasures for pleasures," all come from Plato.[4] Many of them were aimed at other men, such as Callicles in the *Gorgias*, who held views quite different from Epicurus's. But they have been used against Epicurus ever since, and Epicureans need to know where they come from and why they miss the mark.

The rest of this chapter follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states Plato's position in his own words and then sets out the Epicurean response. The dialogues drawn on most are:

- *Apology*: Socrates' defense at his trial, his "divine sign," and death as sleep or migration.[5]
- *Meno*: can virtue be taught?[6] Learning as recollection of what the immortal soul knew before birth.
- *Phaedo*: the death of Socrates and the arguments for the immortality of the soul.[7]
- *Gorgias*: Socrates against Callicles on whether pleasure is the good.[8]

- *Republic*: justice, the ideal state, the Forms and the Cave, the comparison of pleasures, and the myth of Er.[9]
- *Theaetetus*: the refutation of the claim that knowledge is perception.[10]
- *Timaeus*: the creation of the world by the divine craftsman.[11]
- *Philebus*: pleasure and wisdom compared.[12]
- *Laws* Book X: the case against the materialists, and the laws against impiety.[13]

Plato and Epicurus: The Historical Record

Socrates, Plato and Xenophon

As far as we know, Socrates (469–399 BC) wrote no philosophical works. The only writings Plato credits to him are poems composed in prison at the end of his life, "the metrical versions of Aesop's fables and the hymn to Apollo" (*Phaedo* 60d), and none of these survive.[14] He spent his life in the streets of Athens questioning his fellow citizens about virtue, and in 399 BC he was tried and put to death on charges of impiety and corrupting the young. What we know of him comes mainly from two of his followers. Plato (about 428–347 BC) made him the chief speaker in most of his dialogues. Xenophon (about 430–354 BC), a soldier and historian, wrote down his own memories of Socrates' conversations in the *Memorabilia*, in part to defend Socrates against the charge of impiety. Plato's Socrates often speaks for Plato's own theories, so Xenophon's account is an important second witness.

On one point Xenophon matters a great deal to Epicureans. In *Memorabilia* I.4 and IV.3 Socrates argues that the parts of the body and the order of the world were designed by gods for the good of man. David Sedley, in *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (2007), writes that the best evidence for Socrates' "radical stance on the creation issue" is "to be found, not in Plato, but in the less fashionable and, for most tastes, less exciting pages of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*" (p. 78).[15] "Xenophon's Socrates is a fundamentally anti-scientific creationist" (p. 78).[16] Sedley finds in Xenophon "a historical depiction of Socrates' ideas on divine creation which not only is inherently credible, but also represents exactly the reorientation from creationist science to creationist piety that we might ex-

pect of him" (p. 82).[17] Socrates "became the first to argue for the creationist option against the rival materialist hypothesis. Thus it was that the Argument from Design entered the scene" (p. 83).[18] Sedley adds that because Plato's dialogues "have eclipsed all our other sources on Socrates," "the vital material in Xenophon has been insufficiently appreciated" (p. 86).[19] The creationism of Plato's *Timaeus* therefore did not begin with Plato. It goes back to Socrates himself (see The Creation of the World below).

What Epicurus Said About Plato

Diogenes Laertius records the names that Epicurus gave to the other philosophers. "The followers of Plato he called 'Flatterers of Dionysus,' and Plato himself 'The golden man'."[20] The first name refers to Plato's visits to the court of the tyrants of Syracuse, Dionysius I and Dionysius II, where he tried to put his political ideas into practice. The second may mock Plato's myth of the metals in the *Republic*, in which the rulers have gold mixed into their souls (415a).[21]

The Epicurean Velleius on the *Timaeus*

In Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* the Epicurean Velleius begins by rejecting "the artisan deity and world-builder of Plato's *Timaeus*," together with "that old hag of a fortune-teller, the *Pronoia* ... of the Stoics."[22] He asks what tools and helpers Plato's god could have used, and he presses Plato on a contradiction: "the thinker who represented the world not merely as having had an origin but even as almost made by hand, also declared that it will exist for ever. Can you suppose that a man can have even dipped into natural philosophy if he imagines that anything that has come into being can be eternal?"[23] He asks too "why did these deities suddenly awake into activity as world-builders after countless ages of slumber?" Lucretius asks the same questions in Book V of *On the Nature of Things*, and David Sedley concludes that in the Epicurean attack on divine creation "[t]he main target of attack is clearly the *Timaeus*" (*Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*, p. 140).[24]

Velleius treats Plato and the Stoics together, and rightly so. The Stoics took over Plato's creator god and his providence, and the Epicureans answered both with

the same arguments. When Epicurus attacked the *Timaeus*, he was attacking the Stoics as well.

Colotes Against the Platonists

Epicurus's pupil Colotes wrote a book arguing that it is impossible to live according to the teachings of the other philosophers, including Socrates and Plato, and other works attacking Plato's *Lysis* and *Euthydemus*. He also criticized the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, asking why a philosopher who claims to teach the truth should tell a fable. Four centuries later the Platonist Plutarch wrote a whole treatise, *Against Colotes*, to answer him, and another, *That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible*. The quarrel between the Garden and the Academy was still alive in the second century AD.

The Academy Turns Skeptic

About fifty years after Plato's death the Academy itself changed course. Under Arcesilaus and later Carneades it taught that nothing can be known for certain, and it attacked both the Stoics and the Epicurean trust in the senses. This is the Academy of Cicero's *Academic Questions*, and its arguments are preserved at length by Sextus Empiricus (see the chapter Against The Skeptics). Lucretius answers the skeptic in a famous line: "if a man believe that nothing is known, he knows not whether this even can be known, since he admits he knows nothing" (*On the Nature of Things* IV.469–470, tr. Munro).[25]

The Canon: What Is Real, and How Plato Says We Know It

For Plato the first question is not how we know, but what is real. "What is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is" (*Timaeus* 27d–28a).[26] Truth belongs to the eternal. The world of the senses is only half real, and so the senses cannot be the test of truth. As Sextus

Empiricus summed it up, Plato held "that only intelligibles are true," because "sensibles are always becoming and never being."[27]

Epicurus began from the opposite answer. What exists and acts in nature is real, and "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting'" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[28] Every other difference between the two canons follows from this first one.

The Senses Deceive

Plato's theory of knowledge begins with distrust of the senses. In the *Phaedo* Socrates asks: "Have the sight and hearing of men any truth in them, or is it true, as the poets are always telling us, that we neither hear nor see any thing accurately?" When the soul "tries to consider anything in company with the body, it is evidently deceived by it."[29] The soul thinks best "when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure."[30] When it uses the senses, "it is dragged by the body to things which never remain the same, and it wanders about and is confused and dizzy like a drunken man."[31]

The *Timaeus* draws the same line. "That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is."[32]

Epicurus held the opposite. "Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations."[33] Reason cannot refute them, "for all reason is dependent upon sensations."[34] Error comes from the opinions we add, not from the senses themselves.

The Forms

Plato's answer to the unreliability of the senses is the theory of Forms: eternal, unchanging realities such as "absolute beauty and good and greatness," which the mind can know and which are the true causes of things.[35] The highest of them is the Form of the Good, which "may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence."[36]

In the allegory of the Cave, ordinary men are prisoners "living in a underground den," chained from childhood so that they "can only see before them."[37] Behind

them a fire burns, and between the fire and the prisoners runs "a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets."[38] Men pass behind the wall "carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials," and the prisoners see only the shadows that the fire throws of them.[39] "To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images."[40] Plato then explains his figure: "the prison-house is the world of sight."[41] Plato carries this so far that he tells the student of astronomy not to learn from looking at the sky: "whether a man gapes at the heavens or blinks on the ground, seeking to learn some particular of sense, I would deny that he can learn."[42] In the *Timaeus* the race of birds is made from "innocent light-minded men, who, although their minds were directed toward heaven, imagined, in their simplicity, that the clearest demonstration of the things above was to be obtained by sight."[43]

The Cave has a large defect, and it lies in the puppeteers. What the prisoners see is not nature at all. It is a show staged behind their backs: the figures are made things, the shadows are cast by men hidden behind a screen, and the prisoners are chained so that they cannot turn and look. Plato does not say why the carriers carry their figures, but his picture works only if the world of the senses is like a puppet show, arranged by others and shown to men who cannot check it. Nature is not like that. Nature has no design, no aims for men and no wish to deceive them. It holds no opinions, and so it cannot hand us false ones. Epicurus said the same of the senses themselves: "all sensation is irrational and does not admit of memory; for it is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it."[44] Falsehood comes in only with what we add: "falsehood and error always lie in the addition of opinion."[45] Nature gives us no puppet show and no house of mirrors.

Even an opponent of Epicurus chose a better image. In Cicero's *Academica*, Lucullus, speaking for Antiochus against the Academic skeptics, says: "Even the Cimmerians, to whom some god, or nature, or the foulness of the country that they inhabited, had denied the light of the sun, had still some fires which they were permitted to avail themselves of as if they were light" (II.61).[46] The Cimmerians may lack the light they would like, but the light they have is real, and no

one stands behind them using it to fool them. Plato's Cave has no such innocence.

For Epicurus there is no world of Forms behind the world we see, and no one is working the shadows. Because nature has no intent to mislead us, we can trust the senses, and by trusting them and using them to pursue pleasure, we can reach happiness through pleasure. Our general ideas, the "preconcepts," are formed from repeated sensations, and they are tested against the senses, not the other way round. The real causes of things are bodies and their motions, which we know by reasoning from what we see.

Learning Is Recollection

How can the mind know the Forms if it does not learn them through the senses? Plato's answer is that the soul knew them before birth. "Seeing then that the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has beheld all things both in this world and in the nether realms, she has acquired knowledge of all and everything," so that "research and learning are wholly recollection."[47] In the *Meno* Socrates questions a slave boy about geometry and claims that the boy, "without anyone having taught him," recovers the knowledge "out of himself."[48] In the *Phaedo* the same argument is used to prove that the soul existed before birth (72e–77a).[49]

Epicurus held that "all thoughts have their origin in sensations by means of coincidence and analogy and similarity and combination, reasoning too contributing something" (DL X.32).[50] The slave boy learns from a figure drawn before his eyes.

Knowledge Is Not Perception

The *Theaetetus* is Plato's most careful argument against the senses as the standard of truth. Theaetetus proposes that "knowledge is nothing else than perception."[51] Socrates ties this at once to Protagoras's saying that man is "the measure of all things" and to the doctrine "that all things are in motion, like streams."[52] Then he argues that the soul perceives through the senses as through instruments, and grasps being and truth by itself: "knowledge is not in the sensations,

but in the process of reasoning about them."[53] Therefore "perception and knowledge could never be the same."[54]

The strategy is worth noticing. Plato does not argue against the senses as Epicurus understood them. He joins trust in the senses to Protagoras's relativism and Heraclitus's flux, and refutes the combination. Epicurus held neither of these doctrines. He held that every sensation truly reports what strikes the sense organ, that error lies in added opinion, and that the atoms themselves do not change. Later critics of Epicurus often repeated Plato's move, treating any trust in the senses as if it were Protagoras's "man is the measure."

Summary: Two Different Canons

- **Plato:** only the eternal is truly real, and the world of the senses is "always becoming and never is."[55] The senses deceive, like shadows of puppets thrown on the wall of a cave, and true knowledge is of the eternal Forms, grasped by the mind alone, which recollects what the soul knew before birth.
- **Epicurus:** what exists and acts in nature is real, and what reports it as it is, is true. Nature has no design and no intent to deceive, and a sensation adds nothing of its own, so the senses are the first standard of truth. General ideas are built from sensations, error lies in added opinion, and the feelings of pleasure and pain are the standard of good and evil.

Physics: The Divine Craftsman Against the Atoms

Socrates Turns Away from Nature

In the *Apology* Socrates denies that he investigates "the things beneath the earth and in the heavens."[56] In the *Phaedo* he tells how he lost his early enthusiasm for "the kind of wisdom which they call investigation of nature."[57] He was hopeful when he heard that Anaxagoras made mind the cause of all things, but disappointed when Anaxagoras "made no use of intelligence, and did not assign any real causes for the ordering of things, but mentioned as causes air and ether and water."[58] To explain why Socrates is sitting in prison by his "bones and sinews" is to miss the real cause, which is his choice of what is best.[59]

This passage marks a turning point in Greek thought. From here on, Plato and his successors demanded that nature be explained by purpose, by what is "best," and treated explanations in terms of bodies and their motions as superficial. Epicurus, following Democritus, returned to the explanation of nature by bodies, and insisted that it is the only explanation that gives us true understanding which can give us confidence and free us from fear. "A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story" (*Principal Doctrine* 12).[60]

The Creation of the World

The *Timaeus* gives Plato's account of how the world came to be. "Everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause," and the creator looked to an eternal pattern, since "the world is the fairest of creations and he is the best of causes."[61] Why did he make it? "He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything," and "finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order."[62] The world is a single living creature with a soul, the stars are gods, and the creator hands the making of mortal creatures to the lesser gods (41).[63]

Plato does not prove the starting points of this account. He states them and treats doubt as impiety: "If the world be indeed fair and the artificer good, it is manifest that he must have looked to that which is eternal; but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern."[64] Sedley notes that these premises are "baldly stated at the outset (29a2–6), and nowhere treated as in need of defense—it would, after all, be a sacrilege to think otherwise" (p. 109).[65] Plato admits that an account of the visible world can only be probable, and he tells his hearers that "we ought to accept the tale which is probable and enquire no further."[66] For the traditional gods he asks for no proof at all: "How can we doubt the word of the children of the gods? Although they give no probable or certain proofs, still, as they declare that they are speaking of what took place in their own family, we must conform to custom and believe them."[67]

Some modern readers treat the creation story as a myth that Plato did not mean literally. Sedley argues that Plato meant a real beginning in time: "In Plato's case, the divine origin of the world is, by contrast, doctrinally of absolute philosophical centrality" (p. 103).[68] Aristotle, the Epicureans and the Stoics "all seem to have concurred in favoring the literal reading of the Platonic creation" (p. 107).[69] The questions of Velleius about tools, helpers and timing were aimed at the text as Plato wrote it.

Plato was not the first to argue this way. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* Socrates asks a friend who mocks sacrifice and divination to look at the human body: the eyes, the eyelids that close "as with folding doors," the eyebrows set so "that no drop of sweat fall from the head and injure them."[70] "I ask you, when you see all these things constructed with such show of foresight can you doubt whether they are products of chance or intelligence?" The friend agrees that they "would seem to be the handiwork of some wise artificer, full of love for all things living" (I.4.6–7).[71] The *Timaeus* builds a whole cosmology on the same idea, and the Stoics carried it forward.

Lucretius answers this argument directly. He warns against "the mistake of supposing that the bright lights of the eyes were made in order that we might see."[72] Such explanations "put effect for cause through wrongheaded reasoning; since nothing was born in the body that we might use it, but that which is born begets itself a use: thus seeing did not exist before the eyes were born."[73] He also turns the *Timaeus*'s eternal pattern against it. Where could gods have found "a pattern for begetting things in general as well as the preconception of what men are," and how could they know what atoms can do, "unless nature herself gave the model for making things?"[74]

Epicurus rejected each step. The universe is infinite and uncreated, made of atoms and void, and "there are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours."[75] No god made them, because a blessed and immortal being "knows no trouble itself, nor causes trouble to any other" (*Principal Doctrine* 1).[76] Lucretius calls the belief that gods made the world for men "all sheer folly," and points to its defects: "the nature of the world has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it stands encumbered."[77]

Against the Materialists: *Laws* Book X

In his last work Plato attacked the materialist view of the world directly. Its source, he says, is a doctrine held by men of science to the effect that: "all things which are coming into existence, or have or will come into existence, do so partly by nature, partly by art, and partly owing to chance."[78] The elements "all exist by nature and chance, and none of them by art," and by their chance combinations "they have brought into being the whole Heaven and all that is in the Heaven, and all animals, too, and plants ... not owing to reason, nor to any god or art."[79] These men say also that gods exist "by art and not by nature," by human convention, and that justice is a convention too.[80]

Plato wrote this before Epicurus was born, but it is a fair description of the view Epicurus would defend. Plato's answer is that soul, not body, comes first: the soul is "one of the first existences, and prior to all bodies," defined as "the motion able to move itself."[81] Since soul is the cause of all motion, the heavens are moved by souls, and these souls are gods. Epicurus answered that the atoms move eternally by their own weight, and that the soul is a compound of fine atoms which comes to be and passes away with the body.

Gods Care for Men, and Unbelief Is a Crime

Book X of the *Laws* begins from the claim that "No one who believes, as the laws prescribe, in the existence of the gods has ever yet done an impious deed voluntarily, or uttered a lawless word," and it names three kinds of impiety: to believe that gods do not exist, to believe "that the gods exist, but have no care for men," or to believe "that they are easy to win over when bribed by offerings and prayers."[82] The second is the Epicurean position. Plato argues against it that a god who neglected small things would be like an idle man, "a man most like to sting-less drones."[83]

Then Plato makes unbelief a crime. Anyone who meets with impiety must report it "by informing the magistrates."[84] There will be a prison "named the reformatory," where unbelievers will be held and admonished, and if a man "be convicted again on a like charge, he shall be punished by death" (909a).[85]

Plato also wanted the stories of gods controlled by the state. In the *Republic* the guardians must be taught that God causes only good things: "God, if he be

good, is not the author of all things, as the many assert, but he is the cause of a few things only ... of the evils the causes are to be sought elsewhere, and not in him."[86] Poets such as Homer, who say that Zeus hands out both good and evil to men, must be silenced. The rulers will tell the citizens a "royal lie" that God mixed gold, silver, brass and iron in their souls.[87] For Plato, religion is both true and useful, and its usefulness justifies lies and punishments.

Epicurus taught that gods are blessed and immortal and that they neither govern the world nor punish men. "The impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many" (DL X.123).[88] The Epicurean attack on religious fear is in part an attack on the use of gods as an instrument of rule.

Here Plato makes the charge that runs through the whole of this book: that men will not be good unless they believe in a higher and truer world than this one, a world of Forms and of gods who watch them and will judge them, and that the belief must be kept alive, by a "royal lie" if necessary and by law if not. Diogenes of Oinoanda answered him by name. The fear of gods restrains no one whom the laws do not already restrain, and the wise are just because they reason correctly about pain and death. "On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades." (Fr. 20).[89]

The Immortal Soul and the Afterlife

Most of the *Phaedo* is an argument that the soul is immortal: it comes from the dead and returns to them, it knew the Forms before birth, it resembles the divine and unchanging, and it brings life and so cannot admit death. "The soul is like the divine and the body like the mortal."[90] The *Republic* adds a proof that "the soul of man is immortal and imperishable."[91]

Three of the dialogues end with a myth of judgment after death:

- **The *Gorgias*.** After death each soul is stripped of its body and judged naked by the judges of the dead, so that no wealth or rank can hide what it has done. The curable are punished and improved, and the incurable are punished forever as a warning to others. Socrates offers the story "as the truth."[92]

- **The *Phaedo*.** Socrates describes the true earth, of which we see only the hollows, and the rivers of the underworld. The dead are judged and sent each to his place. The incurably wicked are hurled into Tartarus and never come out, and those who have purified themselves by philosophy live on without bodies. A man "ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were magic charms."[93]
- **The *Republic*.** Er, a soldier killed in battle, "returned to life" on his funeral pyre twelve days later and told what he had seen.[94] The souls of the dead are judged and spend a thousand years being rewarded in heaven or punished beneath the earth, tenfold for every wrong. Then they choose their next lives by lot, drink from the river of forgetfulness, and are born again. The *Republic* ends with the advice to follow justice "considering that the soul is immortal."[95]

In Plato, the promise and threat of the afterlife are used to support the moral life.

The *Timaeus* builds this judgment into the order of nature. Men "who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation," those who "had no philosophy in any of their thoughts" become beasts, and the most ignorant become "the race of fishes and oysters."[96] Sedley sums up the point: "Plato's world is not anthropocentric but, as we might rather say, psychocentric" (p. 126).[97] On his reading the whole order of nature is designed for the training and punishment of souls, whose highest reward is to escape the body altogether.

Lucretius answered the *Phaedo* in the third book of *On the Nature of Things*, with dozens of proofs that "the nature of the mind and soul is bodily" and mortal, concluding: "Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, since the nature of the mind is proved to be mortal."[98]

Necessity, Destiny and the Choice of Lives

Plato did not teach the rigid fate of the Stoics, and he did not deny that men choose. But he placed the decisive choice outside this life, and he set the life we live beneath the throne of Necessity.

In the myth of Er, the souls about to be born again come before Lachesis, "the daughter of Necessity," and each chooses the life it will lead: "the life which he chooses shall be his destiny. Virtue is free, and as a man honours or dishonours her he will have more or less of her; the responsibility is with the chooser—God is justified."[99] Once the choice is made, Clotho ratifies "the destiny of each," Atropos spins the threads and makes them "irreversible," and the souls pass "beneath the throne of Necessity."[100] Then they drink from the river of forgetfulness. The man who lives the life remembers nothing of having chosen it.

The *Laws* sets every life within a providence that governs each part of the world for the sake of the whole. The young man who doubts that gods care for men is to be told that "all things are ordered systematically by Him who cares for the World—all with a view to the preservation and excellence of the Whole," and that his own part, "tiny though it be," was "not generated for thy sake, but thou for its sake."[101] God leaves the shaping of each man's character to his own will, but then, like a draughts-player, moves each soul "according to the law and order of destiny" to the place it deserves, toward heaven or down to Hades.[102]

And where Plato speaks of praise and blame in this life, he takes them away. Of the man who gives way to pleasure, the *Timaeus* says that "he is regarded not as one diseased, but as one who is voluntarily bad, which is a mistake ... For no man is voluntarily bad; but the bad become bad by reason of an ill disposition of the body and bad education, things which are hateful to every man and happen to him against his will."[103]

Epicurus held the reverse on each point. There is no choice before birth and no river of forgetfulness, because there is no soul before birth. No providence orders the world, and no man exists "for the sake of the Whole."[104] The choices a man makes in this life are his own, and they are rightly praised and blamed: "that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame" (DL X.133).[105] Plato's soul is free only in a myth, and only once. The Epicurean is free here, every day, in the choices by which he wins pleasure and avoids pain.

Ethics: The Good Against Pleasure

Virtue and the Examined Life

Socrates told his judges that "to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living."[106] In the *Meno* he concludes that virtue "is imparted to us by a divine dispensation without understanding in those who receive it."[107] In the *Theaetetus* the goal of life is "to become like God, so far as this is possible," and to become like God "is to become righteous and holy and wise."[108] In each case virtue is either the end itself or a step toward the divine.

For Epicurus virtue is the means to the pleasant life. "It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly," and it is for the sake of that pleasant life that the virtues are chosen.[109]

Not an Exchange of Pleasures

In the *Phaedo* Socrates admits that ordinary men are temperate in order to obtain greater pleasures, and rejects this as false virtue: "this is not the right way to purchase virtue, by exchanging pleasures for pleasures, and pains for pains, and fear for fear, and greater for less, as if they were coins."[110] The only true coin is wisdom, and virtue based on the weighing of pleasures is "a painted imitation of virtue."[111]

This is exactly what Epicurus taught: "by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters."[112] The wise man gives up some pleasures to avoid greater pains, and accepts some pains to obtain greater pleasures. For Plato this is a counterfeit. For Epicurus it is prudence, "the beginning and the greatest good."[113]

Callicles Is Not Epicurus

The *Gorgias* contains the most famous of Plato's arguments against pleasure. Socrates' opponent Callicles holds that "he who would live rightly should let his desires be as strong as possible and not chasten them," and that "luxury and li-

centiousness and liberty, if they have the support of force, are virtue and happiness."[114] Socrates compares such a soul to "a leaky jar," and asks whether a man "who has an itch and wants to scratch, and may scratch in all freedom, can pass his life happily in continual scratching."[115] Callicles is driven to admit that some pleasures are better and some worse, and Socrates concludes that "it is for the sake of what is good that we should do everything, including what is pleasant, not the good for the sake of the pleasant."[116]

These arguments have been used against Epicurus for two thousand years. But Callicles' view is not Epicurus's. Epicurus taught that unlimited desires lead to pain, that "the wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity" (*Principal Doctrine* 15), and that justice is a compact among men, not a convention for the weak to be overthrown by the strong.[117] Epicurus agreed that some pleasures should be avoided. His reason was not that they fall short of a higher good, but that they bring more pain than pleasure: "Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen" (DL X.129).[118]

Callicles is also driven to admit that some pleasures are better than others, and Socrates takes this as proof that something other than pleasure must decide between them. Epicurus agreed that pleasures are not all the same. Some are greater and some less, some last and some pass quickly, and some bring pains in their train. But he held that they are ranked by one standard only: which of them, all things considered, makes life most pleasant. "Since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time" (DL X.129).[119] "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself: but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures" (PD 8).[120]

Epicurus's image is the man at a banquet: "just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant" (DL X.126).[121] The guest does not need a standard higher than taste to choose among the

dishes. He chooses by which is most pleasant. When Socrates asks which pleasures are "better," the Epicurean answer is the ones that bring more pleasure and less pain over the whole of life, and that question is settled by the feelings and by reasoning about them, not by a Good that stands above pleasure.

Pleasure and Wisdom: The *Philebus*

The *Philebus* is Plato's fullest treatment of pleasure. Socrates asks whether a life of pleasure without any wisdom, memory or knowledge would be worth living, and Protarchus, who began by saying "Having pleasure I should have all things," is brought to agree that it would not.[122] The dialogue ends with a ranking of goods in which "pleasure is not the first of possessions, nor yet the second," but comes after measure, proportion, mind and knowledge.[123]

Epicurus never proposed a life of pleasure without wisdom or memory. For him memory and expectation are among the chief sources of pleasure, and prudence is the greatest good because it secures the pleasant life. Plato's opponent in the *Philebus* is again a straw man.

The *Philebus* also contains Plato's chief argument that pleasure cannot be the good. Socrates and Protarchus agree that the good must be "the most perfect ... of all things" and "sufficient," lacking nothing.[124] Socrates then asks whether pleasure has a limit, and Philebus answers that pleasure belongs "to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree."[125] Since what is unlimited can always be increased, it is never complete, and so, Socrates concludes, "the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good."[126]

Epicurus denied the premise. Pleasure has a limit, and the limit is reached when all pain is gone. "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body nor of mind, nor of both at once" (PD 3).[127] Beyond that point pleasure "is not increased ... but is only varied" (PD 18).[128] A life with no pain in it cannot be made more pleasant, only pleasant in different ways. It is pleasure through and through, undiluted by any pain, and in that sense complete. This is a logical test of purity, and it answers Plato's demand for completeness on Plato's own terms.

The point must not be misunderstood. "Pleasure" does not exist apart from particular pleasures, any more than "color" exists apart from particular colors. When Epicurus says that all pain has been removed, he does not mean that nothing is left. He means that the particular pleasures by which we know what pleasure is, the pleasures of food and drink, of friendship and conversation, of adventure and achievement, of the senses and of the mind, the pleasures Epicurus praised again and again and that we know by feeling them, fill the whole of our experience with no pain mixed in.

The "Neutral State" and the Absence of Pain

One of Plato's arguments goes to the heart of Epicurean ethics. In *Republic* IX Socrates argues that between pleasure and pain there is "a neutral state which is neither pleasure nor pain," a kind of rest.[129] Sick men say that nothing is pleasanter than health, and men in pain that nothing is pleasanter than relief. But "how, then, can we be right in supposing that the absence of pain is pleasure, or that the absence of pleasure is pain?" Those who think so "err in contrasting pain with the absence of pain, which is like contrasting black with grey instead of white."[130] The same argument appears in the *Philebus*, where Socrates speaks of men who "think that they have pleasure when they are free from pain," and in the *Timaeus*, which explains pleasure as the sudden replenishment of a body that has been emptied (64–65).[131]

Epicurus answered this argument directly. "Epicurus consequently maintained that there 'is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling' intermediate between pleasure and pain," for the state "characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order."[132] A living being that is conscious at all feels either pleasure or pain. "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful" (*Principal Doctrine* 3).[133]

This exchange matters for how Epicurus is read today. Plato's claim that the absence of pain is only a gray, neutral condition is the source of the long tradition of treating Epicurean pleasure as a mere absence, a passive calm, and of asking whether Epicurus "really" meant pleasure at all. Epicurus's point was the reverse.

When all pain is removed, what remains is not gray but the full experience of being alive, which is pleasure.

Justice: Nature or Compact

In the *Republic* Glaucon states the view that men "think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither" doing nor suffering injustice, "hence there arise laws and mutual covenants."[134] He illustrates it with the ring of Gyges, which makes its wearer invisible. The rest of the *Republic* is meant to refute this view and show that justice is the health of the soul and is good in itself.

Glaucon's account is close to Epicurus's: "Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another ... it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 33).[135] Epicurus answered the ring of Gyges as well: the unjust man can never be sure of escaping detection, and so can never live free of fear (*Principal Doctrines* 34–35).[136]

Philosopher-Kings and the Private Life

Plato's answer to the problems of politics is that "until philosophers are kings ... cities will never have rest from their evils."[137] He tried twice to put this into practice at the court of Syracuse, which is why Epicurus called his followers "Flatterers of Dionysus."[138] Epicurus took the opposite view: the wise man "will not take part in public life," except when necessary, and he seeks security among friends rather than power over a city.[139]

Death

Plato's Socrates offers two views of death. In the *Apology*, "either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead has no consciousness of anything, or it is, as people say, a change and migration of the soul from this to another place."[140] In the *Phaedo*, the philosopher's whole life is a preparation for death: "the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men."[141]

Epicurus took the first view of the *Apology* and made it the whole truth: "death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is depriva-

tion of sensation."[142] And he rejected the *Phaedo*'s view of philosophy as a practice for dying. The right understanding of death "makes the mortality of life enjoyable," and philosophy is a preparation for living.[143]

Where Plato Helps the Epicurean Case

Plato is a hostile witness, but in several places he supplies material that Epicureans can use.

- **Death as a dreamless sleep.** Socrates' first alternative in the *Apology*, that death may be "like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream," is very close to Epicurus's own view, and Socrates calls it "a wonderful gain."[144]
- **Justice as a compact.** Glaucon's speech in *Republic* II is the earliest full statement of the view of justice that Epicurus adopted, and it is stated with great force (358e–360d).[145]
- **The materialists before Epicurus.** *Laws* X is one of the best surviving reports of the natural philosophy of the generation before Epicurus, and of its claim that gods and justice are human conventions (888e–890a).[146]
- **The contest of pleasure.** Even Plato could not let the question of pleasure go. In *Republic* IX he calculates that the just king lives "729 times more pleasantly" than the tyrant.[147] In the *Philebus* he admits "true pleasures," such as "those which are given by beauty of colour and form, and most of those which arise from smells," that have no pain mixed with them.[148] And in the *Protagoras* Socrates himself argues that the art of living is an art of measuring pleasures and pains.
- **Praise of sight.** In the *Timaeus*, Plato's distrust of the senses gives way for a moment: "had we never seen the stars, and the sun, and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered," and from sight "we have derived philosophy."[149]

None of this makes Plato an ally. Each concession serves Plato's order: the Forms in place of atoms, the craftsman in place of nature, the immortal soul in place of the mortal one, and virtue, wisdom and the divine in place of pleasure.

Plato's Long Shadow

The Academy, the Stoics and the Later Platonists

Plato's school lasted, with changes, until the sixth century AD. The Stoics took over his creator god and his providence, and the later Platonists, from Plutarch in the first century AD to Plotinus in the third, turned his dialogues into a religious philosophy of the soul's ascent to the divine. Plutarch wrote three works against the Epicureans. Throughout antiquity the Platonists and the Stoics, for all their differences, stood together against Epicurus on the questions of providence, the soul and pleasure.

Christianity

The Christian writers found in Plato much that they could use: a creator god, an immortal soul judged after death, a world of eternal truths above the senses, and contempt for the pleasures of the body. Augustine's high regard for the Platonists set the pattern for the Latin West. Through Augustine, and later through the revival of Plato in Renaissance Florence, where Marsilio Ficino translated all the dialogues into Latin, Plato became the pagan philosopher most at home in Christian thought, while Epicurus remained the type of the unbeliever.

The Modern World

In the twentieth century the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote that the European philosophical tradition "consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (*Process and Reality*, 1929).[150] The habits of thought that Plato established are still with us: the belief that the senses deceive and that truth lies in abstractions beyond them; the belief that the mind or soul is something other than the body; the belief that pleasure is at best a by-product of a higher good; and the belief that the absence of pain is a neutral state. Epicureans who meet these ideas today should know that they are not neutral observations about the world but positions that Plato argued for, and that Epicurus answered.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

The Canon: How We Know

- The senses deceive; the soul thinks best alone: *Phaedo* 65b–66a and 79c.[151]
- Learning is recollection: *Meno* 81c–86b; *Phaedo* 72e–77a.[152]
- Knowledge and true opinion: *Meno* 97d–98b.[153]
- Being and becoming: *Timaeus* 27–28.[154]
- The Form of the Good, the Line and the Cave: *Republic* 507a–518b.[155]
- Astronomy without the senses: *Republic* 529b; men who trusted their eyes become birds: *Timaeus* 91d.[156]
- The "likely story" and traditional gods: *Timaeus* 29 and 40.[157]
- "Knowledge is perception" and its refutation: *Theaetetus* 151e–160e and 184b–186e.[158]

Nature, Gods and the Soul

- Socrates and the study of nature: *Apology* 19b and 26d.[159]
- Socrates' turn from natural science; Anaxagoras; the Forms as causes: *Phaedo* 96a–100e.[160]
- Socrates' argument from design (Xenophon): *Memorabilia* I.4.2–7.[161]
- The creation of the world: *Timaeus* 28–30; the lesser gods: 41; souls reborn as women, beasts and fish: 90e–92c.[162]
- God the cause of good only, and the censorship of the poets: *Republic* 377b–392c.[163]
- The royal lie: *Republic* 414b–415d.[164]
- The materialists: *Laws* 888e–890a.[165]
- Soul older than body: *Laws* 891e–896e.[166]
- Gods care for men: *Laws* 899d–905d; each man made for the sake of the Whole, and moved "according to the law and order of destiny": 903b–904e.[167]
- The law of impiety: *Laws* 907d–910d.[168]
- The immortality of the soul: *Phaedo* 69e–107b; *Republic* 608c–611a.[169]

- Myths of the afterlife: *Gorgias* 523a; *Phaedo* 107c; *Republic* 614b.[170]
- The choice of lives before birth, the Fates and the throne of Necessity: *Republic* 617d–621a.[171]
- "No man is voluntarily bad": *Timaeus* 86.[172]

Ethics

- "The unexamined life is not worth living": *Apology* 38a.[173]
- Death as sleep or migration: *Apology* 40c–41c.[174]
- Philosophy as practice for dying: *Phaedo* 64a–67e.[175]
- Virtue not an exchange of pleasures: *Phaedo* 68d–69c.[176]
- Virtue a gift of gods: *Meno* 99e–100b.[177]
- Callicles, the leaky jar and the itch: *Gorgias* 491e–494e.[178]
- Pleasant and good not the same: *Gorgias* 495a–500a.[179]
- Justice as a compact, and the ring of Gyges: *Republic* 358e–360d.[180]
- Philosopher-kings: *Republic* 473c.[181]
- The neutral state and the comparison of pleasures: *Republic* 583b–588a.[182]
- "To become like God": *Theaetetus* 176a–b.[183]
- A life of pleasure without wisdom: *Philebus* 21; the absence of pain: 44; pure pleasures: 51; the ranking of goods: 66.[184]
- Pleasure as replenishment: *Timaeus* 64–65.[185]

Against The Aristotelians

Why Aristotle Matters to Epicureans

Aristotle (384–322 BC) has had a large influence on Western thought. For twenty years he studied in Plato's Academy. He then tutored the young Alexander of Macedon, and in 335 BC he founded his own school at Athens, the Lyceum, whose members came to be called Peripatetics. His surviving works fill a shelf of volumes and cover nearly every subject: logic, physics, astronomy, biology, the soul, metaphysics, ethics, politics, rhetoric and poetry. Thomas Aquinas built Catholic theology on his foundations, and Dante, who placed Epicurus among the heretics in Hell, honored Aristotle as the master of those who know.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was born when Aristotle was forty-three. The two men never debated in person, but their lives overlapped. Diogenes Laertius records that Epicurus came to Athens in his eighteenth year, "when Xenocrates was at the Academy and Aristotle was living in Chalcis" (DL X.1).[1] Aristotle had withdrawn to Chalcis after the death of Alexander, and he died there the following year. When Epicurus opened his own school in Athens in 307/306 BC, the Lyceum was flourishing under Aristotle's successor Theophrastus. For the whole of Epicurus's teaching life, Aristotle's school was one of the two great established schools of the city, the other being Plato's Academy. Their teaching was the philosophical establishment that Epicurus set out to overturn.

Aristotle matters to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, Aristotle was a major builder of the system that Epicurus attacked. Plato left behind dialogues, myths and questions. Aristotle turned them into a complete account of the world, worked out subject by subject. In that account the universe is a single, finite, eternal sphere. There is no void. Matter is not made of atoms. The heavens are made of a divine fifth element and move in perfect circles forever. Their motion is caused by a god who is pure thought and who moves the world as an object of love. Nature does nothing in vain, and every living thing exists for the sake of an end. The highest part of the human soul is divine and immortal. Happiness is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and the best life is spent in contemplating the eternal. Pleasure is welcome only when it follows from the right activity, and the man who makes pleasure his goal is called a slave who prefers "a life suitable to beasts."[2] This is the world that Epicurus denied.

Second, Aristotle's system outlived Epicurus's by more than a thousand years. When the ancient world gave way to the Christian one, Epicurus was condemned and his books were lost. Aristotle was taken up, first by Islamic and Jewish philosophers and then by the Latin Church. His unmoved mover became the God of the theologians, and his account of the soul was made to support its immortality. His ethics of virtue and contemplation was fitted to the Christian life. Much of what Epicureans today must argue against comes to us in Aristotle's words or by way of his arguments.

Third, Aristotle is the opponent most often mistaken for an ally. Many modern readers think of Aristotle as the down-to-earth student who turned away from Plato's other-worldly Forms toward the study of nature and the evidence of the senses. Raphael's famous painting *The School of Athens* (1511) shows Plato pointing up to the heavens and Aristotle holding his hand flat toward the earth. From this picture it is a short step to the idea that Aristotle and Epicurus were natural allies against Plato, both scientists and both "empiricists." This picture is badly mistaken. On every question that mattered most to Epicurus, Aristotle stood with Plato against Democritus, and Epicurus stood against them both.

The rest of this chapter surveys what Aristotle taught about each of the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics,

or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states Aristotle's position in his own words and then sets out the Epicurean response. The works drawn on most are:

- *Posterior Analytics*: scientific knowledge and demonstration.[3]
- *Physics*: nature, cause, chance, the infinite, place, void, time, motion and the first mover.[4]
- *On the Heavens*: the single, finite and eternal heaven, the fifth element, the elements and their natural places.[5]
- *On Generation and Corruption*: coming to be and passing away, and the case against the atomists.[6]
- *On the Soul*: the soul as the form of the body, sensation, imagination and intellect.[7]
- *On Sense, Memory, Sleep and Dreams*: five of the short natural treatises, including Aristotle's account of prophetic dreams.[8]
- *Metaphysics*: "first philosophy," Aristotle's history of the earlier philosophers, and his god.[9]
- *Nicomachean Ethics*: happiness, virtue, pleasure, friendship and the contemplative life.[10]

Aristotle and Epicurus: The Historical Record

What Epicurus Said About Aristotle

Only a little of what Epicurus wrote about Aristotle survives, and none of it is friendly. Diogenes Laertius lists the names Epicurus gave to rival philosophers. He called "Plato himself 'The golden man,' and Aristotle 'The debauchee,' saying that he devoured his inheritance and then enlisted and sold drugs" (DL X.8).[11] Athenaeus fills in the story from Epicurus's letter *On Vocations*: "after he had devoured his inheritance he entered the army, and on meeting with poor success in the campaign he betook himself to drug-selling. Afterwards, Epicurus says, Plato opened his school, and Aristotle went so far as to hazard himself there, and

attended the lectures, being no dullard, and gradually assumed the contemplative habit" (Usener 171).[12]

Athenaeus remarks that Epicurus is the only source for these stories, but the barb at the end is worth noticing. For Aristotle the contemplative life was the highest and most divine life a man could live. Epicurus presents it as the last stop of a drifting young man who had failed at everything else. The insult is aimed at the very thing Aristotle valued most.

The Epicurean Spokesman Velleius on Aristotle's God

One of the fullest Epicurean criticisms of Aristotle that survive is in Cicero's dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*. There the Epicurean Velleius reviews the theology of the earlier philosophers and turns to Aristotle's lost work *On Philosophy*:

> "And Aristotle in the Third Book of his *Philosophy* has a great many confused notions, <not> disagreeing with the doctrines of his master Plato; at one moment he assigns divinity exclusively to the intellect, at another he says that the world is itself a god, then again he puts some other being over the world, and assigns to this being the rôle of regulating and sustaining the world-motion by means of a sort of inverse rotation; then he says that the celestial heat is god — not realizing that the heavens are a part of that world which elsewhere he himself has entitled god. But how could the divine consciousness which he assigns to the heavens persist in a state of such rapid motion? Where moreover are all the gods of accepted belief, if we count the heavens also as a god? Again, in maintaining that god is incorporeal, he robs him entirely of sensation, and also of wisdom. Moreover, how is motion possible for an incorporeal being, and how, if he is always in motion, can he enjoy tranquillity and bliss?" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* I.33, tr. Rackham)[13]

Two points stand out. Velleius classes Aristotle with Plato's school ("not disagreeing with the doctrines of his master Plato"), right before turning to Plato's other pupils Xenocrates and Heracleides.[14] And he puts his finger on the problem that runs through all of Aristotle's theology: a god who has no body, who is busy turning the heavens, or who *is* the heavens, cannot also be a blessed living being who enjoys his own existence. For the Epicurean, a god must be a living being that is happy, and happiness belongs to beings that perceive and enjoy.

The Stoics Took Over Aristotle's Arguments for Divine Stars

In the second book of the same dialogue, the Stoic Balbus makes his case that the world is governed by divine providence, and he leans on Aristotle again and again. He cites Aristotle's argument that living creatures must be born in the heavens, so that "the stars occupy the region of aether, and as this has a very rarefied substance and is always in lively motion, it follows that the animal born in this region has the keenest senses and the swiftest power of movement" (ND II.42).[15] He praises Aristotle's argument that since the stars move neither by nature nor by force, "it remains therefore that the motion of the heavenly bodies is voluntary" (ND II.44).[16] And he quotes at length Aristotle's famous picture of men who had always lived underground, who come up into the light, see the earth, the sea and the sky, and conclude at once that "the gods exist and that these mighty marvels are their handiwork" (ND II.95).[17]

None of these three passages survives in Aristotle's own writings. All three come from his dialogue *On Philosophy*, which is lost. They are known only because Cicero reported them, and they are printed among the fragments of that dialogue in Valentin Rose's standard collection, *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1886). The men who lived underground are fragment 12 (p. 29), and the arguments about the stars are fragments 23 and 24 (p. 38).[18] Sextus Empiricus preserves another passage from the same lost work, in which "Aristotle said that the conception of Gods arose amongst mankind from two originating causes, namely from events which concern the soul and from celestial phenomena" (Sextus, *Against the Physicists* I.20).[19] The surviving works translated here carry the same theology forward: the eternal first mover of the *Physics* (Book VIII) and the *Metaphysics* (Book XII), and the living, divine heavens of *On the Heavens*.

Epicurus answered exactly these claims. In the *Letter to Herodotus* he writes that the motions of the heavenly bodies "must not be thought to be due to any being who controls and ordains or has ordained them and at the same time enjoys perfect bliss together with immortality," and that we must not believe that the heavenly bodies, "which are but fire agglomerated in a mass, possess blessedness, and voluntarily take upon themselves these movements" (DL X.77).[20] The phrase "voluntarily take upon themselves these movements" answers the Aristotelian ar-

gument for voluntary star-motion almost word for word.[21] The Stoics and the Peripatetics disagreed about many things, but they stood together against Epicurus on the divinity of the heavens. Aristotle supplied many of their arguments.

The Peripatetic School in Epicurus's Time

While Epicurus taught, Aristotle's school was led first by Theophrastus (head from 322 to about 287 BC) and then by Strato of Lampsacus. The Epicureans engaged both.

- **Theophrastus.** Epicurus wrote a work *Against Theophrastus* in at least two books. Plutarch quotes from its second book Epicurus's argument that colors are not intrinsic to bodies but "a result of certain arrangements and positions relative to the eye" (Usener 29–30).[22] Epicurus's student Leontion also wrote a book against Theophrastus, which so offended Cicero's Academic spokesman that he called it an example of the license of the Garden (ND I.93).[23]
- **Praxiphanes.** The chronicler Apollodorus claimed that Epicurus studied under Praxiphanes, a Peripatetic, but "Epicurus himself denies this in his letter to Eurylochus, and says he was his own teacher" (DL X.13).[24]
- **Strato.** Strato abandoned much of Aristotle's theology and explained nature without a governing god. On one point of physics the later commentator Simplicius groups him with Epicurus: both held, against Aristotle, that every body has weight and that light things rise only because heavier things push them up (Usener 276).[25]

Diogenes of Oinoanda Names Aristotle Among the Doubters

The great Epicurean inscription set up at Oinoanda in the second century AD names Aristotle directly. After attacking those who discard the study of nature by claiming "that things are inapprehensible," Diogenes continues:[26]

> "Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the

> nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception." (Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 5, tr. M. F. Smith)[27]

This may seem a surprising charge against the man who wrote the *Posterior Analytics*. But it makes sense once we see what Aristotle meant by "scientific knowledge." As the section on the Canon below will show, Aristotle held that the senses grasp only changing particulars, and that knowledge in the strict sense is of what cannot be otherwise. The world of the senses, for Aristotle, is not itself the object of science. Diogenes's answer is the Epicurean one: things change, but the senses still grasp their nature.

The Later Commentators Preserve the Epicurean Replies

The Greek commentators on Aristotle, writing many centuries later, preserve valuable evidence that Epicurus answered Aristotle point by point. Two examples, both from Simplicius's commentary on the *Physics*, Book VI:

- Aristotle had argued that if magnitudes were made of partless units, a moving body could never be *in the act of* moving over a partless unit, only *have moved* over it. Simplicius reports that "despite his having formulated it and produced his solution, the Epicureans, who came along later, said that this is precisely how motion does occur" (Usener 278).[28]
- Aristotle had argued that if there were indivisible distances, quicker and slower bodies would have to cross them in the same time. Simplicius reports: "And that is why the Epicureans too think all bodies move at equal speed through indivisible distances, so that they can avoid having their atomic quantities be divided" (Usener 277).[29]

In both cases Epicurus did not back away from the consequence that Aristotle thought was absurd. He accepted it and built it into his physics. Modern scholars, especially David Furley in *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* (1967), have shown how much of Epicurus's doctrine of minimum parts and of atomic motion was shaped as a reply to Aristotle's *Physics*. The Italian scholar Ettore Bignone argued in *L'Aristotele perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro* (1936) that the young Epicurus also wrote against Aristotle's early published works, such as *On Philosophy*, which are now lost. Velleius's criticism of the third book of *On Philosophy*, quoted above, is a clear surviving trace of that debate.

The Myth of the "Empiricist" Aristotle

Before turning to the doctrines, we have to clear away a common misunderstanding. Readers who come to Epicurus from a modern education often think of Aristotle as the scientist of antiquity, the man who studied animals and plants and trusted his eyes, in contrast to Plato with his eternal Forms. On that view, Aristotle and Epicurus look like two members of the same team. The ancients did not see it that way, and neither should we.

The ancients put Aristotle with Plato. Cicero has the spokesman of the Old Academy, Varro, say that through Plato "a system of philosophy was established which was one and identical, though under two names; the system namely of the Academics and Peripatetics. For these two schools agreed in reality, and differed only in name" (Cicero, *Academic Questions* I.17).[30] Sextus Empiricus names Aristotle first among the Dogmatists, the philosophers who "believe they have discovered" the truth (*Outlines* I.3).[31] He reports that "Aristotle and Theophrastus and the Peripatetics in general," because they divide things into the sensible and the intelligible, "admit a twofold criterion, sense of things sensible and intellect of things intelligible," and that intellect is "first in potency" (*Against the Logicians* I.217–218).[32] And in his list of the main positions on the reliability of the senses, Sextus sets "the Stoics and Peripatetics," who "have abolished some and established others," against "Epicurus and Protagoras," who "have established all" (*Against the Logicians* I.369).[33] In every ancient line-up, Aristotle stands on the other side from Epicurus.

Aristotle kept the essentials of Plato's view of the world. Aristotle did reject Plato's theory that the Forms exist apart from things, and he said so sharply. In the *Metaphysics* he writes that "to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors" (I.9).[34] He begins his attack on the Form of the Good in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by explaining that although the Forms "have been introduced by friends of our own," "piety requires us to honour truth above our friends" (I.6).[35] But he kept the conviction that lies behind the theory: that what is truly knowable and truly real is form, not matter; the universal, not the particular; the unchanging, not the changing. For Aristotle, the "form" of a thing is its essence, the "what it is" that a definition states, and this form is the source of its activity and its goal. Form, not atoms and

void, is what explains the world. The highest being of all is pure form without any matter: a god who is nothing but thought thinking itself. Part of the human soul shares in this divine nature and is "immortal and eternal."[36] This is not a rejection of Plato's "true world." It is that world brought down into things and given a new name.

Aristotle's science serves his theology. Aristotle observed animals carefully, and much of his biology is useful. But his physics and astronomy were built to support conclusions that no observation could establish. The heavens must be made of an eternal fifth element because circular motion must belong to a divine body. There must be one world and not many. There can be no void, because motion through a void would have no natural place to end. The first mover must be "without parts and without magnitude."[37] Over and over, Aristotle argues from what is fitting, perfect, or prior "by nature," and the answers come out as the theology of the Academy required.

Aristotle's purpose in nature is Plato's creationism without the creator. David Sedley, in *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (2007), reads Aristotle's view of purpose in nature "as a reasoned modification of Plato's creationism" (p. 167).[38] Aristotle took away the divine craftsman but kept the purposes the craftsman was supposed to have built in. Sedley notes the resemblance to Epicurus and the deeper difference: "In positing a detached and self-absorbed god, one who is above any inclination to intervene in our world, Aristotle sounds surprisingly similar to Epicurus. Yet unlike Epicurus he fully shares with Plato the conviction that god is the supreme explanatory principle" (p. 170).[39] His conclusion: "Aristotle is no creationist. Nevertheless, his ... contribution to the philosophy of biology owes its chief inspiration to the creationist theory that he studied in Plato's school" (p. 204).[40]

For these reasons Aristotle is best viewed as within the Platonist tradition and among those that adulterate the philosophy of Epicurus. Through the medieval church his system also became the philosophical backbone of supernatural religion, and his ethics of virtue has become a favorite of modern humanism.

The Canon: What Is Real, and How Aristotle Says We Know It

On what truth is, Aristotle came close to Epicurus. "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics* IV.7).[41] Epicurus said: "That is true which is in the state in which it is said to be" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[42] The two men parted over what most truly is. For Aristotle the particular things we see are real, but what makes them knowable is their form, which the intellect grasps as a universal, and the highest being of all is an eternal mind that no sense can reach. For Epicurus the bodies we perceive, and the atoms and void of which they are made, are the whole of what is, and the senses are our contact with it.

Praise of the Senses That Stops Short

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* opens with a sentence Epicureans can applaud: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight."[43] In *On the Soul* he goes further. "Perception of the objects of the special senses is true, or subject to the minimum of error," he says, and again: "sensations are always true, but imaginings prove for the most part false."[44] On a first reading this sounds close to Epicurus, who held that "all sensations are true" and that error lies in the opinion we add to them (DL X.31–32; DL X.50–51).[45]

The resemblance is real but shallow. For Aristotle, the senses report only particulars: this white thing, this sound, here and now. They do not reach what he considers knowledge. In the *Posterior Analytics* he defines knowledge in the strict sense, which the Oxford translators call "scientific knowledge," as knowing "the cause on which the fact depends, as the cause of that fact and of no other, and, further, that the fact could not be other than it is."[46] It follows that "the proper object of unqualified scientific knowledge is something which cannot be other than it is."[47] And Aristotle draws the consequence without hesitation:

> "Scientific knowledge is not possible through the act of perception. ... Seeing, therefore, that demonstrations are commensurately universal and universals imperceptible, we clearly cannot obtain scientific knowledge by the act of

> perception: nay, it is obvious that even if it were possible to perceive that a triangle has its angles equal to two right angles, we should still be looking for a demonstration."[48]

This is the hinge on which the two philosophies turn. For Epicurus, the senses are the first and indispensable standard of truth, and nothing can overrule them: "nor can one sensation refute another," and "nor again can reason, for all reason is dependent upon sensations" (DL X.32).[49] For Aristotle, the senses are the starting point, but knowledge in the proper sense lives somewhere else: in demonstration from necessary first principles, about objects that "cannot be other than they are."[50]

Demonstration and the Higher Faculty

How then are the first principles of demonstration known? Aristotle's answer comes at the end of the *Posterior Analytics*, and it contains both a close approach to Epicurus and a sharp departure from him.

The approach is his account of how general notions arise. "So out of sense-perception comes to be what we call memory, and out of frequently repeated memories of the same thing develops experience; for a number of memories constitute a single experience."[51] From experience comes "the universal now stabilized in its entirety within the soul."[52] Aristotle compares the process to "a rout in battle stopped by first one man making a stand and then another, until the original formation has been restored."[53] An Epicurean will recognize something like his own account of the preconcept, which Diogenes Laertius describes as "a recollection of what has often been presented from without, as for instance 'Such and such a thing is a man'" (DL X.33).[54]

The departure is where Aristotle ends up. The first principles, he says, are grasped by a faculty that is "truer than scientific knowledge" itself:[55]

> "...since except intuition nothing can be truer than scientific knowledge, it will be intuition that apprehends the primary premisses..."[56]

The word translated "intuition" is *nous*, mind or intellect. In *On the Soul* Aristotle tells us what this intellect is. The intellect that "makes all things" is "separable and impassive and unmixed, being in its essential nature an activity," and

"this, its essential nature, alone is immortal and eternal."[57] So the foundations of Aristotle's science rest, in the end, on a faculty that he describes as divine, separable from the body and deathless. Sextus Empiricus summed it up well: for the Peripatetics, sense comes first in order, but intellect is "first in potency" (*Against the Logicians* I.218).[58]

Epicurus had no place for any such faculty. For him, the preconcepts are themselves formed from sensations and are tested against them. Reason works with what the senses supply and is always "dependent upon sensations."[59] There is no higher court, and no part of the mind that touches truths the senses could never confirm. The Epicurean canon has three standards, all of them natural and all of them shared with the animals in some degree: the sensations, the preconcepts, and the feelings of pleasure and pain (DL X.31).[60] Aristotle's canon has a fourth, and it is the one he trusts most.

The Atomists' "Mistake," According to Aristotle

Aristotle thought he knew exactly where the atomists went wrong in their theory of knowledge. Discussing those who say that contradictory appearances are all true, he writes that this is "why Democritus, at any rate, says that either there is no truth or to us at least it is not evident. And in general it is because these thinkers suppose knowledge to be sensation, and this to be a physical alteration, that they say that what appears to our senses must be true."[61]

The charge is revealing. Aristotle assumes that if knowledge rests on sensation, and sensation is a bodily process, then truth is either impossible or relative. Democritus himself drifted toward that conclusion, which is one of the places where Epicurus corrected him. Epicurus kept the atomist account of sensation as a physical process and refused the skeptical conclusion. Sensations are true precisely *because* they are caused by real things acting on our bodies: "the visions of the insane and those in dreams are true, for they cause movement, and that which does not exist cannot cause movement" (DL X.32).[62] Truth comes from the contact between real bodies, not from a separable intellect. Aristotle's dilemma, either a divine intellect or no knowledge at all, is the false choice Epicurus refused.

Logic, Definitions and Dialectic

Aristotle invented formal logic. His *Prior Analytics* is the first systematic account of the syllogism, and his *Topics* is a handbook for winning arguments in dialectical debate. The *Posterior Analytics* insists that real knowledge is gained "by demonstration," meaning "a syllogism productive of scientific knowledge."[63] Definitions, divisions into genus and species, and chains of syllogisms were for Aristotle the tools of science.

The Epicureans treated this whole apparatus with suspicion. "Logic they reject as misleading," reports Diogenes Laertius.[64] "For they say it is sufficient for physicists to be guided by what things say of themselves" (DL X.31).[65] Epicurus told his students not to begin with definitions but with the plain meaning of words: "it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation" (DL X.38).[66] Cicero complained that Epicurus "does away with the process of definition; he has nothing to teach about subdivision or partition; he lays down no method for constructing and shaping an argument" (Cicero, *On Ends* I.22, tr. Reid).[67] The complaint was accurate, and it describes a choice Epicurus made on purpose. Words take their meaning from the things we have perceived, not from definitions built up by division. An argument that runs off from what can be perceived, however neat its form, proves nothing about the world.

This difference has practical consequences. Aristotle's science aims at the single necessary explanation. Epicurus distinguished two kinds of question. Where only one explanation agrees with the phenomena, as with the doctrine that "the universe consists of bodies and the intangible," we must hold to it.[68] But many things, especially in the heavens, "admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations" (DL X.86).[69] To insist on one explanation there is to fall back "on the useless course of thinking that things could only happen in one way" (DL X.97).[70] Much of Aristotle's astronomy is a demonstration that things in the heavens can happen in only one way, and that this way requires a god.

Truth About the Future

One logical question divided the schools sharply. Is every statement about the future already true or false? Aristotle took it up in a famous chapter of *On Interpretation* (Chapter 9, 18a28–19b4), using the example of a sea-fight that may or may not take place tomorrow. He held to the law of contradiction as "the most certain of all" principles.[71] But he saw that if one of the two statements, "there will be a sea-fight tomorrow" and "there will not be a sea-fight tomorrow," were already true today, then the future would already be fixed, and there would be no point in deliberating about anything.

He did reach an answer, though scholars still argue over exactly what it means. The whole statement "either there will or there will not be a sea-fight tomorrow" is necessarily true, but neither half of it is yet true or false.[72] In E. M. Edghill's Oxford translation (Vol. I, 1928): "A sea-fight must either take place to-morrow or not, but it is not necessary that it should take place to-morrow, neither is it necessary that it should not take place, yet it is necessary that it either should or should not take place to-morrow."[73] Of the two statements, "we cannot say determinately that this or that is false, but must leave the alternative undecided. One may indeed be more likely to be true than the other, but it cannot be either actually true or actually false" (19a30–19b4). So Aristotle kept the law of contradiction for the statement as a whole and gave up, for the future only, the rule that each statement must already be either true or false.

Epicurus came to the same problem from the side of fate. If every statement about the future were already true, then the future would already be fixed, and the Stoic doctrine of fate would follow. Rather than accept that, Epicurus denied that every proposition about future contingent events is true or false now. Cicero reports with disgust that the Epicureans "say that propositions of this sort are neither true nor false" (Cicero, *On Fate* 37).[74] Cicero adds that when the Epicureans were "ashamed of that," they said instead that the whole disjunction is true "but that the statements contained in the propositions are neither of them true" (the same passage). That is Aristotle's own answer. On this one point Epicurus and Aristotle stood together against the Stoics, who held that every statement about the future is already true or false and so made fate inescapable. Here again Epicurus preferred the evidence of experience, that our

choices are real, over the claims of formal logic. He did not let a rule of logic overrule what we perceive about ourselves.

Summary: Two Different Canons

Question	Aristotle	Epicurus
What is true, and what is most real?	Truth is "to say of what is that it is"; the most real is form, and above all the eternal unmoved mover	Truth is what "is in the state in which it is said to be"; the real is bodies and void
Are the senses true?	Mostly, about their special objects; knowledge is not perception	All sensations are true; error is in the opinion added
What is knowledge of?	The universal and necessary, what "cannot be other than it is"	The real nature of things, including changing particulars
How are first principles known?	By intellect (*nous*), separable and immortal	By preconcepts formed from sensation and checked against it
What is the role of logic?	Demonstration by syllogism is the form of science	Formal logic is unnecessary and misleading for the student of nature
How many explanations?	The single necessary one	One where only one fits the evidence; several where several do
Is the future already true or false?	Neither "there will be a sea-fight tomorrow" nor its denial is yet true; the whole disjunction is	The same, in Epicurus's fallback answer: statements about future chance events are not yet true or false

Physics: Aristotle's Universe Against Epicurus's

Epicurus summed up the nature of things in a few propositions. Nothing comes from nothing, and nothing passes away into nothing. The universe has always been as it is now and always will be. It consists of bodies and void. The bodies are

either compounds or the indivisible atoms of which compounds are made. The universe is infinite, both in the number of its atoms and in the extent of its void, and it contains innumerable worlds, some like ours and some unlike it (DL X.38–45, X.39, X.41).[75] Aristotle denied every one of these propositions except the first. His physics is, in effect, a point-by-point rival to the physics of the atomists, and Epicurus's physics is in large part a reply to Aristotle.

One Finite World, Not Infinite Worlds

For Aristotle the universe and the world are the same thing: a single sphere with the earth at its center and the heaven of fixed stars at its edge. Beyond that edge there is nothing at all. "It is clear then that there is neither place, nor void, nor time, outside the heaven."[76] *On the Heavens* devotes a series of chapters to proving that no body can be infinite (I.5–7) and then turns, in Aristotle's words, to show "why there cannot be more than one heaven."[77] Chapter 9 announces that "we must show not only that the heaven is one, but also that more than one heaven is impossible."[78]

What lies "beyond" the outermost heaven, if not body, place or time? Aristotle answers in the language of theology. The beings there "continue through their entire duration unalterable and unmodified, living the best and most self-sufficient of lives."[79]

Epicurus answered: "the universe is boundless. For that which is bounded has an extreme point: and the extreme point is seen against something else" (*Letter to Herodotus*, DL X.41).[80] Since the atoms are infinite in number, they cannot all have been used up in one world, or in any limited number of worlds. "There are infinite worlds both like and unlike this world of ours" (DL X.45).[81] Lucretius put the argument in a famous picture: wherever you set the boundary of the universe, a man standing there could throw a spear beyond it (Lucretius I.968–983).[82] For Epicurus, life is not a privilege of one central world; "in all worlds there are living creatures and plants and other things we see in this world" (DL X.74).[83]

No Void, and the Argument Epicurus Turned Around

Aristotle rejected the void outright. "The void is thought to be place with nothing in it," he writes, and he spends four chapters of the *Physics* (IV.6–9) arguing that there is no such thing.[84] One of his arguments is especially important. If there were a void, he says, a moving body would have no reason to stop: "no one could say why a thing once set in motion should stop anywhere; for why should it stop here rather than here?" And since speed depends on the resistance of the medium, bodies moving through a void, which offers no resistance, would all move at the same speed: "Therefore all will possess equal velocity. But this is impossible."[85]

Epicurus accepted both of the "impossible" consequences and made them part of his physics. The atoms do move forever until something stops them, and they do all move at the same speed through the void: "the atoms must move with equal speed, when they are borne onwards through the void, nothing colliding with them. For neither will the heavy move more quickly than the small and light" (DL X.61).[86] What Aristotle offered as a reduction to absurdity, Epicurus treated as a discovery. Epicurus was right. Galileo later showed that heavy and light bodies fall at the same rate when the resistance of the air is removed, and Newton's first law states that a body in motion continues in motion unless something acts on it. On both points the atomists, not Aristotle, had grasped the truth.

As for the void itself, Epicurus's argument was simple: "if there were not that which we term void and place and intangible existence, bodies would have nowhere to exist and nothing through which to move, as they are seen to move" (DL X.40).[87] Motion is a fact of perception. Void follows from it.

Against the Atoms

Aristotle rejected the atoms on several grounds, which he set out in *On the Heavens*, *On Generation and Corruption* and the *Physics*. He held that "a view which asserts atomic bodies must needs come into conflict with the mathematical sciences," because geometry treats every magnitude as divisible without end.[88] In *Physics* VI he argued that nothing continuous can be made of indivisible parts, because indivisibles could not touch one another part to part, and that indivis-

ible distances would require indivisible movements and equal speeds for all bodies.

Yet Aristotle took the atomists more seriously than he took most of his predecessors. In a passage of *On Generation and Corruption* he praises Democritus's method over the method of his own teacher's school:

> "those who dwell in intimate association with nature and its phenomena grow more and more able to formulate, as the foundations of their theories, principles such as to admit of a wide and coherent development: while those whom devotion to abstract discussions has rendered unobservant of the facts are too ready to dogmatize on the basis of a few observations."[89] And: "whereas the Platonists argue that there must be atomic magnitudes 'because otherwise "The Triangle" will be more than one', Democritus would appear to have been convinced by arguments appropriate to the subject, i.e. drawn from the science of nature."[90]

Later in the same book he concedes that "Leucippus, however, thought he had a theory which harmonized with sense-perception and would not abolish either coming-to-be and passing-away or motion and the multiplicity of things."[91] These are valuable ancient testimonies to the scientific seriousness of the atomists, and they come from their most formidable opponent. They should not be mistaken for agreement. Aristotle praises the atomists' method in order to reject their conclusions.

Epicurus's answer to Aristotle's mathematical objections was his doctrine of minimum parts. An atom is indivisible in fact, but it has extension, and it is made up of the smallest units of magnitude that can exist. These minimum parts are not points. They are the units by which sizes are measured. "We must not suppose that in a limited body there can be infinite parts or parts of every degree of smallness" (DL X.56).[92] Simplicius, as quoted above, reports that the Epicureans accepted the consequences Aristotle had drawn about motion over indivisible distances (Usener 277–278).[93] Aristotle's argument shaped the details of Epicurean atomism. It did not overturn it.

Natural Places, Lightness and the Fifth Element

In Aristotle's universe every simple body has a natural place and a natural motion. Earth moves down toward the center, fire moves up toward the edge, and air and water lie between. Fire is "light" in an absolute sense, not merely less heavy than earth. Epicurus rejected this. All atoms have weight, and things that seem light rise only because heavier things press beneath them (Lucretius II.184–215).[94] As we have seen, Simplicius groups Strato and Epicurus together as holding that "every object possessed weight" (Usener 276).[95]

The heavens, for Aristotle, are made of a fifth element unlike the four elements below. It moves naturally in a circle, and so, he argues, it has no contrary and can neither come to be nor perish. This "primary body" is "eternal and not subject to increase or diminution, but unaging and unalterable and unmodified."[96] Then Aristotle tells us why he is so confident:

> "For all men have some conception of the nature of the gods, and all who believe in the existence of gods at all, whether barbarian or Greek, agree in allotting the highest place to the deity, surely because they suppose that immortal is linked with immortal and regard any other supposition as inconceivable. If then there is, as there certainly is, anything divine, what we have just said about the primary bodily substance was well said."[97]

Here the theology drives the physics. The heavens must be eternal because gods live there, and gods must live there because that is what "all men" believe. Epicurus agreed that there are gods and that men have a true preconcept of them as immortal and blessed. But he denied that gods have anything to do with the heavens. The heavenly bodies "are but fire agglomerated in a mass" (DL X.77), and they come to be and pass away like everything else in a world.[98]

Does Motion Need a Mover?

Behind the dispute over heavy and light lies a larger question, and it is one that readers of Epicurus still ask. Can the atoms move on their own? Or must something outside them push or pull them, as Aristotle held?

Aristotle's answer is that nothing moves itself. Book VII of the *Physics* opens with the rule: "Everything that is in motion must be moved by something."[99] In Book VIII he applies it even to the natural motion of falling stones and rising

fire. A heavy body does not move itself, he says. It "contains within itself the source of motion—not of moving something or of causing motion, but of suffering it."[100] What really moves it is whatever first made it heavy, or whatever removed the thing that was holding it back. His conclusion is that "all things that are in motion must be moved by something" (VIII.4).[101] From this rule the rest of Book VIII builds its chain of movers, which must end in a first mover that is itself unmoved (see "The Unmoved Mover" below).

Aristotle also saw that the atomists did not accept his rule, and he complained of it more than once. Leucippus and Democritus, "who say that the primary bodies are in perpetual movement in the void or infinite," should be asked what kind of motion is natural to them (*On the Heavens* III.2).[102] In the *Metaphysics* he says of Leucippus and Plato that "they say there is always movement. But why and what this movement is they do not say," and he adds: "Now nothing is moved at random, but there must always be something present to move it" (XII.6).[103]

Epicurus answered the question the atomists had left open, and his answer is the opposite of Aristotle's. Motion is not given to the atoms from outside. It belongs to them by their own nature. "The atoms move continuously for all time," he writes, and "these motions have no beginning, since the atoms and the void are the cause" (DL X.43–44).[104] Democritus had given the atoms only size and shape. Epicurus added weight, and the reason he gave was motion: "it is necessary, he argues, that bodies be moved by the blow of their weights, for otherwise they would not move" (Usener 275).[105] Lucretius says the same: the first-beginnings "move on either by their own weight or sometimes by the blow of another" (Lucretius II.80–85, tr. Bailey).[106] Weight is not a push from somewhere else. It is a property of every atom, like its size and shape, and it is the atom's own cause of motion. Through the void, where nothing stands in the way, every atom moves "with equal speed," the heavy no faster than the light (DL X.61).[107]

The swerve is a motion of the same kind. According to Lucretius, atoms falling through the void by their own weight "at times quite undetermined and at undetermined spots... push a little from their path" (II.216–220).[108] Nothing outside the atom causes the swerve, and that is why it matters. Weight and blows alone would make every motion the necessary result of earlier motions, and the human mind would be "constrained like a conquered thing."[109] So, Lucretius ar-

gues, "in the seeds too you must needs allow likewise that there is another cause of motion besides blows and weights, whence comes this power born in us, since we see that nothing can come to pass from nothing... this is brought about by the tiny swerve of the first-beginnings in no determined direction of place and at no determined time" (II.284–293, tr. Bailey).[110]

Epicurus's opponents said that a swerve with no outside cause was a motion with no cause at all. Cicero made the charge in *On Fate*: Epicurus "is compelled to admit, if not by his words, by the facts themselves," that the swerve comes about without a cause (Usener 281).[111] But in the same book Cicero reports how the Academic Carneades thought the Epicureans should have answered. "Without cause" means "without an external and antecedent cause," not "without a cause of some kind."[112] The right way to put it is "that it is the nature of the atom itself to be kept in motion by weight and gravity, and that its nature is itself the cause of its travelling in this manner" (Cicero, *On Fate* 24–25).[113] That is the Epicurean position. The atom's motion has a cause, and the cause is the atom itself.

Epicurus's view contradicts Aristotle's argument for a first mover. Aristotle and Epicurus agreed that motion never began and never ends. But Aristotle's chain of movers depends on the rule that nothing moves itself, and Epicurus denied that rule at the level of the atoms. If every atom carries the cause of its own motion, then eternal motion needs no eternal mover. Nothing has to start it, keep it going or steer it. This is one more reason why the Epicurean gods have nothing to do with running the world, a point taken up again under "The Unmoved Mover" below.

Living, Divine Stars

Aristotle did not stop at making the heavens eternal. He made the stars alive. Faced with puzzles about their motions, he writes: "We may object that we have been thinking of the stars as mere bodies, and as units with a serial order indeed but entirely inanimate; but should rather conceive them as enjoying life and action."[114] In his lost dialogues he argued that their motion is voluntary, as we have seen from Cicero's Stoic speaker, and in the *Metaphysics* he assigns to each heav-

enly sphere its own unmoved mover, so that his gods of the heavens number fifty-five or forty-seven (*Metaphysics* XII.8).[115]

Epicurus rejected the whole conception, and he explained why it mattered. The belief that the heavenly bodies are blessed beings who move by their own will, or that a god directs them, is the source of "the principal disturbance in the minds of men" (DL X.81).[116] It leads men to fear the heavens and to see in thunder, eclipses and comets the signs of divine anger. "Do not let the divine nature be introduced at any point into these considerations," he wrote to Pythocles, "but let it be preserved free from burdensome duties and in entire blessedness" (DL X.97).[117]

Chance, Necessity and Purpose in Nature

One of the most important differences between Aristotle and Epicurus in physics concerns purpose. Aristotle's *Physics* II is the classic statement of the view that nature acts for ends. He begins by attacking those who explain the world by chance, and among them the atomists:

> "There are some too who ascribe this heavenly sphere and all the worlds to spontaneity. They say that the vortex arose spontaneously, i.e. the motion that separated and arranged in its present order all that exists. This statement might well cause surprise."[118]

He then states the rival view forcefully, and Epicureans should read the passage closely, because it is an ancient forerunner of the theory of natural selection:

> "A difficulty presents itself: why should not nature work, not for the sake of something, nor because it is better so, but just as the sky rains, not in order to make the corn grow, but of necessity? ... Wherever then all the parts came about just what they would have been if they had come to be for an end, such things survived, being organized spontaneously in a fitting way; whereas those which grew otherwise perished and continue to perish, as Empedocles says his 'man-faced ox-progeny' did."[119]

And Aristotle rejects it: "Yet it is impossible that this should be the true view."[120] His reason is that useful arrangements occur "invariably or normally," while chance produces only what is occasional.[121] "It is plain then that nature is a

cause, a cause that operates for a purpose."[122] In *On the Heavens* he gives the principle its shortest form: "But God and nature create nothing that has not its use."[123] In *On the Soul*: "nature makes nothing in vain."[124]

The Epicurean answer is the one Aristotle rejected. Lucretius tells how the earth in its youth produced many creatures that could not feed, defend themselves or reproduce, and how they died out, so that the kinds we see today are those that could survive (Lucretius V.837–877).[125] The appearance of design is the result of this weeding out, not of planning. And Lucretius denies Aristotle's principle at its root: "nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use" (Lucretius IV.833–835, tr. Bailey).[126] Eyes were not made for seeing. Seeing came about because there were eyes.

Aristotle's argument that what happens "invariably or normally" cannot be the result of chance does not touch the Epicurean view.[127] Epicurus never said that living things arise by pure chance each time. He said that the regularities of nature come from the fixed natures of the atoms and from the weeding out of forms that could not survive, so that the same seeds always produce the same kinds. The order of nature needs no purpose behind it, and no mind to supply one.

Aristotle's other arguments for purpose are weaker still. He argues that the swallow's nest and the spider's web are plainly made for an end, and that "by gradual advance in this direction we come to see clearly that in plants too that is produced which is conducive to the end."[128] Sedley points out that this step-by-step argument "could just as well have been used to prove the opposite," by starting from an iron railing rusting and working up to the bird and its nest (p. 176).[129] Aristotle also admits that nature, like art, makes mistakes, so that "monstrosities will be failures in the purposive effort."[130] A purpose that often fails to reach its end does little to explain the order we see.

In the end Aristotle's purposes, like those of the Stoics, point to man. In the *Politics* he concludes "that plants are created for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of men ... As nature therefore makes nothing either imperfect or in vain, it necessarily follows that she has made all these things for men" (I.8, 1256b, tr. Ellis).[131] He draws a political lesson from it at once: war against "those men who being intended by nature for slavery are unwilling to submit to it" is

"by nature just."[132] Sedley: "Here Aristotle follows Xenophon's Socrates in bringing the entire natural hierarchy within the scope of his teleology, which is itself given a manifestly anthropocentric focus" (p. 202).[133]

The Unmoved Mover

Aristotle's physics ends in theology. The eighth book of the *Physics* argues that motion is eternal, that every motion requires a mover, and that the chain of movers must end in a first mover that "must be unmoved" and "without parts and without magnitude."[134] The twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* tells us what this first mover is. It moves the heavens not by pushing them but as an object of desire and love moves those who desire it. It is pure activity, and its activity is thought:

> "On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And it is a life such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure."[135]

What does this god think about? Only the best thing, which is itself: "its thinking is a thinking on thinking."[136]

It is worth noticing that Aristotle, too, calls the life of his god a life of pleasure. On this one point he and Epicurus agree: the happiest being enjoys its existence. Everything else about Aristotle's god is the opposite of Epicurus's. Aristotle's god has no body, no senses and no friends. It is the cause on which "the heavens and the world of nature" depend.[137] And Aristotle draws from it a political lesson. The universe, he says, is ordered toward its good "as an army does; for its good is found both in its order and in its leader, and more in the latter."[138] He closes the book by quoting Homer: "'The rule of many is not good; one ruler let there be.'" The ruler of the universe becomes the model for the ruler of men.[139]

Epicurus drew no such lesson, and the difference shows again how far apart the two men stood. Aristotle reasons from the order of the heavens down to the order of the state: because the universe has one ruler, the rule of one is best. Epicurus had no ruler of the universe from which to reason, and he never said that the rule of one is better than the rule of many, or the reverse. He judged every form of government by a single test, the security it gives: "To secure protection

from men anything is a natural good, by which you may be able to attain this end" (*Principal Doctrine* 6).[140] The manuscripts of this saying add the words "rule and kingship" as examples of such means. Editors disagree about whether Epicurus wrote them, and Bailey's commentary sets out the dispute. But even if he did, kingship is good only as a means to safety, never as the best order of things.

Lucretius gives the Epicurean history of government, and it favors no form for its own sake. The first kings built cities "to be for themselves a strong-hold and a refuge."[141] In time the kings were put to death, and "things would pass to the utmost dregs of disorder, when every man sought for himself the power and the headship."[142] Then men were taught "to appoint magistrates and establish laws," and they accepted them because they were "worn out with leading a life of violence" (Lucretius V.1105–1160, tr. Bailey).[143] The only clear preference Lucretius states is a personal one, not a political one: "it is far better to obey in peace than to long to rule the world with kingly power and to sway kingdoms."[144] Epicurus himself wrote a book *On Kingship* (Usener 5–6), but Plutarch complains that the Epicureans wrote "about kingship to make us shun the company of kings" (Usener 8).[145] The wise man, says Diogenes Laertius, "will pay court to a king, if occasion demands" (DL X.121).[146] That is advice for living safely under whatever government one has, not a theory of the best state. The bluntest judgment in the surviving Epicurean texts may be a single sentence from a damaged column of Philodemus's *On Rhetoric*: "Rhetors prefer to live in a democracy, the worst form of government" (Book VII, tr. H. M. Hubbell, 1920, p. 339).[147] Even here the point is not that one ruler is better than many. The papyrus is too broken to show whether Philodemus is speaking for himself or reporting another's view, and the sentence is about the orators, who thrive where crowds decide. For the Epicureans the question of who should rule was never settled by appeal to the heavens. It was settled, case by case, by which arrangement best lets men live in safety.

Epicurus's gods are the reverse in every respect. They do not move the heavens or govern anything. "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself, nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favor" (*Principal Doctrine* 1).[148] Velleius's objection to Aristotle, quoted above, goes to the heart of the matter: a being that is "always in motion," or that sustains the

motion of the heavens, cannot "enjoy tranquillity and bliss" (ND I.33).[149] A god who must keep the universe turning is a laborer, not a blessed being.

Myths "With a View to the Persuasion of the Multitude"

One passage of the *Metaphysics* deserves special attention, because in it Aristotle says openly what Epicurus accused the religion of his day of doing. Aristotle explains that the ancients rightly thought the heavenly bodies were gods:

> "Our forefathers in the most remote ages have handed down to their posterity a tradition, in the form of a myth, that these bodies are gods, and that the divine encloses the whole of nature. The rest of the tradition has been added later in mythical form with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to its legal and utilitarian expediency; they say these gods are in the form of men or like some of the other animals..."[150]

Aristotle thought the stories of gods in human form were tools of social control, added to keep the many in line, while the "true" core of the tradition was that the stars are divine. Epicurus held almost exactly the reverse. The preconcept that gods exist in human-like form and live in blessedness is true, for it comes from "clear vision." What is false, and what does the damage, is the belief that gods govern the heavens and the affairs of men and reward and punish. "The statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods" (DL X.124).[151] Aristotle kept the divine heavens and approved the useful lie. Epicurus rejected both. Aristotle's "legal and utilitarian expediency" is the charge of Plato's *Laws* in a cooler form: the myths may not be true, but they keep the many in line.[152] The Epicurean answer is that a morality resting on stories the wise know to be false cannot be trusted, and does not need to be, because justice rests on the advantages that men can see for themselves.

The Eternity of the World

On one point Aristotle and Epicurus agreed against Plato. Plato's *Timaeus* had described the world as made by a divine craftsman, and Aristotle notes that "Plato alone asserts the creation of time, saying that it had a becoming together with

the universe."[153] Aristotle held that the world never had a beginning, and Epicurus held that the universe never had a beginning. Epicureans should not make too much of this agreement. For Aristotle the eternal world is an eternal *order*: the same heavens, the same species, the same divine motion, forever. For Epicurus the universe is eternal, but every world within it, including ours, is born and will die (Lucretius V.235–415).[154] Aristotle's world was not made by a god, but it is everywhere directed toward ends, and its motion depends on a god. The Epicurean arguments against Plato's creator, and against the Stoic providence that carried the same creationism forward, apply with equal force to Aristotle's god-governed order.

The Soul

Aristotle defined the soul as the form of a living body: "soul is the first actuality of a natural body having in it the capacity of life."[155] On this view the soul is not a thing in its own right, as it was for Plato, but the organization and activity of the body. Some modern readers have taken this as a materialist view, close to Epicurus. It is not.

First, Aristotle rejected the atomist account of the soul in detail. In Book I of *On the Soul* he reports that "Democritus affirms the soul to be a sort of fire or heat. For the"shapes" or atoms are infinite and those which are spherical he declares to be fire and soul," and he devotes much of the book to refuting this and similar views.[156] For Aristotle the soul is not a body at all. Epicurus answered that "the soul is a body of fine particles distributed throughout the whole structure" (DL X.63).[157]

Second, Aristotle exempted the highest part of the soul from death. As we saw above, the active intellect is "separable and impassive and unmixed," and "this, its essential nature, alone is immortal and eternal" (*On the Soul* III.5).[158] Interpreters have argued for two thousand years over what this means, but the words are plain enough, and the Christian scholastics read them as support for the immortality of the soul. Epicurus allowed no exception: "if the whole structure is dissolved, the soul is dispersed and no longer has the same powers nor performs its movements, so that it does not possess sensation either" (DL X.65).[159]

Perception: Forms Without Matter, or Images?

How do we perceive? Aristotle's answer is that "sense is that which is receptive of sensible forms apart from their matter, as wax receives the imprint of the signet-ring apart from the iron or gold of which it is made."[160] Nothing material passes from the object to the eye. The medium between them, such as air or water, is changed by the object, and the change is passed along to the sense-organ.

The atomists said that something material does pass: thin films or images that stream off the surfaces of things and enter the eye. Aristotle rejected this. In *On Sense and the Sensible* he says that to "say with the ancients that colours are emanations, and that the visibility of objects is due to such a cause, is absurd," and he criticizes Democritus for explaining "seeing as mere mirroring."[161]

Epicurus defended the images: "there are images like in shape to the solid bodies, far surpassing perceptible things in their subtlety of texture," which preserve "the respective position and order which they had before in the solid bodies: these images we call idols" (DL X.46).[162] The difference matters for the Canon. On the Epicurean view, the sensation is caused by a real material image of the object, which is why it can be trusted. On Aristotle's view, what reaches us is a "form" without matter, and the grasp of forms leads, step by step, up to the immaterial intellect.

Dreams Are Not Sent by God

On the subject of dreams Aristotle took a position close to Epicurus's but not identical. In his short treatise *On Prophesying by Dreams*, he doubts that dreams come from gods, for "it is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely commonplace persons."[163] Since animals dream too, "it may be concluded that dreams are not sent by God, nor are they designed for this purpose."[164] Most prophetic dreams that come true are coincidences, "like that of persons who play at even and odd."[165]

Even here Aristotle does not quite let go. Dreams "have a divine aspect, however, for Nature [their cause] is divinely planned, though not itself divine."[166] And he mentions Democritus's explanation of dreams by "images" and "emanations" only to offer a different one. Epicurus agreed that gods do not send dreams to

warn or reward us. But he gave dreams a more important place: the images of gods that reach us in sleep are one source of our true preconcept of what gods are like (Lucretius V.1169–1182).[167]

Ethics: Virtue and Contemplation Against Pleasure

Happiness Is the Goal, but What Is Happiness?

Aristotle and Epicurus agreed on the form of the question. Both held that there is a single highest good, desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and both called it happiness. Aristotle writes that "both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ."[168] Epicurus agreed that everything is done for the sake of the blessed life.

They disagreed about what happiness is, and the disagreement could not be sharper. Epicurus: "we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good" (DL X.129).[169] Aristotle, after his famous argument from the "function" of man, concludes that "human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete."[170]

The whole of Aristotle's ethics follows from this definition. Virtue is not a means to happiness, as it is for Epicurus. The activity of virtue *is* happiness. And since the best virtue belongs to the best part of the soul, the best life of all will turn out to be the life of the divine intellect.

"A Life Suitable to Beasts"

Aristotle opens his review of the candidates for happiness with the life of pleasure, and he dismisses it in the language that the enemies of Epicurus would repeat for the next two thousand years:

> "To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life—that just mentioned, the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts..."[171]

Notice how the argument works. Aristotle never shows that pleasure is not the good. He identifies pleasure with the tastes of "the mass of mankind," calls those tastes "slavish," and moves on.[172] Later in the work he uses the same device. Bodily pleasures cannot be happiness, he says, because "any chance person—even a slave—can enjoy the bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one assigns to a slave a share in happiness."[173] The argument assumes what it sets out to prove: that happiness belongs to "the best man," defined by his virtue, and not to anyone who simply lives pleasantly.

Epicurus answered this kind of argument in the *Letter to Menoeceus*. When we say that pleasure is the end, "we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand" (DL X.131).[174] Pleasure for Epicurus includes all experience that is not painful: the pleasures of the body, but also friendship, conversation, adventure, achievement, learning, memory and confident expectation. And the reason we choose it is not that the crowd chooses it, but that nature has given every living creature the feelings of pleasure and pain as its guide.

Eudoxus: The Champion of Pleasure Aristotle Could Not Refute

Aristotle knew the case for pleasure well, because it had been made inside Plato's Academy by the astronomer and mathematician Eudoxus of Cnidus. Aristotle's report of Eudoxus's argument is the earliest surviving statement of what Epicureans call the cradle argument:

> "Eudoxus thought pleasure was the good because he saw all things, both rational and irrational, aiming at it, and because in all things that which is the object of choice is what is excellent, and that which is most the object of

> choice the greatest good ... He believed that the same conclusion followed no less plainly from a study of the contrary of pleasure; pain was in itself an object of aversion to all things..."[175]

Aristotle adds a revealing remark: Eudoxus's "arguments were credited more because of the excellence of his character than for their own sake; he was thought to be remarkably self-controlled, and therefore it was thought that he was not saying what he did say as a friend of pleasure, but that the facts really were so."[176] In other words, the argument for pleasure was respectable only when it came from a man who did not seem to enjoy himself.

Aristotle could not bring himself to reject Eudoxus's starting point. In Book I he says that "Eudoxus also seems to have been right in his method of advocating the supremacy of pleasure."[177] In Book VII he goes further: "the fact that all things, both brutes and men, pursue pleasure is an indication of its being somehow the chief good."[178] And in Book X, against those who say that what all things aim at is not necessarily good, he replies that they are "talking nonsense. For we say that that which every one thinks really is so."[179] Yet in the end he refuses the conclusion. Pleasure, he decides, is good, but it is not *the* good. The best pleasures are those that accompany the best activities, and so the activity, not the pleasure, is what matters.

Epicurus took Eudoxus's argument and followed it to its conclusion. "Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil" (Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* I.30, tr. Reid).[180] Sextus Empiricus reports the Epicurean version: the animals, "as soon as they are born, when still unperverted, seek after pleasure and avoid pains" (*Outlines* III.194).[181] Where Aristotle hesitated, Epicurus did not.

Higher Pleasures, Lower Pleasures, and the Good Man as Measure

Aristotle's treatment of pleasure in Book X of the *Ethics* is subtle. He argues—against the Platonists—that pleasure is not a "process" or a "becoming," but something complete at every moment, like seeing. He writes that "pleasure completes the activity not as the corresponding permanent state does, by its imman-

ence, but as an end which supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age."[182]

But Aristotle uses this account to divide pleasures into higher and lower kinds, and to declare that some pleasures are not really pleasures at all. Because each activity has its own pleasure, pleasures differ in worth as the activities do: "The pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an unworthy activity bad."[183] And who decides which activities, and therefore which pleasures, are worthy? The "good man:"

> "But in all such matters that which appears to the good man is thought to be really so. If this is correct, as it seems to be, and virtue and the good man as such are the measure of each thing, those also will be pleasures which appear so to him, and those things pleasant which he enjoys. If the things he finds tiresome seem pleasant to some one, that is nothing surprising; for men may be ruined and spoilt in many ways; but the things are not pleasant, but only pleasant to these people and to people in this condition. Those which are admittedly disgraceful plainly should not be said to be pleasures, except to a perverted taste..."[184]

This passage is the source of a way of speaking that Epicureans must reject: the habit of dividing pleasures into "real" ones and pleasures that are "not really pleasures," and of handing the judgment to the virtuous man. For Epicurus, the feeling of pleasure is itself a standard of truth, as the senses are. A pleasure is always a pleasure. What can be wrong is not the feeling but the choice: a pleasure may be small, or short, or followed by pains that outweigh it. "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures" (*Principal Doctrine* 8).[185] Aristotle makes the choice of the virtuous man the measure of pleasure. Epicurus makes pleasure the measure of choice.

Aristotle also gives us the image that has followed Epicurus ever since: "no one would choose to live with the intellect of a child throughout his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at."[186] The argument is aimed at a straw man. No Epicurean text says that the pleasures of a child are the greatest available to an adult. The point of the Epicurean classification of desires, and of the "sober reasoning" Epicurus praised (DL X.132), is

precisely to find the greatest pleasures available to a mature and informed human being.[187]

Pleasure as Restoration, and the "Painless State"

In Book VII Aristotle reports the views of others in Plato's school who denied that pleasure is a good at all. One of their arguments was that "A man of practical wisdom pursues what is free from pain, not what is pleasant."[188] Aristotle himself held that "the processes that restore us to our natural state are only incidentally pleasant," and that true pleasures "are not processes nor do they all involve process—they are activities and ends."[189]

These passages matter for Epicureans because so much modern writing about Epicurus is built on them. The Academic view that the wise man seeks freedom from pain rather than pleasure treats painlessness as a higher but neutral state between pleasure and pain. Aristotle's division between the pleasures of "restoration" and the pleasures of unimpeded activity has become the frame through which many scholars read Epicurus's distinction between active and stable pleasures, and from there they conclude that Epicurus's real goal was a quiet, painless "tranquility." Both frames are foreign to Epicurus. He denied that there is any neutral state: "what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible" (Torquatus in Cicero, *On Ends* I.38, tr. Reid).[190] For Epicurus, freedom from pain *is* pleasure, and it is reached by living, not by withdrawing from life. Readers who meet the "absence of pain" in Epicurus should remember that the idea of a painless neutral state, preferred by the wise man to pleasure, comes from Plato's school by way of Aristotle's report, and not from Epicurus.

Contemplation: "Make Ourselves Immortal"

At the end of the *Ethics*, Aristotle tells us what the best life really is. If happiness is activity in accordance with the highest virtue, it must be the activity of "the best thing in us," and that is the intellect.[191] The happiest life is the life of contemplation, the study of eternal and unchanging truths for their own sake. But this life, he admits, is more than human:

> "But such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him ... But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us..."[192]

The model for this life is the life of gods. What do gods do? Not just acts, or brave ones, or generous ones: "Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative."[193] And so the human life most akin to it is the happiest.

This is the heart of the matter. Epicurus also held that gods are models of the happiest life, and that a wise man can "live like a god among men" (DL X.135).[194] But Epicurus's gods are living beings who enjoy their existence, and the god-like life is a life of pleasure among friends, not a life of pure thought in imitation of a god without a body. Aristotle tells the mortal to make himself immortal. Epicurus tells him that he is mortal, that this is no cause for grief, and that a mortal life well lived is complete. "Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure" (*Principal Doctrine* 19).[195]

Death: "The Most Terrible of All Things"

The contrast is sharpest on the subject of death. In his discussion of courage, Aristotle writes:

> "Now death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead."[196]

Epicurus begins from exactly the same premise and draws exactly the opposite conclusion. Death is the end, and nothing is good or bad for the dead. *Therefore* death is nothing to us: "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more" (DL X.125).[197]

Aristotle goes further. The better a man is, he says, the more he should dread death: "the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful."[198] For Aristotle, courage is the virtue of the man who faces this terror for the sake of what is noble, above all in battle. For Epicurus, the terror itself is a mistake, and the man who understands the nature of death is freed from it.

Aristotle was even unsure whether the dead are beyond harm. He discusses whether a dead man can be affected by the fortunes of his children and descendants, since "both evil and good are thought to exist for a dead man, as much as for one who is alive but not aware of them," and concludes only that if anything good or bad reaches the dead, "it must be something weak and negligible."[199] Epicurus would not leave even this much uncertainty: "Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us" (*Principal Doctrine* 2).[200]

External Goods, Fortune, and the Man on the Rack

Aristotle held that the virtuous man needs external goods to be happy: friends, wealth, power, good birth, good children and good looks. "Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well," and "the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy."[201] Since these goods depend on fortune, the happiness of even the best man is exposed to chance. Aristotle draws the consequence in a sentence that seems aimed directly at the claim, later recorded as Epicurus's, that the wise man is happy even under torture:

> "Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense."[202]

Epicurus held the opposite: "even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy," though, Diogenes Laertius adds, "when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament" (DL X.118).[203] He did not deny the pain. He denied that pain, which is either short or bearable, can outweigh the pleasures of memory, friendship, past adventures and achievements, and understanding that the wise

man carries with him. "In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters, reason has ordained" (*Principal Doctrine* 16).[204] Epicurus himself proved the point on his last day, when he wrote that the pain of his illness was set against "the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you" (DL X.22).[205]

Honor and the "Great-Souled" Man

Aristotle's portrait of the man of "pride" or greatness of soul (Book IV, Chapter 3) describes the ideal citizen of the Greek city: a man who thinks himself worthy of great things and is worthy of them, and whose chief concern is honor.[206] For Aristotle, "honour is the prize of virtue, and it is to the good that it is rendered."[207]

Epicurus regarded the craving for honor and fame as an empty desire, neither natural nor necessary, because such craving can never be satisfied and depends on the opinions of others. "Some men wished to become famous and conspicuous, thinking that they would thus win for themselves safety from other men" (*Principal Doctrine* 7).[208] Fame is worth having only to the extent that it actually brings security. This is not a counsel of withdrawal. The Epicureans took part in the festivals and the social life of their cities, and Epicurus corresponded with friends who held high office, such as Idomeneus of Lampsacus. But the Epicurean judged honor by what it brought him, not as the reward of virtue or the goal of a noble life.

Justice: By Nature or by Agreement?

Aristotle taught that "of political justice part is natural, part legal, natural, that which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people's thinking this or that."[209] Epicurus agreed that justice has a basis in nature, but he located that basis in mutual advantage: "The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage, to restrain men from harming one another, and save them from being harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 31).[210] And he denied that justice exists apart from agreements: "Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another, in any place whatever, and at any time, it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 33).[211] For Aristotle,

the natural part of justice is the same everywhere. For Epicurus, what is just is what is advantageous to those who make the agreement, and it can change as circumstances change (*Principal Doctrines* 36–38).[212]

Friendship

Aristotle's books on friendship (VIII and IX) are the parts of his ethics that Epicureans most often admire. "For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."[213] Epicurus would agree: "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (*Principal Doctrine* 27).[214]

But the agreement is narrower than it looks. Aristotle divides friendship into three kinds: for utility, for pleasure, and for virtue. The first two are inferior and unstable: "those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure."[215] Only the third is complete: "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue."[216] Friendship founded on pleasure is, for Aristotle, the friendship of the young, who "live under the guidance of emotion."[217]

Epicurus rejected this ranking. Friendship begins from need and from the pleasures and help it brings, and it is precisely for the sake of the pleasure and security it provides that the wise man values it so highly. "The same knowledge that makes one confident that nothing dreadful is eternal or long-lasting also recognizes, in the face of these limited evils, the security afforded by friendship" (*Principal Doctrine* 28).[218] Because a friendship is valued for the good it brings to the friends, the Epicurean will go to great lengths for his friend, and "on occasion he will even die for a friend" (DL X.121).[219] Aristotle's "perfect" friendship is reserved for men who are good in his sense, and it looks down on the friendships of pleasure. The Epicurean values his friends because of the pleasure and security they bring, and he does not apologize for it.

Law, Compulsion and the Imposed Good

Aristotle's ethics leads into his politics, and its last chapter shows where it is headed. Arguments, Aristotle says, are not enough to make most men good:

> "...for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than the sense of what is noble. This is why some think that legislators ought to stimulate men to virtue and urge them forward by the motive of the noble..."[220]

The state, for Aristotle, exists to make its citizens virtuous, and it may use law and punishment to do so. The good is defined by the virtuous few, and the many must be brought to it by compulsion. This is the pattern that Epicurus resisted, and that later critics of moral absolutism, Nietzsche above all, would recognize in the whole tradition from Plato onward: a "good" defined from above and imposed on others for their own good. Epicurus's ethics begins instead from the feelings of each living being, and his justice from agreements made for mutual advantage. The Epicurean does not need a legislator to tell him what is good for him. He needs to understand the nature of things, so that his choices are guided by his own pleasure rightly understood.

Fate, Choice and Responsibility

On the question of fate, Aristotle stood closer to Epicurus than any other tradition in this book. He was no fatalist. As we saw under "Truth About the Future," he would not let a rule of logic fix the future in advance. In the *Ethics* he devotes the opening chapters of Book III to the voluntary and the involuntary, and he concludes that "virtue also is in our own power, and so too vice. For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act," so that praise and blame are justified.[221] Epicurus agreed that "that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame" (DL X.133).[222] Against the Stoics and the determinists, the two men stood together.

But Epicurus faced a question that Aristotle's system did not have to face. Democritus had drawn from the atoms the conclusion that every motion, and every choice, follows of necessity from the motions before it. Aristotle rejected the atoms, and so that necessity was never a threat to his own account of choice. Epicurus accepted the atoms and rejected that conclusion. He inferred from the evidence of our own free movement that the atoms themselves are not wholly bound by blows and weight, and the swerve of the atoms secures, within atomism, the freedom of choice that Aristotle took for granted. David Furley argued in *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* that Epicurus's account of voluntary action

was shaped by Aristotle's, and that the swerve does not make each choice random but breaks the chain of necessity that would otherwise run back before our birth.

The two men also placed freedom in different worlds. Aristotle's freedom belongs to a soul that is the form of the body, in a nature that acts for ends, beneath heavens that move by eternal necessity around an unmoved mover. And his nature assigns some men their place before they make any choice at all: those "intended by nature for slavery," as we saw under "Chance, Necessity and Purpose in Nature," may justly be made to submit.[223] Epicurus's freedom belongs to a mortal mind made of atoms, in a universe without purposes, and its use is the pursuit of pleasure. Even Cicero was not sure where Aristotle stood. In his own summary of the debate he lists Aristotle, surprisingly, with Democritus, Heraclitus and Empedocles among those who held "that everything takes place by fate in the sense that this fate exercises the force of necessity" (*On Fate* 39).[224] Aristotle's surviving works do not bear that out.

Where Aristotle Helps the Epicurean Case

Aristotle is a hostile witness, but like Sextus Empiricus he can be a valuable one. A reader who keeps the fundamental disagreement in view can use his works in several ways.

- **He preserves the atomists.** Much of what we know of Leucippus and Democritus comes from Aristotle's reports. His summary of their doctrine in the *Metaphysics* is the classic statement: "Leucippus and his associate Democritus say that the full and the empty are the elements, calling the one being and the other non-being," and the differences among atoms are "shape and order and position."[225] His accounts in *On Generation and Corruption* (I.2, I.8), in the *Physics* on the void (IV.6–9), and in *On the Soul* on the atomic soul (I.2) are all essential evidence.[226]
- **He testifies to the scientific seriousness of the atomists.** As we have seen, he says that Democritus argued from "the science of nature" while the Platonists argued from abstractions, and that Leucippus sought a theory that "harmonized with sense-perception."[227]

- **He states, in order to reject, an ancient forerunner of natural selection.** A clear ancient statement of the argument that living things survive because they happen to be fitted to survive is Aristotle's own, in *Physics* II.8. Epicureans can read it there in the form Aristotle thought he had refuted.
- **He attacks Plato.** Aristotle's criticisms of the separate Forms (*Metaphysics* I.9, XIII–XIV; *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6) and of the creation of the world in time (*Physics* VIII.1) are weapons Epicureans can use against Platonism, so long as they remember that Aristotle's own system keeps the substance of what he criticizes.[228]
- **He doubts god-sent dreams.** His short treatise *On Prophesying by Dreams* gives natural explanations for dreams that seem to foretell the future, and says plainly that "dreams are not sent by God."[229]
- **He admits the force of the case for pleasure.** He grants that "all things, both brutes and men, pursue pleasure," that this "is an indication of its being somehow the chief good," and that Eudoxus was "right in his method."[230] He calls the life of his god a life of pleasure. Each of these concessions is a foothold for the Epicurean argument.

None of this makes Aristotle an ally. Each concession serves an alternative order: forms in place of atoms, purpose in place of selection, a divine mover in place of a natural universe, virtue and contemplation in place of pleasure. The value of his testimony comes from the fact that he was an opponent who understood exactly what he opposed.

Aristotle's Long Shadow

The Hellenistic Schools

After Strato, the Lyceum declined, and for two centuries Aristotle's technical works were little read. The Stoics took over much of his logic and many of his arguments for the divinity of the heavens, while rejecting his fifth element and his separable intellect. In the first century BC Antiochus of Ascalon taught that the Academy, the Peripatetics and the Stoics agreed in substance and differed mainly in words, and he built a combined ethics of virtue and "the goods of nature" against Epicurus. Cicero gives this view to Varro in the *Academic Questions* and

to Piso in the fifth book of *On Ends*. Against all of these combinations the Epicureans stood alone, and they knew it. In the ancient line-ups of schools, Aristotle's followers sit with the Platonists and the Stoics on one side, and Epicurus on the other.

The Middle Ages

When Aristotle's works were recovered in the Islamic world and then in the Latin West, they became the framework of one of the most powerful systems of thought Europe had known. Thomas Aquinas made Aristotle's argument for a first unmoved mover the first of his "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God (*Summa Theologiae* I, question 2, article 3). Aristotle's account of the soul as the form of the body, joined to his separable intellect, became the philosophical basis for the doctrine of the immortal soul. His ethics of virtue was fitted to the Christian virtues, and his contemplative life became the model for the contemplation of God. Dante placed Aristotle in Limbo among the virtuous pagans, honored as the master of those who know, while he placed in burning tombs in the sixth circle of Hell "Epicurus all his followers, / Who with the body mortal make the soul" (*Inferno* X.14–15, tr. Longfellow).[231]

The pattern was set for centuries. Aristotle was "the Philosopher," and Epicurus was the name for the pleasure-seeker, the atheist and the denier of the soul. When atomism returned in the seventeenth century with Gassendi, Boyle and Newton, it returned as a challenge to Aristotelian physics, and the new science won its victories against Aristotle's natural places, his denial of the void, his single closed universe and his purposive nature, in nearly every case on ground that Epicurus had held first.

The Modern Revival of Aristotle's Ethics

In ethics Aristotle's influence is again strong. Since the mid-twentieth century, "virtue ethics" has become one of the leading schools of moral philosophy, and many writers who reject Aristotle's god and his immortal intellect embrace his account of the good life as the exercise of virtue. The Greek word for happiness is now routinely translated as "flourishing," and the virtues are presented as the constituents of a flourishing life rather than as means to pleasure. This modern

Aristotelianism is one of the main sources of the humanist misreading of Epicurus, in which the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure is reshaped into a quiet life of moderation, character and self-restraint.

Epicureans should recognize this move when they see it. When a modern author describes Epicurus's goal as "flourishing," treats the virtues as the content of happiness, or ranks pleasures as "higher" and "lower," he is reading Epicurus through Aristotle. When a scholar explains Epicurus's distinction between active and stable pleasures in terms of Aristotle's distinction between pleasure as "activity" and pleasure as "restoration," and concludes that Epicurus's real goal was a painless calm, he is reading Epicurus through Aristotle's report of Plato's school. The Epicurean texts say something simpler and bolder: pleasure is the goal, the feelings are the standard, virtue is the means, and the full and active life of pleasure among friends is the best life a mortal can live.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

The Canon: How We Know

- Knowledge in the strict sense is of what "cannot be other than it is," and is gained by demonstration: *Posterior Analytics* I.2.[232]
- "Scientific knowledge is not possible through the act of perception": *Posterior Analytics* I.31.[233]
- From perception to memory, experience and the universal, and the first principles grasped by intuition: *Posterior Analytics* II.19.[234]
- "All men by nature desire to know," and the ranking of experience, art and wisdom: *Metaphysics* I.1–2.[235]
- The principle of contradiction, "the most certain of all": *Metaphysics* IV.3–4.[236]
- Against Protagoras and Democritus on appearances, and "Democritus ... says that either there is no truth or to us at least it is not evident": *Metaphysics* IV.5–6.[237]
- Sensation of the special objects is true; imagination is mostly false: *On the Soul* III.3.[238]

- The separable, immortal intellect: *On the Soul* III.4–5.[239]

Nature, Gods and the Soul

- Aristotle's history of the earlier philosophers, including Anaxagoras's "mind" and the atomists' "full and empty": *Metaphysics* I.3–4.[240]
- Chance, spontaneity and the atomists' "worlds": *Physics* II.4–6.[241]
- Purpose in nature, the rain argument and the "man-faced ox-progeny": *Physics* II.8.[242]
- Plants for animals, animals for men, and war on "natural slaves": *Politics* I.8, 1256b.
- Against the void, and the equal speeds of bodies in a void: *Physics* IV.6–9.[243]
- Against indivisible magnitudes and motions: *Physics* VI.1–2 and VI.10.[244]
- The eternity of motion and the unmoved first mover: *Physics* VIII.1, VIII.6 and VIII.10.[245]
- The fifth element and the divine heavens: *On the Heavens* I.2–3.[246]
- "God and nature create nothing that has not its use": *On the Heavens* I.4.[247]
- One world only, and nothing outside it: *On the Heavens* I.8–9.[248]
- The stars as living beings: *On the Heavens* II.12.[249]
- Against the atomists' motion and their atoms: *On the Heavens* III.2 and III.4.[250]
- Democritus's method praised, and atomism attacked: *On Generation and Corruption* I.2 and I.8–9.[251]
- The atomic soul of Democritus rejected: *On the Soul* I.2–3.[252]
- The soul as "the first actuality of a natural body": *On the Soul* II.1–2.[253]
- Perception as receiving "forms apart from their matter": *On the Soul* II.12.[254]
- Against emanations and "mirroring": *On Sense and the Sensible* 2–3.[255]
- Dreams are not sent by God: *On Prophesying by Dreams* 1–2.[256]
- God as thought thinking itself, whose "actuality is also pleasure": *Metaphysics* XII.6–7.[257]
- Myths added "with a view to the persuasion of the multitude": *Metaphysics* XII.8.[258]

- The universe ordered like an army, and "one ruler let there be": *Metaphysics* XII.10.[259]

Ethics

- Happiness as the highest good, and the dismissal of the life of pleasure as "slavish": *Nicomachean Ethics* I.4–5.[260]
- The function argument: happiness is "activity of soul in accordance with virtue": I.7.[261]
- The virtuous life "has its pleasure in itself," but needs external goods: I.8.[262]
- Can the dead be harmed? I.10–11.[263]
- Eudoxus "right in his method": I.12.[264]
- Virtue concerned with pleasures and pains, and pleasure "most to be guarded against": II.3 and II.9.[265]
- Voluntary action and responsibility: III.1–5.[266]
- Death, "the most terrible of all things," and the brave man: III.6–9.[267]
- The great-souled man and honor: IV.3.[268]
- Natural and legal justice: V.7.[269]
- The first discussion of pleasure, and the man on the rack: VII.11–14.[270]
- Friendship and its three kinds: VIII.1–3.[271]
- The second discussion of pleasure: Eudoxus, pleasures higher and lower, and the good man as measure: X.1–5.[272]
- Contemplation and "make ourselves immortal": X.6–8.[273]
- Law and compulsion: X.9.[274]

Against The Stoics

Why the Stoics Matter to Epicureans

The Stoic school was founded at Athens by Zeno of Citium (334–262 BC), a merchant from Cyprus who came to philosophy after a shipwreck. He taught in the Painted Porch (*Stoa Poikilē*) on the edge of the Athenian market, and his followers took their name from it. Zeno's successor Cleanthes (331–232 BC) wrote the hymn to Zeus that the later Stoics loved to quote. The third head of the school, Chrysippus (about 279–206 BC), turned Zeno's teaching into a system worked out in hundreds of books. Later Stoics such as Panaetius and Posidonius carried the school to Rome, where it became the philosophy of much of the governing class. The three Stoic authors whose works survive in most complete form all wrote under the Roman Empire: Seneca, the adviser of Nero; Epictetus, the former slave; and Marcus Aurelius, the emperor.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) and Zeno were almost exact contemporaries. Epicurus opened his school in Athens in 307/306 BC, and Zeno began teaching in the Stoa a few years later. For the rest of antiquity the two schools were the great rivals of Hellenistic philosophy, and each was often defined against the other. In Cicero's dialogues the Epicurean speaks and the Stoic answers. In Epictetus and Seneca, Epicurus is the opponent who must be refuted again and again.

The Stoics matter to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, the Stoics represent the most complete alternative to Epicurus in the ancient world. On every main question they gave the opposite answer. Epicurus taught that the universe is infinite, made of atoms and void, and that gods take

no part in governing it. The Stoics taught that the world is a single living being, ruled by a divine reason that runs through all matter, and that "the world and all the things that it contains were made for the sake of gods and men."[1] Epicurus taught that some things happen by chance and some by our own choice. The Stoics taught that everything happens by fate, "a certain order and series of causes," and that gods reveal the future through divination.[2] Epicurus taught that pleasure is the goal of life and that virtue is the means to it. The Stoics taught that "we should believe Moral Worth to be the only good," and that pleasure is "simply the good of cattle."[3]

Second, Stoicism remained popular and was integrated into Christianity and Humanism. The early Christian writers found much in Stoicism to admire: a providential God, a world made for man, a law of nature written in every heart, a soul that is a fragment of the divine, and contempt for bodily pleasure. Seneca was so highly regarded that a correspondence between him and the apostle Paul was forged in the fourth century and was accepted as genuine for a thousand years. In the sixteenth century Justus Lipsius revived Stoicism as a Christian philosophy of endurance, and today Stoicism is again a popular "philosophy of life" sold in bestsellers and self-help programs. Much of what passes for practical wisdom in our own time comes from Stoic sources.

Third, the Stoics are one of the main sources of the modern misreading of Epicurus. Seneca quoted Epicurus dozens of times, and he praised what he quoted. But he chose sayings about frugality, endurance and calm, and left out the doctrines that pleasure is the goal, that no divine providence guides the world, and that consciousness ends at death. Readers who meet Epicurus first through Seneca's letters, or through modern books that follow Seneca's selections, come away with a Stoic Epicurus: a teacher of tranquility and limited desire rather than of pleasure. Epicureans need to know the Stoic system well enough to recognize it when it is passed off as Epicurean.

The rest of this chapter follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states the Stoic position in the words of the Stoics or

of Cicero's Stoic speakers, and then sets out the Epicurean response. The works drawn on most are:

- Cicero, *On Ends*, Rackham's translation: Book III is the fullest surviving statement of Stoic ethics, given by Marcus Cato.[4] Book IV is Cicero's reply from an Academic skeptic position.
- Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, Book II: the Stoic Balbus on gods, providence and the design of the world.[5]
- Cicero, *Academic Questions*: the Stoic theory of knowledge, defended by Lucullus.[6]
- Cicero, *On Divination*, Book I: Quintus Cicero's Stoic defense of divination and fate.[7]
- Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Books II–V: pain, grief, the emotions and the sufficiency of virtue, argued largely on Stoic lines.[8]
- Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*: all 124 letters, with many quotations of Epicurus.[9]
- Seneca, *Six Dialogues*: *Of Providence*, *Of the Firmness of the Wise Man*, *Of a Happy Life*, *Of Leisure*, *Of Peace of Mind* and *Of the Shortness of Life*.[10]
- Epictetus, *Discourses*: the lectures of Epictetus as written down by Arrian, with several direct attacks on Epicurus.[11]
- Epictetus, *Encheiridion* and *Fragments*: the Stoic handbook.[12]
- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*: the emperor's notes to himself, built on the choice "Either Providence or Atoms."[13]

Stoics and Epicureans: The Historical Record

A Rivalry from the Beginning

The two schools grew up side by side in the same city, and the hostility began early. Diogenes Laertius records that "Diotimus the Stoic, who is ill-disposed to Epicurus, has calumniated him most bitterly by producing fifty lewd letters as Epicurus' work."[14] He names "Posidonius the Stoic and his followers" among the slanderers, along with others who claimed that Epicurus took his atoms from

Democritus and his pleasure from Aristippus.[15] Diogenes rejects all these stories: "these calumniators are all mad" (DL X.9).[16]

The rivalry was also a contest of books. According to Carneades, Chrysippus tried to match Epicurus in the number of his writings: "Whenever Epicurus wrote anything, Chrysippus felt bound in rivalry to write the equivalent; and this is why he often repeats himself."[17] Carneades called Chrysippus "the parasite who fed on Epicurus' books" (DL X.26).[18]

The Epicureans answered in kind. Philodemus, the Epicurean teacher of Cicero's generation, wrote a book *On the Stoics*, attacking the scandalous passages of Zeno's *Republic*. In Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* the Epicurean Velleius opens with scorn for "that old hag of a fortune-teller, the *Pronoia* (which we may render 'Providence') of the Stoics," and for "a world endowed with a mind and senses of its own."[19] He calls the Stoic doctrine of fate "a belief for old women, and ignorant old women at that."[20]

Heirs of Socrates and the *Timaeus*

The Stoics did not invent their creator god. They took him from Socrates and Plato. David Sedley, in *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (2007), writes that Stoicism "is in many ways best understood as an updated version of Socratic philosophy, and the early Stoics were in fact even willing to be known by the title 'Socratics'" (p. 206).[21] Zeno "had in fact in his youth studied for many years in the Academy, the school originally founded by Plato," and "[t]he single most significant ancestor of Stoic physics is Plato's *Timaeus*" (pp. 206, 209).[22] The Stoics dropped Plato's Forms and his immortal, migrating soul, but they kept his central idea: the world is itself a divine living being, governed by a god within it.

Balbus names Socrates as his authority. Man's intelligence, he says, proves that there is a divine mind in the universe: "Otherwise, whence did man 'pick up' (as Socrates says in Xenophon) the intelligence that he possesses?" The argument comes from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (I.4), where Socrates also argues that the eyes, eyelids and eyebrows were made by "some wise artificer."[23] When Epicurus attacked the creator god of Plato's *Timaeus* and of Xenophon's Socrates, he was attacking the god the Stoics would adopt.

The Stoics Answer Epicurus by Name

The Stoic works that survive are full of Epicurus. The Stoic Balbus in *On the Nature of the Gods* begins by saying that "when the errors of Epicurus have been refuted, my argument is robbed of all occasion for prolixity."[24] Epictetus devotes whole chapters to Epicurus: "In answer to Epicurus," "Against Epicureans and Academics," and the debate with an Epicurean official in III.7.[25] He uses "Epicurean" as a term of abuse: men who quote Zeno while living otherwise are "Epicureans and blackguards."[26] Marcus Aurelius returns again and again to the choice between "Providence" and "atoms" (IV.3).[27]

Seneca is the special case. He reads Epicurus "not as a deserter, but as a scout," and through the first part of his letters he ends almost every letter with a saying of Epicurus.[28] But he insists that the sayings he likes "are common property and are emphatically our own," and on every point of doctrine he takes the Stoic side.[29]

Marcus Aurelius and the Epicurean School

The rivalry was still alive in the second century AD. Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor, endowed salaried chairs of philosophy at Athens for each of the four great schools, the Platonists, the Peripatetics, the Stoics and the Epicureans (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book LXXII). The Epicurean school was strong enough in his reign to need a professor of its own, and the great Epicurean inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda in Asia Minor dates from about the same century.

Marcus himself never wrote a treatise against Epicurus. But the *Meditations* show that the Epicurean view of the world was never far from his mind. Again and again he sets out the choice between a world governed by providence and a world of atoms, and again and again he chooses providence. Twice he quotes Epicurus with respect (VII.64, IX.41).[30] His notebook is the most direct evidence we have of how a convinced Stoic felt when he faced the Epicurean alternative.

Cicero's Dialogues as a Battlefield

Much of what we know of the early Stoics comes not from their own books, which are lost, but from later writers, and among them from Cicero, who wrote his philosophical dialogues in 45–44 BC. Cicero was an Academic skeptic with some Stoic leanings, and not a dedicated and consistent Stoic. But he gave the Stoics their own spokesmen, and in several dialogues he set them directly against an Epicurean:

- In *On Ends*, the Epicurean Torquatus states Epicurus's ethics (Book I), Cicero answers him (Book II), and the Stoic Marcus Cato states the Stoic ethics (Book III).
- In *On the Nature of the Gods*, the Epicurean Velleius states Epicurus's theology (Book I), and the Stoic Balbus answers him with the Stoic theology of providence (Book II). The Academic skeptic Cotta argues against both of them (Books I and III).
- In the *Academic Questions*, Lucullus defends the Stoic theory of knowledge against Cicero's skepticism, and both sides criticize Epicurus's view of the senses.

Because the dialogues set the schools side by side, they show more clearly than any other ancient source where the lines of division ran. On each question, the Stoics and Epicurus took opposite sides.

The Canon: What Is Real, and How the Stoics Say We Know It

The Stoics agreed with Epicurus that only bodies exist, as we will see under Physics. But they did not place truth in the things that exist. For the Stoics "the True is 'that which subsists and is opposed to something' ... and this being an incorporeal judgement is an intelligible."[31] Sensations are true, they said, "not directly so but by reference to the intelligibles associated with them."[32] Truth became a property of statements, judged by reason. Epicurus held that "all sensibles are true and existent," because "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting'" (II.9).[33]

The "Comprehensive" Impression

The Stoics, like Epicurus, held that knowledge begins with the senses. But the Stoics divided the act of knowing into stages that conflict with Epicurus's view. Cicero's Varro explains Zeno's theory. First comes the impression, "which he called *phantasia*, and which we may term perception."[34] To this "he adds the assent of the mind, which he considers to be placed in ourselves and voluntary."[35] Not every impression deserves assent, but only "those which contain some especial character of those things which are seen."[36] An impression of this kind Zeno called "comprehensible," and when the mind had accepted it, "then he called it comprehension, resembling those things which are taken up (*prehenduntur*) in the hand."[37]

Zeno illustrated the theory with his hand. "When he stretched out his fingers, and showed the palm of his hand, 'Perception,' said he, 'is a thing like this.'" With his fingers a little closed, that was assent.[38] With his fist closed, comprehension. And when he gripped his fist with his other hand, "knowledge, he said, was of that character; and that was what none but a wise man possessed."[39]

Two points stand out. First, the Stoics did not trust the senses as such. They trusted only a special class of impressions, marked by a quality that the skeptics argued no one could ever identify for certain. Second, real knowledge belonged only to the Stoic wise man, a figure that the Stoics themselves admitted had hardly ever existed. Cicero presses the point: "even those who are themselves wise men do not venture to say so, nor any one who has ever lived and been a wise man."[40]

Against Epicurus's Trust in the Senses

Epicurus held that "the tests of truth are the sensations and preconcepts and the feelings," and that "nor is there anything which can refute the sensations."[41] Error lies not in the sensations but in the opinions we add to them. The Stoics thought this naïve. Lucullus says that Epicurus, "who said that it was the duty of a wise man to separate opinion from evident knowledge, did no good at all."[42] He refuses to answer the skeptics' examples of the bent oar and the dove's neck by saying that every appearance is true: "Epicurus may deal with this idea, and with many others."[43]

Cicero, speaking against Lucullus, states Epicurus's position fairly: "Epicurus brings the matter down to this point, that if once in a man's life one of his senses has decided wrongly, none of them is ever to be trusted."[44] The Epicurean Timagoras, he reports, said that when he twisted his eye he never saw two flames from one candle, "for that the error was one of opinion, and not one of his eyes."[45] Cicero then shows why the Stoic position is weaker than Epicurus's. The Stoics agree with the skeptics that some sensations are false, and Epicurus holds that if any sensation is false nothing can be known: "What is Epicurus's maxim? If anything that appears to the senses be false, then nothing can be perceived."[46] Put the two together, and the skeptic wins.

Epicurus saw the danger clearly. Once the senses are allowed to deceive, the only remaining judge is reason, and reason itself depends on the senses: "all reason is dependent upon sensations" (DL X.32).[47] The Stoic "comprehensive impression" was an attempt to keep the senses as a starting point while placing the final judgment in the mind. It satisfied neither the skeptics nor Epicurus.

The Stoics also had a puppeteer problem of their own. Plato had pictured the world of the senses as shadows cast by figures that men carry behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them."[48] The Stoics put a designing god behind the world, and they held that this god sends visions to men in sleep and through oracles, auspices and the entrails of victims. The Academics turned this against them: "when you say (say they) that some visions are sent by God ... they ask how God can make those things probable which appear to be false" (*Academica* II.47).[49] If a god with aims of his own can send appearances, then some appearances may be staged, and no impression is safe until we know his intentions. Epicurus's world has no stage manager. Nature has no design and no opinions, so it cannot hand us false ones. A sensation "is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it", and "falsehood and error always lie in the addition of opinion."[50]

The Good Is Judged by Reason, Not Feeling

The Stoics applied the same principle to ethics. For Epicurus, the feelings of pleasure and pain are part of the Canon: we know what is good and bad by feeling. Seneca states the Stoic objection plainly: "Those who rate pleasure as the su-

preme ideal hold that the Good is a matter of the senses; but we Stoics maintain that it is a matter of the understanding."[51] To let the feelings judge is to let "the vilest part" pass sentence on the better.[52]

Logic, Dialectic and the Future

The Stoics were the great logicians of antiquity, and Chrysippus wrote a great many books on logic. Epicurus rejected formal logic. "Logic they reject as misleading," says Diogenes Laertius, "for they say it is sufficient for physicists to be guided by what things say of themselves."[53] Seneca reports that the Epicureans "did away with the rational branch" of philosophy, and replaced it with their own canon.[54]

The dispute was not only about method. Chrysippus argued that "every proposition is either true or false," that this holds for statements about the future, and that therefore everything that will happen is already fixed by fate (Cicero, *On Fate* 20–21).[55] Epicurus, says Cicero, would not grant that the statement "Hermachus will either be alive tomorrow or he will not" is necessarily true, because he "despises and ridicules the whole science of dialectics."[56] For the Stoic, logic led to fate. For Epicurus, a logical rule that abolished free choice was a reason to doubt the rule, not to give up the freedom that we experience.

Summary: Two Different Canons

- **Epicurus:** to be true is to be real, and all sensations are true reports of what strikes the senses. Error lies in added opinion. The feelings of pleasure and pain are the standard of good and evil.
- **The Stoics:** only bodies exist, but truth belongs to an incorporeal judgment of reason. Some impressions are true and some false, and only a special class can be trusted. The final judgment belongs to reason, perfect knowledge belongs only to the wise man, and the good is judged by the understanding, not by feeling.

Physics: A World Full of God

Everything Is Body, but Body Is Divine

On one point the Stoics agreed with Epicurus against Plato and Aristotle. Zeno "would not allow that that which produced anything, or which was produced by anything, could possibly be anything except body."[57] Seneca repeats it: "We of the Stoic school believe that the Good is corporeal, because the Good is active, and whatever is active is corporeal."[58] Even virtue and the soul were bodies.

But the agreement goes no further. The Stoic body is continuous, not made of atoms, and there is no void within the world. Through all matter runs a divine fire and reason, which the Stoics called god, nature, fate and providence. Seneca gives the scheme: "there are two things in the universe which are the source of everything,—namely, cause and matter."[59] Matter "lies sluggish," and the cause that moves it "is surely Creative Reason,—in other words, God."[60] In Velleius's summary, Chrysippus "calls the world itself a god, and also the all-pervading world-soul," as well as fire, fate and necessity.[61]

The World Is a Living, Rational God

Zeno argued in short syllogisms that the world itself is alive and wise: "That which has the faculty of reason is superior to that which has not the faculty of reason; but nothing is superior to the world; therefore the world has the faculty of reason."[62] The nature of the world is "styled by Zeno not merely 'craftsman-like' but actually 'a craftsman'," and its foresight "plans out the work to serve its use and purpose in every detail."[63]

Zeno took his syllogism from Plato. In the *Timaeus* the creator reasons that nothing without intelligence is better than what has it, and so he makes the world intelligent and ensouled. Sedley: "Zeno has deftly borrowed the Demiurge's reasoning as his own, thus extracting from Plato an argument for divine providence that was never formally there in his text" (p. 227).[64] Sextus Empiricus preserves the reply of Zeno's critic Alexinus: "The poetic is better than the non-poetical and the grammatical than the non-grammatical, and the artistic product of the other arts than the inartistic; but nothing is better than the Universe; therefore the Universe is poetical and grammatical."[65]

Epicurus denied every step. The world is not a living being but one of countless worlds, formed by the motions of atoms and destined to break up again. Gods are living beings, but they live apart from the worlds and take no part in governing them. Lucretius answers the Stoic claim that the elements and the heavens are divine: "These things therefore are not possessed of divine sense, since they cannot be quickened with the vital feeling."[66]

Providence and the Argument from Design

The heart of Stoic physics is providence. Balbus announces the theme: "Next I have to show that the world is governed by divine providence. This is of course a vast topic; the doctrine is hotly contested by your school, Cotta."[67] Cotta is not an Epicurean. He is an Academic skeptic, the speaker who answers first the Epicurean Velleius and then Balbus himself, and his "school" is the Academy. The Academics resisted providence as they resisted every firm conclusion, by raising doubts. The Epicureans denied it outright, and gave their reasons. The Stoic proof rests on the order and beauty of the world. Balbus cannot understand how anyone could believe "that the fortuitous collision of those particles produces this elaborate and beautiful world": a man who believes it should also believe that letters of the alphabet shaken out on the ground could produce the *Annals* of Ennius.[68] The Epicureans, he says, "indulge in such random babbling about the world that for my part I cannot think that they have ever looked up at this marvellously beautiful sky."[69]

Balbus also compares the world to a machine. "Suppose a traveller to carry into Scythia or Britain the orrery recently constructed by our friend Posidonius, which at each revolution reproduces the same motions of the sun, the moon and the five planets ... would any single native doubt that this orrery was the work of a rational being?"[70] Sedley calls this Stoic argument "the chief ancient antecedent of William Paley's celebrated comparison of the world to a watch" (p. 207).[71] The modern argument from design, in other words, is the Stoic argument.

The later Stoics repeat the argument in the same form. Seneca's *Of Providence* opens with the claim that the order of the heavens shows "that this regularity does not belong to matter moving at random, and that particles brought togeth-

er by chance could not arrange themselves with such art."[72] He asks "who gathered together the scattered atoms."[73] Epictetus argues that "from the very structure of all made objects we are accustomed to prove that the work is certainly the product of some artificer, and has not been constructed at random."[74] Marcus Aurelius states the choice over and over: "Either a medley and a tangled web and a dispersion abroad, or a unity and a plan and a Providence."[75]

The Epicurean answer is that the order we see comes from the nature of the atoms themselves, from their sizes, shapes and weights and from the endless time and space in which they have combined. The things that do not work have perished, and the things that work remain. And the world shows plain signs that it was not made for us. Lucretius: "the nature of the world has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it stands encumbered."[76]

Marcus Aurelius: "Either Providence or Atoms"

No Stoic writer states the choice between the Stoic and the Epicurean world more often than Marcus Aurelius. "Recall the alternative: Either Providence or Atoms!" he tells himself.[77] "Either a medley and a tangled web and a dispersion abroad, or a unity and a plan and a Providence."[78] "Either there is one intelligent source, from which as in one body all after things proceed ... or there are atoms, and nothing but a medley and a dispersion."[79] Even in planning how to deal with difficult men he starts from the same premise: "If not atoms, then an all-controlling Nature."[80]

His answers to the dilemma are revealing, and they fall into three kinds.

First, he says that without providence life would not be worth living. "But if indeed there are no Gods, or if they do not concern themselves with the affairs of men, what boots it for me to live in a Universe where there are no Gods, where Providence is not?" If the world is a medley of atoms, "why should I even wish to abide in such a random welter and chaos? Why care for anything else than to *turn again to the dust* at last."[81] Here Marcus admits something important. The Stoic does not arrive at providence only by argument. He needs it, because without it his ethics loses its purpose. Epicurus held that gods exist but do not govern the world, the very case Marcus calls unbearable, and he taught that

this is the only world in which a man can be free of the fear of gods. For Epicurus, life in a world of atoms is not a "random welter" but the setting for a life of pleasure among friends.

Second, he tries to make his ethics hold whichever way the question is decided. "Whether there be atoms or a Nature, let it be postulated first, that I am a part of the whole Universe controlled by Nature."[82] He works through three possibilities: "There must be either a predestined Necessity and inviolable plan, or a gracious Providence, or a chaos without design or director," and finds a lesson in each.[83] If a chaos, "congratulate thyself that amid such a surging sea thou hast in thyself a guiding Reason."[84] In another place he shrugs: "if God—all is well; if haphazard—be not thou also haphazard."[85] These passages concede more than Marcus intends. If the Stoic way of life is right even in a world of atoms, then it does not rest on providence after all, and the question becomes what way of life the atoms themselves would teach. Epicurus's answer is that a living being in a world without providence has one guide that nature gives it from birth, the feelings of pleasure and pain.

Third, he falls back on the evidence of power and order. Asked how he knows gods exist, he answers: "from the continual proofs of their power I am assured that Gods also exist and I reverence them."[86] He tells himself to think "of the Universe as one living Being, possessed of a single Substance and a single Soul," in which "there is both one Universe, made up of all things, and one God immanent in all things, and one Substance, and one Law."[87] This is the argument from design in its simplest form, and the Epicurean answer is the same one Lucretius gave to Balbus: the order of the world comes from the nature of its elements, and its defects show that it was not made for us.

One passage shows how close Marcus came to the Epicurean conclusion and why he turned away from it. "If the Gods have taken counsel about me and the things to befall me, doubtless they have taken good counsel."[88] But if they take counsel about nothing at all, which he calls "an impious belief," then "let us have no more of sacrifices and prayers and oaths."[89] For Marcus, gods who do not govern are not worth worshipping. Epicurus held the opposite: gods are to be honored for their blessedness, not out of fear or in hope of favors, and the man

who thinks this way has nothing to fear from them (*Letter to Menoeceus*, DL X.123–124).[90]

A World Made for Gods and Men

The Stoics held that the world was made for rational beings. Chrysippus argued that just as "a shield-case is made for the sake of a shield and a sheath for the sake of a sword," so the crops were made for animals and the animals for man, "the horse for riding, the ox for ploughing, the dog for hunting."[91] Balbus concludes that "the world itself was created for the sake of gods and men, and the things that it contains were provided and contrived for the enjoyment of men."[92] Cato draws the moral: "Chrysippus well said, that all other things were created for the sake of men and gods," so that men may use animals "without injustice."[93]

Chrysippus took the idea as far as it would go. Of the pig, Balbus reports, "Chrysippus actually says that its soul was given it to serve as salt and keep it from putrefaction."[94] In the same passage Balbus lets slip that birds "afford us so much pleasure that our Stoic Providence appears to have been at times a disciple of Epicurus" (*On the Nature of the Gods* II.160).[95] The Academic Carneades turned the pig against the Stoics. If every natural thing is benefited when it reaches the end for which it was born, and the pig was born to be slaughtered and eaten, then the pig is benefited by being eaten (Porphyry, *On Abstinence* III.20, discussed by Sedley, pp. 236–37).[96]

Lucretius calls the whole idea folly: "To say again that for the sake of men they have willed to set in order the glorious nature of the world ... is all sheer folly. For what advantage can our gratitude bestow on immortal and blessed beings, that for our sakes they should take in hand to administer aught?"[97] A blessed and immortal being, says Epicurus, "knows no trouble itself, nor causes trouble to any other" (*Principal Doctrine* 1).[98]

Fate

Since everything is governed by divine reason, everything happens by fate. Quintus Cicero gives the Stoic definition: "By Fate I mean that which the Greeks call εἱμαρμένη, that is, a certain order and series of causes," so that "nothing happens which is not predestined to happen."[99] Seneca translates the prayer of Cleanthes:

"the willing soul / Fate leads, but the unwilling drags along."[100] The same prayer closes the *Encheiridion* of Epictetus (53).[101]

Epicurus rejected fate more sharply than any other doctrine of the natural philosophers. The wise man "laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things."[102] Some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some are within our control, and "that which is in our control is subject to no master."[103] Then comes one of the strongest sentences Epicurus wrote: "it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation."[104] The "natural philosophers" with their destiny include Democritus, the founder of atomism, whose atoms moved only by blows and so made every event necessary, and the Stoics, who made fate the reason of a god. Cicero, who was hostile, says that Epicurus brought in the swerve of the atoms because he feared "the necessity of fate" (*On Fate* 22–23).[105] Diogenes of Oinoanda gives the Epicurean account: the free movement of the atoms is something "which Democritus failed to discover, but Epicurus brought to light — a swerving movement, as he proves from phenomena" (Fr. 54).[106] The phenomena are our own free movements, by which "we go forward whither the will leads each" (Lucretius II.251–262).[107]

Chrysippus saw that fate seemed to leave nothing in our power, and he tried to keep both. Some causes, he said, are "perfect and principal, others auxiliary and proximate," and fate supplies only the second kind.[108] A roller that is pushed has been given "a beginning of motion," but not "the capacity to roll," and in the same way, when an impression strikes the mind, "the act of assent will be in our power" (*On Fate* 41–43).[109] But the roller's shape was itself given by fate, and so was the push, and so was every cause that made the man what he is. Cicero judged that Chrysippus wished to strike a compromise, but "in employing formulae peculiar to himself he slips into such difficulties that against his will he lends support to the necessity of fate" (39).[110]

The Epicureans answered the doctrine of fate in three ways. First, it defeats itself: "The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity" (VS 40).[111] Second, its chief evidence was divination, and

divination fails: "So, if divination [is eliminated], what other evidence for fate is there?" asks Diogenes of Oinoanda (Fr. 54).[112] Third, it destroys the reasons for choosing and for correcting choices: "if fate is believed in, all admonition and censure are nullified."[113] Epicurus's own summary is short: "Necessity is an evil, but there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity" (VS 9).[114]

Divination

If the future is fixed and gods care for men, they will reveal the future. This was the Stoic argument for divination, which Cicero calls "the very citadel of the Stoics": "if there is divination there are gods," and "if there are gods there is divination."[115] The Stoics argued it in their usual way: "If there are gods and they do not make clear to man in advance what the future will be, then they do not love man," and so on through every alternative.[116] Chrysippus collected oracles and dreams in four books. Balbus calls divination "the very strongest proof that man's welfare is studied by divine providence," and admits that "nothing provokes the ridicule of Epicurus so much as the art of prophecy."[117]

For Epicurus divination was useless as well as false. If gods do not govern the world, they send no signs. And even if the future could be known, knowing it would not help a man to live well.

Lucian's *Alexander the Oracle-Monger* shows the same lines drawn in the second century AD. When the false prophet Alexander set up his oracle of the serpent-god Glycon, the Stoics gave him no trouble, and the Epicureans led the opposition: "As for the Platonists, Stoics, Pythagoreans, they were his good friends; he had no quarrel with them. But the unmitigated Epicurus, as he used to call him, could not but be hateful to him, treating all such pretensions as absurd and puerile."[118] Alexander burned Epicurus's *Accepted Maxims* in the market-place, and at his mysteries, when he cried "Christians, avaunt!", the crowd answered, "Epicureans, avaunt!"

The Soul and Death

The Stoic soul is a breath of the divine fire. Epictetus tells his pupil, "you are a fragment of God; you have within you a part of Him."[119] Seneca writes that "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you."[120] Most Stoics taught that

the soul survives the body for a time, though not forever, until the whole world is consumed by fire and begins again. Seneca would not commit himself: "Death either annihilates us or strips us bare."[121] Marcus wavers in the same way, writing that death returns us either to "the same Seminal Reason of the Universe" or scatters us "into the atoms" (VI.24).[122]

Marcus wonders where the souls of the dead could all be kept, and answers that they last for a time in the air, then "are diffused and become fire, being taken again into the Seminal Reason of the Whole."[123] He is troubled that good men, who have lived in fellowship with gods, "should when once dead have no second existence but be wholly extinguished," and he can only reply that gods would have arranged it otherwise if it were right.[124] In his shortest notes the Epicurean alternative is always present: "Of Death: Either dispersion if atoms; or, if a single Whole, either extinction or a change of state."[125] And: "Dread of death is a dread of non-sensation or new sensation. But either thou wilt feel no sensation, and so no sensation of any evil; or a different kind of sensation will be thine."[126] The first half of that sentence is Epicurus's own argument, but Marcus could never quite let go of the second.

Epicurus held that the soul is made of atoms and is scattered at death, and that this is why death is nothing to us: "all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation."[127] The Stoic hope of survival, however limited, keeps open the door to fear.

Ethics: Virtue Against Pleasure

The First Impulse: Self-Preservation or Pleasure?

Both schools began their ethics with the newborn animal. Torquatus argues for Epicurus that "every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good" (*On Ends* I.30).[128] Cato gives the Stoic reply: "immediately upon birth (for that is the proper point to start from) a living creature feels an attachment for itself, and an impulse to preserve itself."[129] Pleasure, "according to most Stoics, is not to be reckoned among the primary objects of natural impulse."[130] Cato adds a revealing reason: he agrees "for fear lest many immoral consequences would follow if we held that nature has placed pleasure among the

earliest objects of desire."[131] Diogenes Laertius reports the same doctrine: "as for what some people say, that the first inclination of animals is to pleasure, they say what is false."[132] Pleasure, "if there be any such thing at all, is an accessory only."

Seneca makes the same point in his own way. What the newborn child seeks is "not a Good, but the beginning of a Good," and the Epicureans are "placing the tree-top where the root ought to be."[133] For Epicurus, the root is exactly where the good is first seen. "We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."[134]

Living in Agreement with Nature

From self-preservation the Stoic rises by reason to a different good. "Man's first attraction is towards the things in accordance with nature," but once he understands "the order and so to speak harmony that should govern conduct," he values this harmony "far more highly than all the things for which he originally felt an affection," and concludes that "in this order resides the Chief Good of man."[135] The goal is "to live in agreement and harmony with nature," which for the Stoics means living according to virtue, and that means living according to the divine reason that governs the whole: "the common law ... is identical with that right reason which pervades everything, being the same with Jupiter" (Diogenes Laertius VII.88).[136]

The Stoic "nature" is therefore not the nature that Epicurus appealed to. For Epicurus, nature speaks through the feelings of every living thing. For the Stoics, it speaks through reason, and through the will of a god.

Virtue the Only Good

The central Stoic doctrine is that virtue, or moral worth, is the only good and vice the only evil. "We should believe Moral Worth to be the only good."[137] From this follow the famous Stoic "paradoxes":

- The wise man is always happy, "since reason has proved that moral worth is the sole good, it follows that he must always be happy," and he alone is truly a king, rich, free and beautiful.[138]

- All faults are equal. "Just as a drowning man is no more able to breathe if he be not far from the surface of the water ... than if he were actually at the bottom already," so a man who has made progress toward virtue "is none the less in misery than he that has made no progress at all."[139] Cicero mocks the doctrine in reply: "You Stoics say that all transgressions are equal."[140]
- Virtue is sufficient for happiness. In the *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero argues the Stoic case that "virtue is able by herself to make life happy."[141]

Health, wealth, freedom from pain and life itself are not goods at all. The Stoics called them "preferred" things, which a man may reasonably choose, but whose loss does not make him less happy. Cicero answers in Book IV of *On Ends* that this is a change of names, not of things: Zeno "set about juggling with words."[142]

Epicurus held that virtue is valuable because it produces the pleasant life. Prudence "teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly" (DL X.132).[143] Seneca states the difference exactly: "Epicurus also decides that one who possesses virtue is happy, but that virtue of itself is not sufficient for the happy life, because the pleasure that results from virtue, and not virtue itself, makes one happy."[144] Seneca calls this "a futile distinction."[145] It is in fact a central difference between the schools.

Pleasure: "The Good of Cattle"

The Stoic contempt for pleasure runs through all their writings. For Seneca, pleasure is "simply the good of cattle," and it "actually destroys the soul and softens all its vigour."[146] In *Of a Happy Life*: "virtue is a lofty quality, sublime, royal, unconquerable, untiring: pleasure is low, slavish, weakly, perishable."[147] Marcus reduces the matter to a syllogism: "the true good man would never regret having passed a pleasure by. Pleasure therefore is neither a useful thing nor a good."[148]

The Stoics did allow that the wise man feels a kind of joy, and that pleasure may follow virtue as a by-product. Seneca uses the image of a cornfield: "pleasure is not the reward or the cause of virtue, but comes in addition to it," as flowers grow among the corn.[149] When the Epicurean replies that virtue rules our choice

of pleasures, Seneca sneers that in this school "virtue has the dignified office of preliminary taster of pleasures."[150]

The Stoics were so set against pleasure that they removed it from their sources. Xenophon's Socrates counts "all the pleasures of the palate" among the gifts of gods.[151] In the Stoic version of the same argument, preserved by Sextus Empiricus, Sedley finds that "that apparent attachment of positive value to pleasure has been edited out, and none of the other references to pleasure in the Xenophon original has been retained. Such omissions no doubt reflect the strongly anti-hedonist inclination of Stoic ethics" (pp. 216–17).[152] The Stoic Archedemus said that pleasure "has a natural existence, like the hairs in the armpit, but possesses no value."[153]

Epicureans can accept Seneca's description without his sneer. Virtue does choose among pleasures, and that is its job. "Every pleasure ... because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen," and the wise man measures pleasures and pains against each other to obtain the most pleasant life (DL X.129–130).[154]

Pain Is Not an Evil

If virtue is the only good, pain cannot be an evil. Cicero tells the story of Posidonius, lying ill with gout, who lectured Pompey on the doctrine "That nothing was good but what was honest; and that in his paroxysms he would often say, 'Pain, it is to no purpose, notwithstanding you are troublesome, I will never acknowledge you an evil.'"[155]

Epicurus held that pain is an evil, and he did not pretend otherwise. His answer was that pain can be borne: "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh," and severe pain is short, while long illness allows more pleasure than pain (*Principal Doctrine* 4).[156] Marcus Aurelius takes this advice from Epicurus: "call to thy rescue even Epicurus when he says that a pain is never unbearable or interminable."[157] And Seneca, like Cicero, tells of Epicurus's last day, when in spite of the pain of his illness he wrote that "that day was none the less happy."[158] Epicurus bore pain by remembering pleasure, not by denying that pain hurts.

The Emotions as Diseases

The Stoics held that the emotions, which they divided into four kinds (distress, fear, desire and delight), are not natural but come from false judgments, and that the wise man is free from them. Cato says that these "are not excited by any influence of nature."[159] Cicero explains in the *Tusculans* that "the philosophers call all perturbations of the soul diseases," and argues the Stoic case that "grief is a disorder of the mind; therefore a wise man will be always free from it."[160] Epictetus teaches that "it is not the things themselves that disturb men, but their judgements about these things."[161]

Epicurus agreed that false opinions cause much misery, especially the fears of gods and of death. But he did not hold that the wise man is free of all feeling. "The wise man will feel grief," says Diogenes Laertius, reporting Epicurean doctrine.[162] And Seneca attacks Metrodorus for saying that "there is a certain pleasure akin to sadness" in remembering a lost friend.[163] The Epicurean does not cut away his feelings. He uses them as the guide to life.

Destroying Desire

The Stoic cure for disappointed desire is to stop desiring. Epictetus tells the beginner: "for the time being remove utterly your desire; for if you desire some one of the things that are not under our control you are bound to be unfortunate."[164] The man who would be a true Cynic "must utterly wipe out desire" (*Discourses* III.22.13).[165] And Epictetus sums up the whole method in a single line: "For freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire" (IV.1.175).[166] Marcus Aurelius adds that a man has no need to seek retreats in the country or by the sea, "when thou canst at a moment's notice retire into thyself," where a steady look inward puts him "at once in all good ease."[167]

This is the Stoic root of the modern advice to clear the mind and let go, and of the minimalism that promises happiness to the man who wants less. Epicurus did not teach it. He told his students to satisfy desire wisely, not to destroy it: "We must not violate nature, but obey her; and we shall obey her if we fulfill the necessary desires and also the physical, if they bring no harm to us" (VS 21).[168] He valued the ability to live on little "not that we may at all times enjoy but a few

things," but so that the man who lacks much may still enjoy what he has, "in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it" (DL X.130).[169] The Stoic's freedom is freedom from wanting. The Epicurean's freedom is the freedom to get what is worth wanting, with confidence that the necessities are secure.

Accepting Whatever Happens

Because everything happens by the will of a good providence, the Stoic must accept whatever happens. "Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish, but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen, and your life will be serene."[170] In piety the chief element is to believe that gods exist and administer the universe "well and justly," and to "submit to everything that happens."[171]

Marcus carries the doctrine furthest. "The Universal Nature has prescribed for so and so sickness or maim or loss," as a physician prescribes cold baths, and each man should accept it "as conducive to his destiny."[172] He prays to the world itself: "All that is in tune with thee, O Universe, is in tune with me! Nothing that is in due time for thee is too early or too late for me!" The man who rebels against what befalls him is like "a hand cut off or a foot, or a head severed from the trunk."[173]

Seneca translates the prayer of Cleanthes to Zeus, which ends: "Fate leads, but the unwilling drags along."[174] Epictetus quotes Chrysippus: "But if I really knew that it was ordained for me to be ill at this present moment, I would even seek illness: for the foot also, if it had a mind, would seek to be covered with mud."[175] Sedley sums up the doctrine in one line: "To be a Stoic is to think of yourself as a foot" (p. 234).[176]

Epicurus taught that the wise man faces fortune bravely, but he never asked anyone to will the misfortunes that fortune brings. Chance offers "opportunities for great good and great evil," and the wise man uses reason to make the best of them.[177]

Suicide

The Stoics taught that suicide is sometimes the right choice, even for a happy man. "It is on occasion appropriate for the Wise Man to quit life although he is happy."[178] Seneca praises the "open door": "The best thing which eternal law ever ordained was that it allowed to us one entrance into life, but many exits."[179] For the Stoic, life itself is one of the "indifferent" things, and reason may order a man to leave it whatever he feels.

Epicurus acknowledged that leaving life can sometimes be the right course, but he judged it as he judged every choice, by the pleasure and pain it brings. Torquatus explains that the greatest pains are ended by death, that slight ones have frequent intervals of respite, and that those of medium intensity lie within our own control: "we can bear them if they are endurable, or if they are not, we may serenely quit life's theatre, when the play has ceased to please us."[180] The exit is there, but Epicurus emphasized how seldom it is desirable. He blamed those who "run towards death because you are tired of life, when it is your manner of life that has made you run towards death," and he said that even if the wise man loses his eyesight, "he will not end his whole life."[181]

The Epicurean teaching on death does not say that death is a good, or that anything good awaits us after it. Death is nothing to us because we will not be there to feel it. What the teaching gives us is a better life now: "For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living."[182] The knowledge that death holds no pain "makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality."[183] The Stoic looks to the open door as a way out of life. The Epicurean is freed by the same knowledge to spend his life on the pleasures of living, rather than in fear of its end.

The City of Gods and Men

The Stoic theory of society also rests on their theology. "The universe is governed by divine will; it is a city or state of which both men and gods are members, and each one of us is a part of this universe; from which it is a natural consequence that we should prefer the common advantage to our own."[184] Marcus: "If the intellectual capacity is common to us all, common too is the reason," and

so "the Universe is as it were a state."[185] Justice, for the Stoics, exists by nature, as part of the law of the universe. Marcus states the consequence in three words: "Injustice is impiety."[186] The unjust man offends not his neighbor but "the most venerable of Deities," the Nature of the Universe, which "has fashioned rational creatures for the sake of one another."[187] For the Stoic, justice depends on piety: the unjust man offends the gods before he offends his neighbor. Cicero, who was no Stoic, stated the same conviction in his own voice: if piety toward the gods disappears, "loyalty and social union among men" will disappear as well, "and justice itself, the queen of all the virtues" (*On the Nature of the Gods* I.4).[188]

Epicurus taught that "Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another ... it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 33).[189] Seneca quotes Epicurus with approval on the fear that haunts the wrongdoer, but parts company at once: "Let us disagree with Epicurus on the one point, when he declares that there is no natural justice."[190] Epictetus goes further, and charges that Epicurean doctrines are "subversive of the State, destructive to the family."[191]

Friendship

Epicurus held that friendship begins in mutual help and becomes a source of the greatest pleasure, and that "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (*Principal Doctrine* 27).[192] Seneca rejects the Epicurean reason for friendship: the wise man makes friends "not, however, for the purpose mentioned by Epicurus in the letter quoted above: 'That there may be someone to sit by him when he is ill, to help him when he is in prison or in want'."[193] The Stoic sage needs nothing from anyone. He makes friends in order to exercise his virtue.

Public Life

Seneca gives the clearest contrast between the schools on politics: "Epicurus says, 'The wise man will not take part in politics, except upon some special occasion;' Zeno says, 'The wise man will take part in politics, unless prevented by some special circumstance'."[194] The Stoic is a citizen of the world with a duty to serve it.

The Epicurean takes part in public affairs only when it serves his own safety and the good of his friends. This difference is often turned into a charge of idleness. But Seneca himself reports that "Epicurus forbids us to doze," and that "Epicurus, whom you adopt as the patron of your laziness," was no teacher of sloth.[195]

Where the Stoics Help the Epicurean Case

The Stoics are hostile witnesses, but they are sometimes the best witnesses we have. A reader who keeps the fundamental disagreement in view can use their works in several ways.

- **They preserve Epicurus's words.** Many sayings of Epicurus and Metrodorus survive only in Seneca's letters, and Usener's collection of Epicurean fragments draws on him heavily. Among them are the motto of the Garden, "Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure"; the saying "If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich"; and Epicurus's words on his last day.[196]
- **They state Epicurean doctrine clearly in order to reject it.** Seneca's account of Epicurus's view of virtue (85.18), of the senses as the judge of good (124.2) and of politics (*Of Leisure* 3) are some of the most precise ancient statements of these points.[197]
- **They testify to Epicurus's character.** Seneca writes that "Epicurus is really a brave man, even though he did wear long sleeves."[198] He admits, against his own school, that "the teaching of Epicurus was upright and holy, and even, if you examine it narrowly, stern."[199] Epictetus admits that Epicurus wrote "such big books" because he could not help caring for others (II.20).[200] Marcus records Epicurus's conduct in his last illness (IX.41).[201]
- **Their arguments show what Epicurus was answering.** Balbus's argument from design, Chrysippus's argument from logic to fate, and the Stoic proof of divination are the positions against which Epicurus's physics was built. Reading them makes clear why Epicurus insisted on the infinite universe, the swerve and the distant gods.

None of this makes the Stoics allies. Every concession serves the Stoic order: providence in place of atoms, fate in place of freedom, virtue in place of pleasure, and the reason of a god in place of the feelings of a living being.

The Stoics' Long Shadow

Rome and the Early Church

By the first century BC Stoicism had become a leading philosophy of Roman public life. Its ideals of duty, endurance and service to the state suited the governing class, and men like Cato the Younger became its heroes. The Epicureans were a large and active school in the same period, and Cicero himself complains of how widely their books were read. But the Stoic view of the world proved in many cases to be easier to fit with Roman religion and with Roman power.

When Paul preached at Athens, "certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him" (Acts 17:18, King James Version).[202] The Christian writers who followed treated the two schools very differently. The Stoic providential God, the law of nature, the soul as a divine spark and the contempt for the flesh were all congenial to Christianity, and the forged correspondence of Seneca and Paul made Seneca an honorary Christian. Epicurus, who denied providence and the immortal soul and called pleasure the good, became the type of the unbeliever.

The Revival of Stoicism

When ancient philosophy was recovered in the Renaissance, Stoicism was taken up again as a moral teaching compatible with Christianity. Justus Lipsius's *On Constancy* (1584) and his manuals of Stoic philosophy founded what is now called Neostoicism, which shaped the moral outlook of soldiers and statesmen in the age of the religious wars. Epicurus also returned in adulterated form, through Gassendi and the new interest in atomism, but Epicurus's ethics, canonics and physics, based entirely in nature, remained unacceptable.

In our own time Stoicism has enjoyed another revival. The founders of modern cognitive therapy pointed to Epictetus's saying that we are disturbed not by

things but by our judgments about them. Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus are sold in large numbers as guides to resilience and self-mastery, and Marcus above all has become the model of the calm and dutiful leader. Most modern readers take this advice believing they can distance themselves from Stoic theology. But the Stoics—and even Marcus himself—did not think their ethics could stand without it. Marcus wrote that he would not wish to live in a universe without providence (II.11), and the modern reader who keeps Stoic resignation while discarding its gods has kept the Stoic conclusion after giving up the fundamental Stoic reasoning for it.[203]

The Stoic Epicurus

Epicureans should recognize the effect of all this on how Epicurus is read. Seneca chose the sayings of Epicurus that fitted Stoic ethics: live simply, master your desires, face death calmly. He praised Epicurus's pleasure as "sober and temperate," and he described the Epicurean goal as "a body free from pain and a soul free from disturbance."[204] A reader who knows Epicurus only through Seneca will think that Epicurus was a gentler Stoic, whose real goal was calm. Much of the modern minimalist Epicurus, who owns little, wants little and finds his happiness by letting go, comes from this Stoic selection.

This is the picture of Epicurus that dominates many modern books: the philosopher of tranquility, limited desires and the quiet life. This is not Epicurean philosophy. It is the twisted picture the Stoics wanted. The Epicurean texts say something different and bolder. Pleasure, in its full sense, is the goal. The feelings are the standard. Virtue is the means. And gods neither made the world for us nor require us to accept whatever happens in it.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

The Canon: How We Know

- Zeno's theory of impression, assent and comprehension: *Academic Questions* I.11.[205]
- Zeno's hand, and knowledge only for the wise man: *Academic Questions* II.47.[206]

- Lucullus against Epicurus on the senses: *Academic Questions* II.7 and II.14.[207]
- Epicurus's maxim that if one sense is false nothing can be known: *Academic Questions* II.25 and II.32.[208]
- Epicurus refuses the disjunction about Hermarchus (Yonge's "Hermachus"): *Academic Questions* II.30.[209]
- Is the good grasped by the senses or by the understanding? Seneca, *Letter* 124.[210]
- The Epicureans abolish logic: Seneca, *Letter* 89.11.[211]

Nature, Gods and the Soul

- Velleius on the Stoic "Pronoia" and fate: *On the Nature of the Gods* I.18, I.39 and I.55.[212]
- Zeno's syllogisms that the world is rational and alive: *On the Nature of the Gods* II.21–22.[213]
- Chrysippus: everything made for something else, and man made to contemplate the world: II.37.[214]
- Providence, and the letters of Ennius: II.73–94.[215]
- The world made for gods and men: II.133 and II.154.[216]
- Fate as "a certain order and series of causes," and the Stoic proof of divination: *On Divination* I.38 and I.55.[217]
- Chrysippus on fate, and Epicurus's swerve: *On Fate* 20–23.[218]
- Chrysippus's roller and his "compromise" between fate and freedom: *On Fate* 39–43.[219]
- The Epicurean answer: DL X.133–134; Lucretius II.251–293; Diogenes of Oinoanda Fr. 54.[220]
- Cause and matter, God as Creative Reason: Seneca, *Letter* 65.[221]
- "God is within you": Seneca, *Letter* 41.[222]
- The hymn of Cleanthes: Seneca, *Letter* 107.11.[223]
- Why misfortunes befall good men: Seneca, *Of Providence*.[224]
- Providence and design: Epictetus, *Discourses* I.6.[225]

- "You are a fragment of God": Epictetus, *Discourses* II.8.[226]
- "Either Providence or Atoms": Marcus, *Meditations* IV.3, VI.10, IX.28, IX.39, X.6, XI.18 and XII.14.[227]
- Life not worth living without providence: Marcus, *Meditations* II.11; gods who take no counsel: VI.44.[228]
- The universe as one living being with one God and one Law: Marcus, *Meditations* IV.40 and VII.9; how he knows gods exist: XII.28.[229]
- Death and the soul: Marcus, *Meditations* IV.21, VII.32, VIII.58 and XII.5.[230]

Ethics

- Self-preservation, not pleasure, as the first impulse: *On Ends* III.16–17.[231]
- Agreement with nature, and moral worth the only good: *On Ends* III.20–26.[232]
- The emotions: *On Ends* III.35; *Tusculan Disputations* III–IV.[233]
- Destroying desire: Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 2; *Discourses* IV.1.175; retiring into oneself: Marcus Aurelius IV.3.[234]
- All faults equal: *On Ends* III.48.[235]
- "Preferred" things, and suicide: *On Ends* III.50–61.[236]
- The city of gods and men, and the use of animals: *On Ends* III.62–68.[237]
- The wise man as king: *On Ends* III.75.[238]
- Cicero's reply: *On Ends* IV.[239]
- Pain not an evil, and Posidonius: *Tusculan Disputations* II.25.[240]
- Virtue sufficient for happiness: *Tusculan Disputations* V.[241]
- Epicurus on the bull of Phalaris: Seneca, *Letter* 66.18; *Tusculan Disputations* II.7.[242]
- Virtue and pleasure: Seneca, *Letter* 85.18, 92 and 123; *Of a Happy Life* VI–XIII.[243]
- Natural justice: Seneca, *Letter* 97.13–16.[244]
- Friendship: Seneca, *Letter* 9.[245]
- Politics: Seneca, *Of Leisure* III.[246]

- Epictetus against Epicurus on the good: *Discourses* I.20 and III.7; on society: I.23 and II.20.[247]
- What is under our control, and judgments, not things: *Encheiridion* 1 and 5.[248]
- Pleasure "neither a useful thing nor a good": Marcus, *Meditations* VIII.10.[249]
- Accepting what Nature prescribes: Marcus, *Meditations* IV.23, V.8 and VIII.34.[250]
- The world-state, and "Injustice is impiety": Marcus, *Meditations* IV.4 and IX.1.[251]
- Marcus quotes Epicurus on pain: *Meditations* VII.64 and IX.41.[252]

Against The Skeptics

Why the Skeptics Matter to Epicureans

The Skeptics were the philosophers who held that the truth cannot be known, or at least that no one has yet shown that it can. Their founder was Pyrrho of Elis (about 360–270 BC), an older contemporary of Epicurus, whose sayings were spread by his pupil Timon. About the time Epicurus died, Plato's own school, the Academy, turned Skeptic under Arcesilaus. A century later Carneades made the "New Academy" the leading critic of the Stoics, and Cicero, who studied with its last head, Philo of Larissa, gave its case in his *Academic Questions* and through the speaker Cotta in *On the Nature of the Gods*. In the first century BC Aenesidemus revived the more radical Skepticism of Pyrrho, and in the late second century AD Sextus Empiricus collected its arguments in the books that survive today. Pyrrhonists and Academics quarreled over details, and Sextus took care to set himself apart from the Academy. But both taught that the reader should withhold assent, and Pyrrhonism was the more extreme of the two.

Sextus Empiricus was a Greek physician and Skeptic philosopher of the late second century AD. He belonged to the "Empiric" school of medicine, hence his name, and to the radical Skepticism that traced itself back to Pyrrho of Elis. His surviving books are the fullest statement of ancient Skepticism we have. Their method is to set "to every argument an equal argument" until the reader suspends judgment on everything.[1]

The Skeptics matter to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, the Skeptics deny the foundation on which all knowledge stands. Their Skepticism is the position Epicurus spent his life refuting: the claim that the senses cannot be trusted, that nothing can be known, and that peace comes from giving up the search for truth. To see what Epicurus was answering, you have to see the Skeptic case at full strength, and Sextus gives it.

Second, Skepticism leaves religion and custom standing. A philosophy that says nothing can be known cannot say that the city's gods are false. Pyrrho taught that "men did everything in consequence of custom and law," and his city made him a priest (DL IX, *Life of Pyrrho*).[2] Sextus says that the Skeptic lives by "the tradition of laws and customs, ... whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good" (*Outlines* I.23–24), and that "following the ordinary view, we affirm undogmatically that Gods exist and reverence Gods and ascribe to them foreknowledge" (III.2).[3] Cicero's Academic Cotta, a high priest of Rome, says the same: "I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof" (*On the Nature of the Gods* III.6).[4] Epicurus set out to free men from the fear of gods by teaching them the truth about nature. The Skeptic takes away the truth, and the old fears remain.

Third, the Skeptics are a source of the modern "tranquil" Epicurus. Sextus uses Epicurus's word for the goal of life, *ataraxia*, and many modern readers conclude that the two men sought the same thing. They then read Epicurus through Sextus, and make him a quietist who seeks calm by holding no firm views. The Ethics section below shows, in Sextus's own words, why the two *ataraxias* are opposites.

The rest of this chapter follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states the Skeptic position in the words of the Skeptics, and then sets out the Epicurean response. The sources drawn on most are:

- Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, *Against the Logicians*, *Against the Physicists* and *Against the Ethicists* and *Against the Professors*, in R. G. Bury's translation.[5]
- Cicero, *Academic Questions*: the case for and against the New Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades.[6]

- Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*: the Academic Cotta answers the Epicurean Velleius in Book I and the Stoic Balbus in Book III.[7]
- Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Pyrrho* (Book IX).[8]

Skeptics and Epicureans: The Historical Record

Pyrrho, Nausiphanes and Epicurus

Pyrrho's teaching, as Diogenes Laertius reports it, was "the doctrine of incomprehensibility, and of the necessity of suspending one's judgment."[9] "He used to say that nothing was honourable, or disgraceful, or just, or unjust. And on the same principle he asserted that there was no such thing as downright truth; but that men did everything in consequence of custom and law."[10] The stories told of him show where this leads. "He never shunned anything, and never guarded against anything; encountering everything, even waggons for instance, and precipices, and dogs, and everything of that sort; committing nothing whatever to his senses. So that he used to be saved, as Antigonus the Carystian tells us, by his friends who accompanied him" (DL IX, *Life of Pyrrho*).[11] Aenesidemus denied that Pyrrho really acted so carelessly, but the stories show what the ancients thought a life without trust in the senses would look like.

Epicurus met this teaching early. His own teacher Nausiphanes was a disciple of Pyrrho, and Diogenes reports Nausiphanes' claim "that Epicurus, who admired the conversation and manners of Pyrrho, was frequently asking him about him."[12] Whatever Epicurus thought of Pyrrho's calm, he rejected Pyrrho's doctrine and turned on the man who had taught it to him. Sextus reports that Epicurus called Nausiphanes "the Stockfish" because he was "without sense" (*Against the Professors* I.1–4).[13] The Epicurean wise man, by contrast, "will give definite teaching and not profess doubt" (DL X.121).[14]

The Academy Turns Skeptic

About the time of Epicurus's death, Arcesilaus made Plato's Academy a school of doubt, and Carneades carried the attack forward against the Stoics. The Academics did not deny that things appear to us. Cicero insists that "those men are

egregiously wrong who say that the Academics deny the existence of the senses; for they have never said that there is no such thing as colour, or taste, or sound" (*Academic Questions* II.32).[15] What they denied was that any appearance carries a mark of truth. Carneades taught that the wise man acts on what is "probable." If he sails "thirty furlongs, in a seaworthy vessel, with a good pilot, and in fine weather like this, it appears probable that he will arrive there safe" (*Academic Questions* II.31).[16]

Cicero also shows how the Academics turned Epicurus's own principle into a weapon. "What is Epicurus's maxim? – If anything that appears to the senses be false, then nothing can be perceived. What is yours? – The appearances presented to the senses are false. – What is the conclusion? Even if I hold my tongue, it speaks for itself, that nothing can be perceived" (*Academic Questions* II.32).[17] The trap works only on the Stoic, who grants that some sensations are false. Epicurus granted nothing of the kind. He held that every sensation is true, and that error lies in the opinion we add to it.

In Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* the Academic is Cotta, who answers first the Epicurean Velleius and then the Stoic Balbus. He offers no view of his own: "in almost all subjects, but especially in natural philosophy, I am more ready to say what is not true than what is" (I.60).[18]

Sextus Names Epicurus a Dogmatist

Sextus opens the *Outlines* by dividing all philosophers into three kinds: those who think they have found the truth, those who think it cannot be found, and the Skeptics, who keep on searching. The first kind he names at once: "Those who believe they have discovered it are the 'Dogmatists,' specially so called—Aristotle, for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics" (*Outlines* I.3).[19] Everything Sextus wrote is a war on the Dogmatists. The longest part of it, the books against the Logicians, Physicists and Ethicists, is known as *Against the Dogmatists*.

He returns to the point again and again:

- His stock examples of Epicurean dogma are "Being is divided," "God does not foreknow events in the Universe," and "Pleasure is the Good" (*Outlines* II.5).[20]

- When he rejects the authority of the wise man, the first one he names is "the Sage of Epicurus" (*Outlines* II.38).[21]
- When he argues that the schools disagree, so that none can be trusted, Epicurus is his example: "why Epicurus rather than Aristotle?" (*Against the Logicians* I.328).[22]
- He refuses to share even Epicurus's quarrel with the professors. Both attacked the arts, he says, but the Pyrrhonists were not moved "by the view that these subjects are of no help to gaining wisdom (for that is a 'dogmatic' assertion)" (*Against the Professors* I.5).[23] In the same passage he sneers at Epicurus's "lack of culture" and says that "in many matters Epicurus stands convicted of ignorance" (I.1).[24]

What Sextus Never Says

If Epicurus's goal were really Skeptic quietude, Sextus would have said so. He never does.

- **Epicurus is not among the near neighbours.** In Book I of the *Outlines*, Sextus gives six chapters to philosophies that others had confused with Skepticism: those of Heraclitus, Democritus, the Cyrenaics, Protagoras, the Academics and the Empiric doctors (*Outlines* I.210–241).[25] Epicurus is not on the list. It did not occur to Sextus that anyone could mistake him for a Skeptic.
- **No claim of kinship.** Sextus never calls Epicurus a forerunner, never says that Epicurus's *ataraxia* is the same as his own, and never cites Epicurus in support of suspending judgment.
- **Borrowing without credit.** When Sextus does use an Epicurean argument, he leaves Epicurus's name off it. His comfort for the Skeptic in pain, that the worst pain "terrifies us, after all, but for a moment," while everyday pain is easily relieved, is Epicurus's teaching that pain is either short or bearable (PD 4), unacknowledged (*Against the Ethicists* 150–155).[26]
- **A defence with a motive.** The one place Sextus defends Epicurus is against the Grammarians' charge that he stole his doctrines from the poets. Sextus needs the defence to show that the Grammarians are of no use. In making it he reports Epicurus's doctrine accurately: "it is far preferable to be alive be-

cause the good belongs to the sentient" (*Against the Professors* I.283–285).[27] That is a statement of what is good, the very thing Sextus says no one should affirm.

The Hostility Ran Both Ways

The Epicureans gave as good as they got. Sextus complains that "especially those of the Epicurean School" were "wont to withstand us rather rudely" (*Against the Logicians* II.337).[28] Epicurus had begun the quarrel himself, when he turned on his old teacher Nausiphanes, the disciple of Pyrrho.

The Canon: How the Skeptics Say We Cannot Know What Is Real or True

The Skeptic attack begins before the question of how we know. It asks whether anything is true at all. "If nothing true exists, the criterion of truth also disappears," Sextus writes, and he sets out the disagreement: "some say that there is not, others that there is, something true; and of the latter, some have said that only intelligibles are true, others that only sensibles, and others that both sensibles and intelligibles alike are true" (*Against the Logicians* II.3–4).[29] Since the philosophers disagree about truth itself, he concludes, "the dissension which exists about Truth itself is enough to drive us to a position of suspended judgement" (II.2).[30] The Skeptic speaks only of how things appear, never of how they are.

Epicurus answered that the question is not closed. What exists in nature is real, "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting,'" and the senses report the existent object "as it really is by nature" (II.9).[31]

To Every Argument an Equal Argument

Many readers meet Sextus's arguments one at a time and take them for an honest search for truth: a case for one side, a case for the other, and then a weighing of the two. That is not what they are. Sextus tells us plainly that the arguments are built to come out even, and that coming out even is the point. The "main basic

principle" of his system is "opposing to every proposition an equal proposition," and he adds why: "for we believe that as a consequence of this we end by ceasing to dogmatize" (*Outlines* I.12).[32] In other words, the purpose of the whole back-and-forth is to make the reader stop holding any view at all.

Sextus is just as plain about where he wants that to lead. Suspense, he says, is "a state of mental rest owing to which we neither deny nor affirm anything," and quietude enters the soul "along with suspension of judgement" (I.10).[33] The Skeptic *began* by hoping to learn "what is true in things and what false" (I.12).[34] When he could not decide, he gave up, and found that calm followed "as if by chance" (I.26–29).[35] Sextus does say that the Skeptics "keep on searching" (I.3), but it is a search arranged so that it can never end, because every argument is to be met by an equal one.[36]

Sextus even describes his arguments as medicine for belief. The Skeptic, "being a lover of his kind, desires to cure by speech ... the self-conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists" (III.280).[37] The patients he has in mind include Epicurus by name. At the start of the *Outlines* Sextus names the Dogmatists he is writing against: "Those who believe they have discovered it are the 'Dogmatists,' specially so called—Aristotle, for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics" (I.3).[38] In *Against the Ethicists* he singles Epicurus out again: "the lover of pleasure is further inflamed by the doctrine of Epicurus," and the Dogmatists' "science of life" is "a bulwark in defence of the evils of mankind rather than an aid against them" (*Against the Ethicists* 179–180).[39] The disease he means to cure is the conviction that anything is true. In *Against the Ethicists* he says it outright: to teach men "that there does not exist anything which is either good or evil by nature" is "the peculiar task of Scepticism" (*Against the Ethicists* 140).[40]

This is the heart of the conflict with Epicurus. For Sextus, giving up on finding the truth is the goal, and his arguments are tools for getting the reader there. For Epicurus, finding the truth about nature is the only road to a happy life.

The Ten Modes Against the Senses

The Skeptic's chief tool against the senses is a set of standard arguments called "Modes." "The usual tradition amongst the older Sceptics is that the 'modes' by which 'suspension' is supposed to be brought about are ten in number": the first

"based on the variety in animals; the second, on the differences in human beings; the third, on the different structures of the organs of sense; the fourth, on the circumstantial conditions," and so on (*Outlines* I.36).[41] The same honey tastes sweet to one man and bitter to another. The same tower looks round from far away and square from near by. The same object looks different to the sick and to the well, to the waking and to the dreaming (I.100).[42] Since we cannot say which appearance is the true one, the Skeptic concludes, we must suspend judgment about what the object is.

Epicurus answered with the distinction that runs through his whole Canon. The senses report truly what strikes them. The round look of the distant tower is a true report of the images that reach the eye after a long journey. The error lies in the added opinion that the tower itself is round, and that opinion is tested by going closer. Sextus himself gives the clearest account of this answer, in his report of Epicurus's doctrine of presentation and opinion, the square tower, and the tests of confirmation and non-contradiction (*Against the Logicians* I.203–216).[43]

A Second Trap: The Name "Empiricus"

Sextus's name sets a second trap. Today "empiricism" means the view that knowledge comes from the senses and from experience. Epicurus taught that the senses are the standard of truth, so modern readers often call him an empiricist. Then they meet a philosopher named "Sextus Empiricus" and assume the two belong on the same side. They do not.

"Empiricus" is not a description of Sextus's philosophy. It is the name of his medical school. The Empiric school took its name from the Greek word *empeiria*, "experience." Its doctors claimed to work from experience alone: they treated patients by remembering what had followed what in past cases, and they refused to reason about the hidden causes of disease. Sextus himself says that even this school went too far for a Skeptic, because it "positively affirms the inapprehensibility of what is non-evident" (*Outlines* I.236).[44]

The difference shows most clearly in what each man does with what the senses report. Sextus accepts only the "suggestive" sign, the kind learned by habit, as when "a man sees smoke" and fire comes to mind.[45] He rejects the "indicative"

sign, which reveals something that can never be seen, and he calls it one of "the private inventions of the Dogmatists" (*Outlines* II.99–102).[46] But reasoning from the seen to the unseen is the heart of Epicurus's method. Epicurus proves that void exists, "a thing non-evident," from "an obvious fact, namely motion" (*Against the Logicians* I.213).[47] In the same way he reasons to atoms, to the nature of the soul, and to the nature of gods. Every one of those conclusions is exactly what Sextus says cannot be known.

So Epicurus trusts the senses and builds on them, reasoning all the way to the atoms and the void. Sextus uses the senses only as a habit of daily life and refuses to build anything on them. Sharing a name with "empiricism" makes Sextus no more an ally of Epicurus than sharing the word *ataraxia* does.

The Epicurean Answer

Epicurus aimed his Canon squarely at the Skeptic position: "If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false" (PD 23).[48] "Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations," because reason itself "is dependent upon sensations" (DL X.32).[49] Lucretius answered that the man who claims to know nothing "has himself stood with his own head in his footprints" (Lucretius IV.469–521): he cannot even know that nothing can be known.[50]

The Skeptic's own life confirms the point. Sextus admits that the Skeptic eats when he is hungry and drinks when he is thirsty, and that hunger "drives us to food" (*Outlines* I.24).[51] He trusts his senses every time he crosses a street. What he refuses to do is to say so, and to build on it.

The Skeptic's arguments from dreams, madness and the Ten Modes all treat the senses as if any appearance might be a counterfeit that cannot be told from the real thing. Plato at least supplied someone to make the counterfeits: in his Cave the shadows are cast by figures that men carry behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them."[52] The Skeptic keeps the suspicion and drops the puppeteers. But nature is no puppeteer. It has no design, no aims for men and no opinions, so it has no motive and no means to stage a show for us. A sensation "is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it", and error comes only from what we add to

it (X.50).[53] Even Lucullus, who was no Epicurean, saw what the Academics had done. "Even the Cimmerians, to whom some god, or nature, or the foulness of the country that they inhabited, had denied the light of the sun, had still some fires which they were permitted to avail themselves of as if they were light. But those men whom you approve of, after having enveloped us in such darkness, have not left us a single spark to enable us to look around by" (*Academica* II.61).[54]

Summary: Two Different Canons

- **The Skeptics:** whether anything is true or real is in dispute, and so we speak only of appearances. Every appearance can be opposed by an equal appearance, and every argument by an equal argument. No sensation carries a mark of truth, and so the wise man suspends judgment on everything, or at most follows what seems "probable."
- **Epicurus:** what exists in nature is real, and to be true is to be as it is said to be. Every sensation is a true report of what strikes the senses. Error lies in added opinion, which is confirmed or refuted by further evidence. From what is seen we reason to what is unseen, and the feelings of pleasure and pain are the standard of good and evil.

Physics: Suspending Judgment on Nature

Sextus's *Against the Physicists* argues that nothing can be known about gods, cause, body, place, motion, time, number, or becoming and perishing. The third book of the *Outlines* runs through the same subjects more briefly. On every one of them Epicurus held a firm view, and Sextus reports and attacks him again and again (see the passages listed at the end of this chapter).

Sextus does not stop at the evidence of the senses. As we have seen, he also rejects the "indicative" sign, by which Epicurus reasoned from what is seen to what can never be seen: from motion to the void, and from there to atoms, to the nature of the soul and to the nature of gods. Yet Sextus himself admits that "the evidence of facts seems to bear out the view that motion exists," and tells of the Cynic who answered the arguments against motion by standing up and walking about (*Against the Physicists* II.66–68).[55]

On the question of gods the Skeptic ends where he began, with custom. Sextus opens his discussion of gods by saying that "following the ordinary view, we affirm undogmatically that Gods exist and reverence Gods and ascribe to them foreknowledge," and only then argues "against the rashness of the Dogmatists" (*Outlines* III.2).[56] Cotta, the Academic, tells the Stoic Balbus that "no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the belief as to the worship of the immortal gods which I have inherited from our forefathers" (*On the Nature of the Gods* III.5).[57]

Others said openly that religion is a useful fiction. Sextus preserves the verses of Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, who held that laws could stop only open crimes, and that to stop secret ones "Some shrewd man first, a man in counsel wise, Discovered unto men the fear of Gods, Thereby to frighten sinners should they sin E'en secretly in deed, or word, or thought."[58] Cicero's Academic Cotta answers that the view that the gods are "a fiction invented by wise men in the interest of the state, to the end that those whom reason was powerless to control might be led in the path of duty by religion" is destructive of religion, but he does not show that it is false.[59] Between the Skeptic who keeps the old religion as a custom and the critic who keeps it as a useful lie, the belief in watchful gods survives, true or not, because men are thought to need it. Epicurus held that only the truth can be trusted to guide a life, and Diogenes of Oinoanda observed that the fear of gods does not restrain the men who most need restraint: wrongdoers who do not fear the laws "[are not] afraid of [the gods]" either (Fr. 20).[60]

Epicurus held that this is exactly the condition from which natural science sets us free. "A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story" (PD 12).[61] And there is "no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above, and things beneath the earth, and indeed all in the boundless universe, remain matters of suspicion" (PD 13).[62] The Skeptic leaves everything a matter of suspicion. Epicurus's physics ends it, by finding the truth.

Fate: "Still Unsettled"

The Skeptics did some of the best work against the Stoic doctrine of fate. Carneades, the head of the Academy, put the case in a form that Cicero said "cannot be made more rigidly conclusive": "If everything takes place with antecedent causes, all events take place in a closely knit web of natural interconnexion; if this is so, all things are caused by necessity; if this is true, nothing is in our power. But something is in our power" (*On Fate* 31–32).[63] He also cut away the Stoic proof of fate from divination, arguing that "not even Apollo could tell any future events except those whose causes were so held together by nature that they must necessarily happen."

But Carneades turned the same skill against Epicurus. He held that "the school of Epicurus could have maintained its cause without this fictitious swerve," by saying only that there are "no external and antecedent causes of our volition" (*On Fate* 23).[64] The Academic argued against fate as he argued against everything, and he did not commit himself to the alternative.

Sextus, who collected the Skeptic arguments, would not let even Carneades's conclusion stand. When the Dogmatists appeal to "impulse" and "purpose," Sextus answers that "we must remind him of the controversy about 'what is in our power,' and how it is still unsettled, since hitherto we have failed to find a criterion of truth" (*Outlines* III.70).[65] The Skeptic does not say that he is fated, and he does not say that he is free. He says that he lives by "the guidance of Nature," by "the constraint of the passions," by "the tradition of laws and customs," and by "the instruction of the arts" (*Outlines* I.23–24).[66] He acts, but he does not claim that any of his actions is in his power.

Epicurus claimed it. "That which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame" (DL X.133).[67] He did not wait for the debate to be settled before acting on what he saw in himself, and he showed that the man who denies freedom cannot even argue the point without assuming it: "The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity" (VS 40).[68] A man who is not sure whether anything is in his power has given up the confidence that he needs to plan his life and to pursue his pleasures by his own choices.

Ethics: Nothing Good by Nature

Nothing Is Good or Evil by Nature

Pyrrho "used to say that nothing was honourable, or disgraceful, or just, or unjust" (DL IX).[69] Sextus makes the same claim the center of his ethics. To teach men "that there does not exist anything which is either good or evil by nature" is "the peculiar task of Scepticism" (*Against the Ethicists* 140), because "the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted" (*Outlines* I.27).[70]

Living by Custom

If nothing is good by nature, how is the Skeptic to live? Sextus answers that he follows appearances and "the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive."[71] This rule of life is fourfold: "the guidance of Nature," "the constraint of the passions," "the tradition of laws and customs," and "the instruction of the arts."[72] Under the third heading "we regard piety in the conduct of life as good, but impiety as evil" (*Outlines* I.23–24).[73]

This is the practical result of Skepticism. A man who will not say that anything is good by nature has no ground from which to judge the laws and customs he was born under. He follows them, whatever they are. Epicurus judged every law and custom by a natural standard, the pleasure and security it brings: justice "is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed," and where a law "does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice" (PD 33, 37).[74]

The Letter to Menoeceus Is a Dogmatic Document

Sextus's central charge against every Dogmatist is that he "opines that anything is by nature good or bad" (*Outlines* I.27).[75] That is exactly what the Letter to Menoeceus does, from beginning to end:

- It tells Menoeceus to practice what Epicurus taught him, "considering them to be the first principles of the good life," and to "believe that god is a being immortal and blessed" (DL X.123).[76]

- "We call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us ... using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good" (DL X.129).[77]
- The best man is the one who "has reasoned out the end ordained by nature" (DL X.133).[78]

Every one of these is a firm statement about what is good by nature. To Sextus that belief is the root of all disturbance: "the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted" (*Outlines* I.27).[79] The Skeptic finds quietude only by refusing to call anything good or bad by nature (*Outlines* III.235–237; *Against the Ethicists* 118).[80] He even says that friendship, courage, justice and wisdom are "goods" only "by belief," to be given up with the rest (*Against the Ethicists* 142).[81]

Epicurus's school taught the reverse. Diogenes Laertius records that the Epicurean wise man "will give definite teaching and not profess doubt" (DL X.121).[82]

Same Word, Different Things: Sextus's *Ataraxia* Is Not Epicurus's

To understand Epicurus you have to watch his words. He used the ordinary Greek words of his day, but he often meant something very different by them from what other schools meant. His opponents regularly used the same words to mean something very different.

- **"Gods."** Epicurus says "gods there are," but "they are not such as the many believe them to be," and "the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many" (DL X.123).[83] His gods neither rule the world nor punish anyone. Anyone who hears "gods" and thinks of Zeus or of Plato's maker of the world has missed his meaning entirely.
- **"Virtue."** For Plato and the Stoics virtue is the highest good, chosen for its own sake. For Epicurus "virtue is preferred for the sake of pleasure, and not for its own sake, just as the doctor's art is employed for the sake of health" (DL X.138).[84] Same word, opposite place in the system.

- **"Happiness."** Every school claimed to teach the happy life, and each put happiness in something different.
  - The Stoics put it in virtue. Diogenes Laertius reports their view that virtue "is of itself sufficient for happiness, as Zeno says" (DL VII.127, Yonge translation).[85]
  - Plato tied it to the worship of gods. In the *Laws* he calls it "the noblest and truest of all sayings" that "for the good man to offer sacrifice to the Gods, and hold converse with them by means of prayers and offerings and every kind of service, is the noblest and best of all things, and also the most conducive to a happy life" (*Laws* IV, 716d, Jowett translation).[86]
  - The Christians put it in God. Augustine prays: "the happy life is this—to rejoice unto You, in You, and for You; this it is, and there is no other" (*Confessions* X.22, Pilkington translation).[87]
  - Epicurus put it in pleasure: "we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life" (DL X.129).[88] Centuries later, in the second century AD, the Epicurean Diogenes of Oinoanda carved the same answer in stone. The question, he says, is "what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?," and "I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues ... are in no way an end, but the means to the end" (Diogenes of Oinoanda, fr. 32, Smith translation).[89]

Ataraxia belongs on this list, and it may be the most important word on it. Sextus says the goal of the Skeptic is *ataraxia*, which Bury translates "quietude." Epicurus also speaks of *ataraxia*, which Bailey translates "peace of mind" or "freedom from disturbance."[90] Many modern readers see the one Greek word and conclude that the two men wanted the same thing. They then read Epicurus through Sextus, and make Epicurus a quietist who seeks calm by withdrawing from the world and holding no firm views.

That reading turns the truth upside down. When each man's own definitions are put side by side, the two *ataraxias* turn out to be fundamentally different things, built on opposite foundations.

1. For Epicurus *Ataraxia* Is a Pleasure. For Sextus It Is Not.

Epicurus classes freedom from disturbance as a pleasure: "Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures" (DL X.136).[91] It is part of the pleasure that is "the beginning and end of the blessed life."[92]

Sextus defines quietude simply as "an untroubled and tranquil condition of soul" (*Outlines* I.10), and he sets it against pleasure.[93] In his chapter on the Cyrenaics he says that the Skeptic's End is "'quietude,' which is the opposite of their End," because "the man who positively affirms pleasure to be the End undergoes perturbations" (*Outlines* I.215).[94] If the two words meant the same thing, Epicurus's goal would be the opposite of itself.

2. Epicurus Reaches It by Knowing the Truth. Sextus Reaches It by Giving Up on Truth.

For Epicurus, peace of mind is built on firm belief. Its whole purpose in studying the heavens is "peace of mind and a sure confidence" (DL X.85).[95] Peace of mind "is being delivered from all this, and having a constant memory of the general and most essential principles" (DL X.82).[96] He who is "in opposition to clear-seen facts ... can never have his part in true peace of mind" (DL X.96).[97] "Without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed" (PD 12).[98] And there is "no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above, and things beneath the earth, and indeed all in the boundless universe, remain matters of suspicion" (PD 13).[99]

For Sextus, quietude depends on holding no beliefs at all. The Skeptic set out to learn which impressions were true, "found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgement; and as he was thus in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude" (*Outlines* I.26).[100] Quietude "followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its substance" (I.29).[101]

Put "sure confidence" into Sextus's quietude and, on his own terms, it is gone. Take "sure confidence" out of Epicurus's peace of mind and, on his terms, it is gone. Each is built on what destroys the other.

3. Epicurus Aims at It. Sextus Stumbles Into It.

For Epicurus, health of body and freedom from disturbance of soul are "the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act" (DL X.128).[102] It is reached by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit" (DL X.132).[103] Epicurus banishes false opinions by reasoning his way to true ones.

For Sextus, quietude was never reached by reasoning to a conclusion. It came "as it happened." He compares the Skeptic to the painter Apelles, who could not paint a horse's foam, threw his sponge at the picture in frustration, and found that the sponge had made the effect for him (*Outlines* I.28–29).[104] Sextus banishes every opinion, true and false alike.

4. Epicurus's Peace Reaches the Body. Sextus's Stops at Opinion.

Sextus's quietude covers only "matters of opinion." For hunger, cold and pain he settles for "moderate affection," and admits that "we do not, however, suppose that the Sceptic is wholly untroubled" (*Outlines* I.25–30).[105] He even admits that Skeptic argument cannot talk a hungry man out of his distress, nor talk the man who is relieved out of his joy (*Against the Ethicists* 148–149).[106]

Epicurus does not stop at opinion. He pairs freedom from trouble in the mind with freedom from pain in the body (DL X.131), and he teaches that bodily pain itself is either short or bearable (PD 4).[107] That teaching is a firm belief about the body, the kind of belief Sextus says must be given up.

5. Epicurus's Peace Is Knowing Particular Truths. Sextus's Is Knowing None.

Epicurus's peace of mind is the knowledge of particular truths: gods are not to be feared, death is nothing to us, the heavens have natural causes, pain and desire have limits which can be known (PD 10–13).[108] Sextus suspends judgment on exactly these questions. The third book of the *Outlines* and the whole of *Against the Physicists* argue that nothing can be known about gods, causes, bodies, motion or time. Epicurean *ataraxia* consists in holding the very beliefs that Sextus says must be dropped to reach his.

Why This Makes Sextus Such an Opponent

Plato and the Stoics were Epicurus's opponents, but they at least agreed that truth exists and can be known. Epicurus argued with them about what is true: about atoms and void, gods, the soul and pleasure. Sextus attacks the ground all of those arguments stand on. He denies that anything can be known at all, and he aims that denial straight at Epicurus's Canon, the senses, feelings and preconcepts by which Epicurus says we know the truth.

He is also dangerous to a proper understanding of Epicurus, because he looks like a friend. He uses Epicurus's word for the goal of life, and so readers who would never mistake Plato for an Epicurean take Sextus's quietism for Epicurus's teaching. The result is an Epicurus who has given up on truth, given up on pleasure, and given up on the confident knowledge of nature that he said was the only road to a happy life. That Epicurus never existed. One might call him "Sextus wearing an Epicurean mask," but for the fact that Sextus never claimed to be an Epicurean. The mistaken identity is entirely the fault of those today who fail to pay heed to the differences between them.

Getting *ataraxia* right is therefore one of the most important steps in understanding Epicurus. Wherever a modern writer says that Epicurus's goal was "tranquility," the reader should ask whose tranquility is meant: the confident pleasure of a man who knows the truth about nature, or the quietude of a Skeptic who has stopped asking.

"Absence of Pain" Does Not Make Epicurus a Skeptic

The quietist reading rests on the phrase "freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind" (DL X.131).[109] Sextus's own words answer it in four ways.

First, Sextus's objection is to making pleasure the end at all, whatever kind of pleasure is meant. In his chapter on the Cyrenaics he says that the Skeptic's quietude is "the opposite of their End; for whether pleasure be present or not present the man who positively affirms pleasure to be the End undergoes perturbations" (*Outlines* I.215).[110] The fault lies in affirming pleasure as the end. Epicurus affirms it in so many words: "we call pleasure the beginning and end of

the blessed life" (DL X.129), and "we maintain that pleasure is the end" (DL X.131).[111]

Second, Sextus counts "painlessness" as one more dogmatic answer. Asked what the good is, he says, the Dogmatists "plunge into a hopeless war, some saying it is virtue, others pleasure, others painlessness" (*Outlines* III.175; the same list at *Against the Ethicists* 36 and 76).[112] Calling the goal "absence of pain" does not move a man out of the Dogmatist camp. It only puts him on one side of the war that Sextus wants to end. And the "painlessness" side of that war was not Epicurus's side. The philosopher who made painlessness the end was the Peripatetic Hieronymus of Rhodes, and the ancients kept him and Epicurus apart. In Cicero's *On Ends*, the Epicurean Torquatus is asked what Hieronymus holds to be the supreme good. "I understand," he answers, "that he holds freedom from pain to be the final good"; and of pleasure Hieronymus "asserts ... that it is not essentially an object of desire."[113] Cicero concludes that Hieronymus therefore holds "that joy is one thing, absence of pain another," and Torquatus answers that "he is grossly mistaken" (*On Ends* II.8–9, Reid translation).[114] Cicero himself presses the point: if Epicurus meant the same as Hieronymus, "why does he prefer to talk of pleasure rather than of freedom from pain, as Hieronymus does" (II.16)?[115] Epicurus talked of pleasure because pleasure was his end. When Cicero sorts the theories of the supreme good, he puts them in separate places: "one that of Aristippus or of Epicurus, the second that of Hieronymus" (II.35).[116] In Sextus's list, then, Epicurus belongs under "pleasure"; "painlessness" was the answer of Hieronymus.

Third, Epicurus calls freedom from trouble and freedom from pain *pleasures*. "Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures" (DL X.136).[117] Sextus's quietude is not a pleasure, and he does not choose it as a good. It comes to the Skeptic "as if by chance" after he gives up (*Outlines* I.29).[118]

Fourth, Epicurus did not limit pleasure to the static kind. In the same passage Diogenes Laertius reports that, unlike the Cyrenaics, "Epicurus admits both kinds both in the soul and in the body" (DL X.136).[119]

Sextus Says Epicurus Makes Men Worse

Sextus does not think Epicurus brings calm. He says the opposite. In *Against the Ethicists* he argues that every dogmatic "art of life" makes men more disturbed, and he names Epicurus: "the lover of pleasure is further inflamed by the doctrine of Epicurus (for on his showing pleasure is proved to be the perfection of happiness)."[120] The Dogmatists' "science of life," he concludes, "is a bulwark in defence of the evils of mankind rather than an aid against them" (*Against the Ethicists* 179–180).[121]

He attacks Epicurean pleasure head on, too:

- He argues that the Epicurean cradle argument fails, because "to every pleasure there is linked a pain" (*Outlines* III.194–196; *Against the Ethicists* 96–98).[122]
- He argues that "if Epicurus makes the End consist in pleasure" while the soul is made of atoms, no heap of atoms can judge anything good (*Outlines* III.187).[123]
- He counts "Epicurus ... asserts that pleasure is a good" among the clashing opinions that, he says, prove nothing is good by nature (*Against the Ethicists* 73–77).[124]

And his whole case about happiness is aimed at Epicurus's starting-point. "The dogmatic philosophers assert ... that the man who acquires the good and avoids the evil is happy" (*Against the Ethicists* 110).[125] That is Epicurus's doctrine of choice and avoidance. Sextus answers that such a man "will never be happy" (113).[126]

Where the Skeptics Help the Epicurean Case

The Skeptics are opponents, but Epicureans can still use them.

- **Sextus is a witness.** To refute every school, Sextus had to describe every school. He is a hostile witness but often a careful one, and he preserves some of the most important surviving reports of Epicurus's teaching. The best example is his account of Epicurus's Canon in *Against the Logicians* (I.203–216). He also reports the Epicurean cradle argument, Epicurus's definition

of philosophy, the proof of void from motion, and Epicurus's account of how men first conceived gods (see the passages listed at the end of this chapter).

- **Sextus defends Epicurus once.** Against the Grammarians' charge that Epicurus stole his doctrines from the poets, Sextus says that "death is nothing to us" was "proved by Epicurus, and it is not the saying but the proving that is admirable" (*Against the Professors* I.283–285).[127]
- **The argument from evil.** Sextus preserves the argument against providence from the existence of evil that later came to be called the "Epicurean Paradox" (*Outlines* III.9–12).[128]
- **The Academics against the Stoics.** Carneades and Cotta attacked Stoic providence, the Stoic gods and Stoic divination with arguments that Epicureans can use. Cotta's reply to Balbus in Book III of *On the Nature of the Gods* is a storehouse of them.
- **The Skeptics cannot argue away pleasure and pain.** Sextus admits that hunger and pain come "by necessity," and that Skeptic argument cannot talk a hungry man out of his distress (*Against the Ethicists* 141–155).[129] On the feelings, nature has the last word, as Epicurus said it does.

Who Are the "Professors"?

The Greek title of Sextus's largest work is *Pros Mathematikous*, in Latin *Adversus Mathematicos*: "Against the Mathematicians." The word does not mean mathematicians in our narrow sense. The *mathemata* were "the things learned," the subjects of a liberal education. A *mathematikos* was a man who professed and taught them: grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology and music. That is why Bury translates the title as *Against the Professors*. Because the later books against the Logicians, Physicists and Ethicists were copied together with it, the whole collection carries the name.

This matters to Epicureans because Epicurus fought the same professors, for his own reasons. Sextus opens the work by pairing himself with Epicurus. Both attacked the professors of the arts, he says, though "the standpoints they adopt are different," and "Epicurus took the ground that the subjects taught are of no help in perfecting wisdom."[130] In Cicero's *On Ends* (I.71–72), the Epicurean

Torquatus explains the reason. Epicurus refused to spend his life, as Plato did, on "music, geometry, mathematics and astronomy, which not only start from false assumptions and so cannot be true, but if they were true would not aid us one whit towards living a more agreeable, that is a better life" (Cicero, *On Ends*, Reid translation).[131]

The two oppositions are not the same. Sextus rejects the arts because he rejects all knowledge. Epicurus rejected them because he held that the senses, not abstract reasoning, are the standard of truth, and that learning is worth only what it adds to a pleasant life. Plato had made geometry the gateway to his world of eternal Forms, and the Stoics prized the same kind of reasoning. Epicurus's attack on the "mathematicians" was an attack on that whole way of seeking truth apart from the senses. It was never an attack on learning itself. Sextus himself reports that Epicurus wrote that the wise man must learn to read and write (*Against the Professors* I.49), and Cicero records that Epicurus's friend Polyaenus, "said to have been a great mathematician," was "persuaded by Epicurus to believe all geometry to be false" (*Academic Questions* II.106).[132]

The Skeptics' Long Shadow

The Church and the Academy

The early Christian writers found Skepticism useful and dangerous at once. It humbled the pride of the pagan philosophers, but it also threatened any claim to know religious truth. Augustine's first surviving work after his conversion was *Against the Academics* (AD 386), written to show that the truth can be found. Once found, for Augustine, the truth was God.

The Revival of Pyrrhonism

Sextus was almost unknown in the Latin West until the Renaissance. In 1562 the printer Henri Estienne published a Latin translation of the *Outlines*, and Skeptic arguments spread quickly. Michel de Montaigne used them in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* to argue that human reason is too weak to reach the truth on its own, and that man must therefore rely on faith. This use of doubt in the ser-

vice of belief, later called "fideism," shows again where Skepticism leads. It does not free men from religion. It leaves them nothing to set against it.

The "Tranquil" Epicurus

The longest shadow falls on Epicurus himself. The "tranquil" Epicurus of the modern books is very often Sextus's quietist under Epicurus's name, and the Ethics section above shows that the two are opposites.

The same question applies to the popular modern advice to clear the mind, let go of desires and concerns, and wait for happiness to arise of itself. That advice is usually credited to Buddhists or Stoics, but its shape is Sextus's. He did not reason his way to his quietude. It came to him "as it happened," after he gave up, as the sponge thrown in frustration made the painter's picture (*Outlines* I.26–29).[133] Epicurus offered no such shortcut. His pleasant life is produced by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance" (DL X.132), and his confidence rests on knowing the truth about nature, not on ceasing to ask about it.[134]

The Most Important Epicurean Passages

Pyrrho and the Academics

- **Pyrrho's doctrine and his life:** DL IX, *Life of Pyrrho*.[135]
- **The Academics do not deny the senses, but act on what is "probable":** *Academic Questions* II.31.[136]
- **Epicurus's maxim turned against the Stoics:** *Academic Questions* II.32.[137]
- **Cotta's ancestral religion "even without proof":** *On the Nature of the Gods* III.5–6.[138]
- **The Skeptic lives by custom and reveres gods "undogmatically":** *Outlines* I.23–24 and III.2.[139]
- **The Ten Modes:** *Outlines* I.35–163.[140]

The Canon: How We Know the Truth

- **Every sensation is true; error lies in opinion.** Epicurus's doctrine of presentation and opinion, the square tower, and the tests of confirmation and non-contradiction: *Against the Logicians* I.203–216.[141] This is the single most important passage in Sextus for Epicureans.
- **All sensibles are true and existent:** *Against the Logicians* II.9 and II.185.[142]
- **Orestes and the Furies:** the sensation of the images was true, and the opinion that the Furies were solid was false. *Against the Logicians* II.63–65.[143]
- **Epicurus "established all" appearances,** unlike Democritus, who "abolished" them: *Against the Logicians* I.369.[144]
- **The Epicureans begin with Canonics:** *Against the Logicians* I.22.[145]
- **Preconcept (*prolepsis*) makes inquiry possible:** *Against the Logicians* II.337 and *Against the Professors* I.57.[146]
- **How all concepts arise from the senses,** by resemblance, composition and analogy: *Against the Physicists* I.393–395 and *Against the Ethicists* 250–251.[147] Compare DL X.32.
- **The evidence of the senses against dialectic:** even Sextus admits that "the evidence of facts seems to bear out the view that motion exists," and tells of the Cynic who answered the arguments against motion by standing up and walking about: *Against the Physicists* II.66–68.[148]
- **Demetrius of Laconia's defense of proof:** *Against the Logicians* II.348.[149]

Nature: Atoms, Void, Time and Gods

- **How Epicurus came to philosophy:** as a boy he asked his schoolmaster where Hesiod's Chaos came from, and when told this was the business of philosophers, said "I must go off to them, if it is they who know the truth of things": *Against the Physicists* II.18–19.[150]
- **The proof of void from motion:** *Against the Logicians* I.213 and II.329.[151]
- **Epicurus's definition of time** ("a concurrence of concurrences"): *Outlines* III.137.[152] The fullest account is Demetrius of Laconia's report that time is "a symptom of symptoms": *Against the Physicists* II.219–227.[153]

- **Change is the rearrangement of atoms,** and the void is the "intangible nature": *Against the Physicists* II.42–44 and II.2.[154]
- **Two Epicurean definitions of body:** *Against the Professors* I.22, and body as "a combination of size and shape and resistance and weight": *Against the Physicists* II.240.[155]
- **How men first conceived gods,** from great images of human shape seen in sleep: *Against the Physicists* I.25, with Sextus's objections at I.43–47.[156]
- **Souls are "dispersed like smoke"** when released from the body: *Against the Physicists* I.72.[157]
- **Gods neither feel trouble nor cause it** (PD 1): *Outlines* III.219, and "the Divinity pays no heed to us," *Outlines* I.155.[158]
- **The argument from evil against Providence,** source of the so-called "Epicurean Paradox": *Outlines* III.9–12.[159]
- **Fate:** Carneades against the Stoics, and against the swerve: *On Fate* 23–33; "what is in our power" is "still unsettled": *Outlines* III.70.[160]
- **Thunder is no sign of a god:** *Against the Professors* VI.19.[161]

Ethics: Pleasure and Death

- **The cradle argument:** animals "as soon as they are born, when still unperverted, seek after pleasure and avoid pains."[162] *Outlines* III.194.[163] A fuller version, the newborn that cries at its first touch of cold air "not as yet a slave to opinions," is at *Against the Ethicists* 96.[164] Sextus's reply, that pleasures bring pains, is answered by Epicurus's own doctrine of choice and avoidance (Letter to Menoeceus 129–130).[165]
- **The Skeptic cannot argue away pain and pleasure:** Sextus admits that these come "by necessity," and then consoles the Skeptic with Epicurus's own argument that pain is either brief or bearable (PD 4), without naming him: *Against the Ethicists* 141–155.[166]
- **Philosophy is "an activity which secures the happy life by arguments and discussions":** Epicurus's definition, at *Against the Ethicists* 169.[167]
- **Death is nothing to us** (PD 2): *Outlines* III.229.[168]

- **Sextus defends Epicurus.** Epicurus did not take his limit of pleasure from Homer, and "death is nothing to us" was "proved by Epicurus, and it is not the saying but the proving that is admirable."[169] Above all: "it is far preferable to be alive because the good belongs to the sentient."[170] *Against the Professors* I.283–285.[171]
- **Epicurus required the wise man to learn letters,** in his lost book *On Gifts and Gratitude*: *Against the Professors* I.49.[172]

Against The Abrahamists

Why the Abrahamists Matter to Epicureans

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are three religions, not one philosophy, and they have quarreled with each other for two thousand years. But they trace themselves to the same patriarch, Abraham, they share many of the same scriptures, and on the questions that mattered most to Epicurus they give the same answers. There is one God, who made the world out of nothing. He watches every man and every sparrow. He has revealed his will in a book, and that revelation outranks the evidence of the senses. The soul survives death, or the body will be raised again, and every man will be judged and rewarded or punished forever. The goal of life is to obey God and to win the reward, not to live pleasantly here and now. This chapter calls the defenders of these positions "Abrahamists."

Epicurus (341–270 BC) never met these religions. He died more than three centuries before Paul preached at Athens. But he denied every one of these positions, and his followers met the new faiths head on. The scriptures and the authorities who interpreted them answered with a hostility they showed few other Greek philosophers. In Hebrew, "Epicurus" became the legal name for a heretic.

The Abrahamists matter to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, the Abrahamists defeated Epicurus in history. For a thousand years the governments of Europe and the Near East were Christian or Muslim, and the teaching that the soul dies with the body and that no god governs the world was a crime as well as a sin. Epicurus wrote some three hundred rolls (DL X.26).[1] Apart from three letters and two short collections of sayings, nearly all of them

were lost. Much of what we know of his teaching comes to us from his enemies, the Church Fathers among them.

Second, the Abrahamists carried the world of Plato and the Stoics into faith. The creator god of the *Timaeus*, the providence of the Stoics and the immortal soul of the *Phaedo* became articles of belief that no one was allowed to question. Saint Augustine wrote that of all the philosophers the Platonists came nearest to the Christian faith (*City of God* VIII). The arguments that Epicurus aimed at Plato and the Stoics were now aimed, in effect, at the religion of the state.

Third, the Abrahamist arguments against Epicurus are still repeated today. That without God there is no reason to be good, that the man who seeks pleasure must be a glutton or a lecher, that "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" sums up a life without an afterlife: all of these were written down in the scriptures and the Church Fathers, and they are repeated now by people who do not know where they came from.[2]

The rest of this chapter follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states the Abrahamic position in the words of the scriptures and of their authorities, and then sets out the Epicurean response.

Abrahamists and Epicureans: The Historical Record

Paul Among the Epicureans

The only passage in the Bible that names the Epicureans is in the Book of Acts. Paul is arguing in the market place at Athens: "Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).[3] Paul's first claim to them is the one Epicurus denied most firmly: "God that made the world and all things therein." His last is a judgment of the world, proved by the resur-

rection, and that is the point at which his hearers laughed: "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked" (Acts 17:30–32).[4]

Paul's letters warn the churches against the whole enterprise of Greek philosophy: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8).[5]

The *Apikoros*

In rabbinic Judaism the name of Epicurus became a legal category. The Mishnah, the core of Jewish law, lists those who lose their place in the life after death: "These are they who have no share in the world to come: who say there is no resurrection of the dead; that the Law is not from Heaven; and the Epicureans" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1, tr. Danby).[6] The *Sayings of the Fathers* tells the student: "Be diligent to learn Thorah, wherewith thou mayest make answer ... to Epicurus" (*Avot* 2:14, tr. Taylor).[7]

Over the centuries the word came to mean any Jew who rejected the authority of the rabbis, and the Talmud records a long debate over who exactly counts as one (Sanhedrin 99b–100a).[8] But the medieval code of Maimonides brings the word back to the positions Epicurus actually held. "Three are called *apikorsim*: one who says there is no prophecy at all, and that no knowledge reaches the heart of human beings from the Creator; one who denies the prophecy of Moses our teacher; and one who says the Creator does not know the deeds of human beings" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:8).[9]

The Church Fathers

The Christian writers of the third to fifth centuries knew Epicurus well and attacked him by name. Lactantius, the tutor of the son of the emperor Constantine, called him "the crazy Epicurus" (*Divine Institutes* II.9) and explained his popularity this way: "The system of Epicurus was much more generally followed than those of the others; not because it brings forward any truth, but because the attractive name of pleasure invites many. For every one is naturally inclined to vices" (III.17).[10] He wrote a whole treatise, *On the Anger of God*,

against Epicurus's teaching that gods are neither angry nor kind (*De Ira Dei* 4).[11]

Augustine made a remarkable admission in his *Confessions*. Before his conversion, he says, he argued with his friends about good and evil, and "I held that Epicurus had, in my judgment, won the palm, had I not believed that after death there remained a life for the soul, and places of recompense, which Epicurus would not believe" (*Confessions* VI.16).[12] Only the belief in reward and punishment after death stood between Augustine and Epicurus.

Al-Ghazali's Three Sects

In Islam the Koran gives the materialist view in a single verse and dismisses it: "And they say, 'There is only this our present life: we die and we live, and nought but time destroyeth us.' But in this they have no knowledge: it is merely their own conceit" (Koran 45:24, tr. Rodwell).[13] The theologian al-Ghazali (AD 1058–1111), in his autobiography *Deliverance from Error* (translated by Claud Field as *The Confessions of Al Ghazzali*), divides the philosophers into three sects and condemns all three. He does not name Epicurus, but his first two sects hold Epicurus's positions. The Materialists "reject an intelligent and omnipotent Creator and Disposer of the Universe. In their view the world exists from all eternity and had no author" (*Confessions*, p. 25, tr. Field).[14] The Naturalists "deny the immortality of the soul. Consequently they deny heaven, hell, resurrection, and judgment" (pp. 25–26).[15] Both, he says, "ought to be called atheists."

The Canon: Faith Against the Senses

For the Abrahamic religions the highest reality is God, who is eternal and cannot be seen, and the truth that matters most is what he has revealed. The visible world is real, but it is lesser and passing. Epicurus held that the world we see is the real world, and that truth is reached by the senses and by reasoning from them, not received on authority.

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

Epicurus held that the senses are the standard of truth, and that nothing should be believed unless the senses, and reasoning from them, support it. The Abrahamic scriptures teach the opposite: the highest truths are those that cannot be seen, and they are received by faith.

The New Testament defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).[16] Paul writes: "we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal," and "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 4:18, 5:7).[17] The Koran describes the believers first of all as those "who believe in the unseen" (Koran 2:1–3).[18]

The Gospel of John tells the story of the apostle Thomas, who refused to believe in the resurrection unless he could see and touch the wounds. When he has seen, Jesus answers: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).[19] Thomas applied the Epicurean test. The Gospel gives its blessing to those who do not.

Against the Wisdom of the World

The scriptures do not merely place faith above the senses. They place it above reason. "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent ... hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ... For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:19–23).[20] The Hebrew Bible says the same: "Trust in the LORD with all thy heart, And lean not upon thine own understanding ... Be not wise in thine own eyes" (Proverbs 3:5–7), and "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).[21] The fringes on a Jew's garment are to remind him of the commandments, "that ye go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go astray" (Numbers 15:39).[22]

Augustine names the Epicureans as the school that made this mistake. He praises the Platonists above "those who attributed to the bodily senses the faculty of discriminating truth, and thought that all we learn is to be measured by their un-

trustworthy and fallacious rules. Such were the Epicureans, and all of the same school" (*City of God* VIII.7).[23]

The Epicurean Answer

Epicurus answered that there is no standard above the senses to which we can appeal. "If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false" (PD 23).[24] "We must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations ... in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen" (DL X.38).[25] The unseen is not closed to us, but we reach it only by reasoning from what is seen, as Epicurus reasoned from motion to the void and from the qualities of bodies to the atoms.

Faith offers no such test. The believer who accepts a revelation because it is not seen has no way to choose between rival revelations, and the three Abrahamic religions themselves have never agreed which revelation is the true one. Epicurus also explained where the belief in punishing and rewarding gods comes from: "the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods" (DL X.124).[26]

There is a deeper problem. Nature has no design, no aims for men and no opinions, so it has no motive to deceive us, and that is why we can trust the senses. The God of the scriptures is a person with aims, and the scriptures say that he deceives. Paul writes of those who perish that "for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:11–12).[27] The Koran says the same: "God misleadeth whom He will, and whom He will he guideth" (14:4).[28] Under such a God the world of appearances could be what Plato pictured in his Cave, shadows cast by figures that someone carries behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them."[29] No sensation could be trusted until the believer first knew the will of the one who sends it, and that will is known only by faith. Epicurus's nature sends us no delusions. A sensation "is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it

add to it or take from it", and "falsehood and error always lie in the addition of opinion."[30]

Summary: Two Different Canons

- **The Abrahamists:** the highest reality is the unseen and eternal God. The highest truths are revealed by God in scripture and received by faith. The senses and human reason are weak and must submit to revelation. The "fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."[31]
- **Epicurus:** the world we see is the real world. The senses, the preconcepts and the feelings are the standards of truth. What cannot be seen is known only by reasoning from what is seen. Beliefs about gods that do not come from this evidence are "false suppositions."

Physics: Creation, Providence and Judgment

Creation Out of Nothing

The Bible opens with the doctrine Epicurus denied first: "IN the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).[32] "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made ... For He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it stood" (Psalm 33:6, 9).[33] "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3).[34] The Koran: "Sole maker of the Heavens and of the Earth! And when He decreeth a thing, He only saith to it, 'Be,' and it is" (Koran 2:117).[35] The Letter to the Hebrews says that the visible world was not made out of anything visible: "the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Hebrews 11:3).[36]

To the man who asks how the world was made, God answers Job with a question of his own: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast the understanding" (Job 38:4).[37]

Epicurus's physics begins at exactly this point. "First of all, that nothing is created out of that which does not exist: for if it were, everything would be created out of everything with no need of seeds" (DL X.38).[38] "The universe always was

such as it is now, and always will be the same" (X.39).[39] Lucretius states the first principle in the form the Abrahamists would deny: "nothing is ever gotten out of nothing by divine power" (Lucretius I.149–150).[40]

The Argument from Design

Paul states the argument from design in its strongest form. Whoever looks at the world and does not see its maker is "without excuse": "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse ... Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:20–22).[41] The Christian apologist Minucius Felix says of those who think the world "was heaped together by certain fragments casually adhering to each other" that they "seem to me not to have either mind or sense, or, in fact, even sight itself" (*Octavius* XVII).[42]

Lactantius attacks Epicurus's answer to the argument from design directly. Epicurus "said that the eyes were not produced for seeing, nor the ears for hearing, nor the feet for walking, since these members were produced before there was exercise of seeing, hearing, and walking ... What do you say, Epicurus? Were not the eyes produced for seeing? Why, then, do they see?" (*On the Workmanship of God* VI).[43] The answer Lactantius mocks is the one Lucretius gives: "nothing was born in the body that we might use it, but that which is born begets itself a use" (Lucretius IV.832–835).[44] The eyes see because they were formed with the power of seeing, and the creatures whose parts did not work did not survive to leave descendants. And Lucretius adds the evidence of the world's defects: "the nature of the world has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it stands encumbered" (II.180–181).[45]

Providence Over Every Sparrow

The God of the Abrahamists does not merely make the world. He watches and governs every part of it. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:29–30).[46] "He knoweth whatever is on the land and in the sea; and no leaf falleth but He knoweth it" (Koran 6:59), and

"not the weight of an atom on Earth or in Heaven escapeth thy Lord" (10:61).[47] The Mishnah tells the student to "know what is above thee—a seeing eye, and a hearing ear, and all thy deeds written in a book" (*Avot* 2:1).[48]

The Hebrew prophets condemn by name the view that Epicurus taught. God promises to punish "the men ... That say in their heart: 'The LORD will not do good, neither will He do evil'" (Zephaniah 1:12).[49] That is very nearly Epicurus's first doctrine: "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour" (PD 1).[50] Maimonides makes the denial of providence the third mark of the *apikoros*, and in his *Guide for the Perplexed* names Epicurus as its author: "There is no Providence at all for anything in the Universe ... This is the theory of Epicurus, who assumes also that the Universe consists of atoms, that these have combined by chance" (*Guide* III.17, tr. Friedländer).[51]

The scriptures also accept the price of total providence. If God governs everything, he governs evil too: "I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the LORD, that doeth all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).[52] "Shall evil befall a city, And the LORD hath not done it?" (Amos 3:6).[53] Lactantius preserves the Epicurean argument that this cannot be squared with a good God: "God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able ... if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?" (*On the Anger of God* 13, tr. Fletcher).[54] Lactantius admits that "many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument."

Predestination and Free Will

A God who governs every sparrow governs every human choice as well, and the scriptures say so. "Nothing can befall us but what God hath destined for us" (Koran 9:51).[55] "No mischance chanceth either on earth or in your own persons, but ere we created them, it was in the Book" (57:22).[56] Paul applies the same rule to salvation. Before Jacob and Esau were born, "neither having done any good or evil," God chose the one and rejected the other, "that the purpose of

God according to election might stand ... Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Romans 9:11–18).[57]

Paul saw the objection at once, and it is the Epicurean objection: if God decides everything, how can he blame anyone? "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?"[58] His answer is not an argument but a rebuke: "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay?" (Romans 9:19–21).[59]

The rabbis held both sides at once: "Everything is foreseen; and freewill is given. And the world is judged by grace; and everything is according to work" (*Avot* 3:15, tr. Taylor).[60] Augustine did the same, and he attacked Cicero for refusing to. Cicero had argued that if the future is foreknown, all things happen by fate, and "then is there nothing in our own power," and so he chose between "two things, either that something is in our own power, or that there is foreknowledge."[61] Augustine's verdict: Cicero "chose the freedom of the will, to confirm which he denied the foreknowledge of future things; and thus, wishing to make men free he makes them sacrilegious. But the religious mind chooses both, confesses both, and maintains both by the faith of piety" (*City of God* V.9, tr. Dods).[62] "But we embrace both. We faithfully and sincerely confess both. The former, that we may believe well; the latter, that we may live well" (V.10).[63]

The reason both are needed is plain. The decree belongs to the creator who governs all things. The freedom is kept so that men can be judged, for "everything is according to work," and every deed is "written in a book" against the day of reckoning.[64] In these texts, free will exists to make men answerable to God.

Epicurus chose as Cicero did, and on firmer ground, because there is no creator to foreknow or decree anything. His freedom is not kept for the judgment. It is part of nature, and its use is to pursue a pleasant life. And of the two yokes he named, he judged destiny the worse: "it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation" (DL X.134).[65] The God of Romans 9 joins the two. He is a person who judges, yet his decree knows no placa-

tion, for "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."[66]

The Soul, the Resurrection and Hell

Epicurus taught that the soul is a body of fine atoms that is scattered at death, so that "death is nothing to us."[67] The Abrahamic religions teach that death is the beginning of judgment. "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).[68] "All that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28–29).[69] "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels ... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25:41, 46).[70] The Hebrew Bible: "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence" (Daniel 12:2).[71]

Where Epicurus taught men not to fear death, the Gospel commands them to fear what comes after it: "fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).[72] The Mishnah closes the door Epicurus opened: "Let not thine imagination assure thee that the grave is an asylum; for perforce thou wast framed, and perforce thou wast born, and perforce thou livest, and perforce thou diest, and perforce thou art about to give account and reckoning before the King of the kings of kings" (*Avot* 4:22).[73]

The materialist objection that the body returns to dust is answered in all three traditions by the power of the creator. In the Talmud, Caesar asks Rabban Gamaliel, "Does not the corpse become dust? How, then, can dust be restored?" (Sanhedrin 90b–91a).[74] In the Koran the unbeliever asks, "'Who ... shall give life to bones when they are rotten?' SAY: He shall give life to them who gave them being at first" (Koran 36:78–79).[75] Lactantius quotes Epicurus's own words, "When we are in existence, death does not exist; when death exists, we have no existence: therefore death is nothing to us," and replies that it is not death itself we fear but "the very act of dying" (*Divine Institutes* III.17).[76]

Epicurus's answer is the truth about the soul and death, and that truth removes the fear of judgment. "Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation" (DL X.124).[77] "For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living" (X.125).[78] Lucretius gave a whole book to the proofs that the soul is mortal, ending: "Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, since the nature of the mind is proved to be mortal."[79]

Ethics: Obedience Against Pleasure

Pleasure Condemned

The Abrahamic scriptures treat the love of pleasure as a mark of the wicked. In a list of the vices of "the last days," men will be "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4).[80] "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world ... For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father" (1 John 2:15–16).[81] "He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man" (Proverbs 21:17).[82] The Koran: "this world's life is only a sport, and pastime, and show ... and this world's life is but a cheating fruition" (Koran 57:20), and on the last day men "shall ... be taken to task concerning pleasures" (102:8).[83]

This life is only a waiting room. "This world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare thyself at the vestibule, that thou mayest be admitted into the hall" (*Avot* 4:16).[84] Augustine names the Epicureans as the men who "live after the flesh, because they place man's highest good in bodily pleasure" (*City of God* XIV.2), and Lactantius says Epicurus "was an advocate of most disgraceful pleasure, and said that man was born for its enjoyment" (*Divine Institutes* III.17).[85]

"Let Us Eat and Drink, for Tomorrow We Die"

The scriptures picture the man who denies the life to come as a glutton. Isaiah gives the first version: "Eating flesh and drinking wine— 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we shall die!'", and God answers, "Surely this iniquity shall not be expiated by you till ye die" (Isaiah 22:13–14).[86] Paul repeats the line as the only

conclusion left if the resurrection is false: "what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).[87] The Book of Wisdom gives "the ungodly" a speech that sets out Epicurus's views one after another: "by mere chance were we born," "the spirit shall be dispersed as thin air," and so "Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and perfumes ... Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds, before they be withered" (Wisdom of Solomon 2:1–9).[88] The Koran says of the unbelievers that they "take their fill, and eat as the beasts eat! And their dwelling-place the fire!" (Koran 47:12), and al-Ghazali says the Naturalists "plunge into sensual pleasures with the avidity of brutes" (*Confessions*, p. 26).[89]

Epicurus answered this picture of his teaching in his own words. "When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality ... For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance" (DL X.131–132).[90] The Epicurean measures each pleasure against the pains that follow it, and he chooses the greater pleasure over the lesser. The glutton of Isaiah and Paul does not.

"Take No Thought for Your Life"

The Gospels add a different objection to wealth and to planning for this life. To the young man who asks what he lacks, Jesus answers, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven," and when the young man goes away sorrowful, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:21–24).[91] The disciples are told, "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on," because God feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies, and "Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves ... a treasure in the heavens that faileth not" (Luke 12:22–33).[92]

This teaching is one of the roots of the modern belief that the less a man owns and the less he plans, the happier and better he will be. Epicurus also warned against the endless pursuit of wealth: "The wealth demanded by nature is both

limited and easily procured; but the wealth demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity" (PD 15).[93] But his reason was the opposite of the Gospel's. The Gospel treats wealth as a danger to the soul's place in the world to come, and poverty as a step toward heaven. Epicurus judged wealth only by what it does for the pleasure of this life. Riches that can never satisfy are to be avoided because they bring more pain than pleasure, not because they keep a man out of heaven. Nor did Epicurus tell his students to take no thought for tomorrow and trust that someone else would feed them. The wise man, he said, "will be careful of his possessions and will provide for the future" (DL X.120), and he valued the ability to live on little "not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things," but so that he need not fear the loss of many (DL X.130).[94]

Reward and Punishment as the Reason to Be Good

The deepest Abrahamic argument against Epicurus is that without judgment after death there is no reason to be good. The scriptures give reward and punishment as the ground of obedience. "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil ... But if thy heart turn away ... I declare unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish" (Deuteronomy 30:15–18).[95] "Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole man. For God shall bring every work into the judgment" (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14).[96] "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ ... Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:10–11).[97] "As for him who hath transgressed And hath chosen this present life, Verily, Hell—that shall be his dwelling-place" (Koran 79:37–39).[98]

Lactantius draws the conclusion he thinks Epicurus must accept. If the soul perishes, "let us eagerly pursue riches, that we may be able to enjoy all kinds of indulgence; and if these are wanting to us, let us take them away from those who have them by stealth, by stratagem, or by force ... For it is the part of the wise man to do evil, if it is advantageous to him, and safe."[99] He admits that Epicurus never said this: "Although he does not say this in word, yet he teaches it in fact" (*Divine Institutes* III.17).[100] Al-Ghazali says the same of the Naturalists: "Acknowledging neither a recompense for good deeds nor a punishment for evil ones, they fling off all authority" (*Confessions*, p. 26).[101]

Epicurus held that the reasons for living well are found in this life. Virtue is the means to the pleasant life: prudence "teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly" (DL X.132).[102] Justice is "a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (PD 33), kept because it secures a life free from fear.[103] "The just man is most free from trouble, the unjust most full of trouble" (PD 17).[104] The man who robs "by stealth, by stratagem, or by force" can never be sure he will escape, and so never lives at ease (PD 35).[105] The Epicurean does not need a hell to give him a reason to be just. He needs only to see clearly what injustice costs.

Diogenes of Oinoanda went further and turned the argument around. If the fear of gods made men good, the most devout peoples would be the best behaved, and in his eyes they were not: "A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples" (Fr. 20).[106] That is a polemical verdict on the peoples of his own day, and no one needs to accept it to see the force of his argument: devotion and good conduct are different things, and the first does not produce the second. "On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous?" he asks.[107] Not the real gods, who punish no one, and not "Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades," for "why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?"[108]

There is also a moral point in the Abrahamic argument that its defenders do not often face. A man who is honest only from "the terror of the Lord" is moved by fear, not by understanding, and Epicurus held that fear is the chief enemy of a happy life.[109] Augustine's admission shows how much rested on that fear. He would have given the palm to Epicurus, he says, if he had not believed in "places of recompense" after death.[110]

Where the Abrahamists Help the Epicurean Case

The Abrahamic writers are opponents, but they preserve much that Epicureans can use.

- **They preserve Epicurus's arguments.** Lactantius is the source for the argument from evil in its best-known form (*On the Anger of God* 13).[111] He quotes Lucretius on gods "far removed and withdrawn from our concerns" (*De Ira Dei* 8), Epicurus on death (*Divine Institutes* III.17) and Epicurus on the eyes (*On the Workmanship of God* VI).[112]
- **Augustine admits the force of the Epicurean case.** Without his belief in an afterlife, he says, Epicurus "had ... won the palm" (*Confessions* VI.16).[113]
- **Augustine defends the senses against the Skeptics.** In *Against the Academics* he voices the Epicurean position himself: "whatever the eyes are able to see, they see truly" (*Contra Academicos* III.11.26).[114]
- **Lactantius credits Epicurus on the world's end.** Against Plato and Aristotle, "Epicurus alone, following the authority of Democritus, spoke truly in this matter, who said that it had a beginning at some time, and that it would at some time perish" (*Divine Institutes* VII.1).[115] Lactantius means our world, and Epicurus did teach that each world comes to be and passes away.
- **Augustine records that Epicurus lived safely in Athens.** The city that accused Anaxagoras for calling the sun a stone let Epicurus "flourish gloriously" though he denied that any god dwelt in the world to hear men's prayers (*City of God* XVIII.41).[116]
- **The scriptures record the Epicurean test.** Thomas would not believe until he had seen and touched (John 20:24–29).[117] And the Hebrew Bible's Ecclesiastes comes closest to recommending the enjoyment of life, though it adds that "for all these things God will bring thee into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9).[118]

The Abrahamists' Long Shadow

The Middle Ages

For a thousand years "Epicurean" was a name for the unbeliever. Dante, in the *Inferno*, places the heretics in burning tombs, and gives one cemetery to the Epicureans: "Their cemetery have upon this side / With Epicurus all his followers, / Who with the body mortal make the soul" (*Inferno* X, tr. Longfellow).[119] In Jewish law the *apikoros* had no share in the world to come. In Islam the philosopher who denied creation and the resurrection was, for al-Ghazali, an unbeliever.

The Revival of Epicurus

When Epicurus was revived in the seventeenth century, the price of the revival was a concession to the Church. The French priest Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) restored Epicurus's atoms and his ethics of pleasure, but he taught that God created the atoms and set them in motion, and that the soul is immortal. The Epicurus who returned to Europe was an Epicurus with the Abrahamic God added back in.

The Modern World

The Abrahamic arguments outlived the faith of many who repeat them. The claim that without God there is no reason to be good, the picture of the Epicurean as a glutton, and the conviction that pleasure must be justified by some higher purpose are still common among people who no longer believe in a judgment after death. Many of the modern Humanists kept the morality while dropping the God, and the next chapter takes up their case.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

History

- Paul among the Epicureans and Stoics: Acts 17:16–32.[120]

- The *apikoros* has no share in the world to come: Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1; Maimonides's three *apikorsim*: *Mishneh Torah*, Repentance 3:8.[121]
- Augustine: Epicurus "won the palm": *Confessions* VI.16.[122]
- Al-Ghazali's Materialists and Naturalists: *Confessions*, pp. 25–26.[123]

The Canon

- Faith, "the evidence of things not seen": Hebrews 11:1; "we walk by faith, not by sight": 2 Corinthians 5:7; "believe in the unseen": Koran 2:1–3.[124]
- "Blessed are they that have not seen": John 20:24–29.[125]
- The wisdom of the world made foolish: 1 Corinthians 1:19–23.[126]
- The Epicureans and the "untrustworthy" senses: *City of God* VIII.7.[127]

Physics

- Creation: Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:3; Koran 2:116–117.[128]
- Design: Romans 1:18–22; Lactantius on the eyes: *On the Workmanship of God* VI.[129]
- Providence: Matthew 10:29–30; Zephaniah 1:12; Koran 6:59; Maimonides on Epicurus: *Guide* III.17.[130]
- God creates evil: Isaiah 45:7; the Epicurean argument from evil: Lactantius, *On the Anger of God* 13.[131]
- Predestination and free will: Romans 9:11–21; Koran 9:51 and 57:22–23; *Avot* 3:15; Augustine against Cicero: *City of God* V.9–10.[132]
- God sends delusion: 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12; Koran 14:4.[133]
- Judgment and hell: Matthew 10:28; Matthew 25:31–46; *Avot* 4:22; Koran 36:77–82.[134]

Ethics

- "Lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God": 2 Timothy 3:1–5; "this world's life is but a cheating fruition": Koran 57:20.[135]
- "Let us eat and drink": Isaiah 22:13–14; 1 Corinthians 15:32; the speech of the ungodly: Wisdom of Solomon 2:1–9.[136]

- Wealth and the kingdom of heaven: the camel and the eye of a needle, Matthew 19:21–24; "Take no thought for your life": Luke 12:22–33.[137]
- Reward and punishment: Deuteronomy 30:15–18; 2 Corinthians 5:10–11; Koran 79:37–41.[138]
- Lactantius: without judgment, "it is the part of the wise man to do evil": *Divine Institutes* III.17.[139]

Against The Humanists

Why Humanism Matters to Epicureans

"Humanism" is a hard word to pin down. Stoicism had a founder, a school and a set of doctrines. Platonism and Aristotelianism have their master's books. Humanism has none of these. The word has been used for at least four different things:

- **The Renaissance humanists.** In fifteenth-century Italy a *humanista* was a teacher of the *studia humanitatis*, the "humane studies" of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy, a phrase taken from Cicero. Petrarch, Valla, Pico, Erasmus and Thomas More were humanists in this sense. They were scholars and Christians, and most of them were churchmen or devout laymen.
- **The "dignity of man."** From the Renaissance onward the word came to stand for a view of man as a being of special worth, placed at the center of creation, free to shape himself and owed a reverence that no animal is owed.
- **The religion of humanity.** In the nineteenth century, thinkers who had given up Christian belief set out to keep its morality by putting Humanity in the place of God. Auguste Comte founded a "Religion of Humanity" with its own worship and calendar of saints.[1] Ludwig Feuerbach argued that God had always been man's own nature, projected into the sky.
- **Organized Humanism.** In the twentieth century the word was claimed by organizations that issued manifestos, beginning with the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933, signed by John Dewey among others, and continuing with the declarations of Humanist associations today.

Modern Humanism is not a philosophy in the way that Epicurus's teaching is a philosophy. It has no theory of knowledge of its own, no physics of its own and no account of the goal of life that it is willing to defend against all rivals. On the ultimate questions it is often careless. The 1933 Manifesto declares that the universe is "self-existing and not created," but adds that "humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered."[2] Bertrand Russell, the most famous Humanist of the last century, admitted in 1918 that "I feel less convinced than I did then of the objectivity of good and evil."[3] This easy uncertainty about first principles places modern Humanism close to Skepticism. What it holds firmly is not a doctrine about nature but a set of moral feelings: the worth and dignity of every human being, duty to all mankind, and progress. Those feelings came from somewhere, and this chapter traces where. They did not come from Epicurus.

Epicureans need to understand Humanism for three reasons.

First, Humanism is the tradition most often confused with Epicurean philosophy today. Many people who are drawn to Epicurus call themselves Humanists, and Humanist writers claim Epicurus and Lucretius as their ancestors. Corliss Lamont's *Humanism as a Philosophy* (1949) gives Epicurus and Lucretius an honored place in "the Humanist tradition." Both traditions reject supernatural religion, and both say that this life is the only one. It is easy to conclude that they are the same thing. They are not.

Second, Humanism kept the moral structure of the traditions Epicurus fought. Plato, the Stoics and the Christian writers taught that there is an absolute Good that stands above the feelings of the individual and commands him. Humanism removed gods and the Forms, but it kept the absolute Good. It renamed it Human Dignity, Duty, Humanity or Progress, and it went on imposing it on individuals as before. In contrast, Epicurus taught that "we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."[4] Humanism has never accepted that standard.

Third, Humanism has a long history of adopting Epicurus in name while rejecting what is essential to him. The Renaissance humanists brought Epi-

curus back into European thought. But Lorenzo Valla made his Epicurean speaker lose the debate to a Christian, Erasmus argued that pious Christians are the true Epicureans, and Thomas More let his Utopians pursue pleasure only after binding them to believe in the immortal soul and divine providence. Modern Humanists praise Epicurus as a gentle elderly sage but reject his ethics. Lamont writes that he has "criticized as unsound the ethics of setting up pleasure-seeking as the supreme human aim."[5] Readers who meet Epicurus through Humanist books meet a Humanist caricature of Epicurus: a mild teacher of quiet living, with the pleasure removed.

The rest of this chapter begins with Nietzsche, the sharpest critic of Humanism, who also admired Epicurus. It then traces the historical record from Boethius to the present, and follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states the Humanist position in the Humanists' own words, and then sets out the Epicurean response. The passages are collected, with Epicurean guides, on three pages of EpicurusToday.com:

- *Boethius and the Renaissance*: Boethius, Petrarch, Pico (as summarized by Jacob Burckhardt), Erasmus's colloquy "The Epicurean" and Thomas More's *Utopia*.[6]
- *Kant, Comte, Feuerbach and Russell*: Kant on dignity and duty, Comte's Religion of Humanity, Feuerbach's "man is a god to man," and Russell's "A Free Man's Worship."[7]
- *Nietzsche on Humanism*: Nietzsche on the Christian morality that survived the death of God, and on Epicurus.[8]

Nietzsche's Diagnosis: Christian Morality Without God

Why Begin with Nietzsche

Many self-styled Epicureans today regard Humanism as a friend. To criticize Humanism can look like an attack on reason, science and kindness. The best answer to that impression is a witness who stood outside both Christianity and

Humanism, who understood both, and who also understood Epicurus. That witness is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).

Nietzsche's opinions varied as he grew older, but even in his worst moods he was far from an enemy of Epicurus. In *The Joyful Wisdom* Nietzsche wrote: "Yes, I am proud of perceiving the character of Epicurus differently from anyone else perhaps," and he saw in Epicurus "the happiness of the afternoon of antiquity."[9] In *The Antichrist* he named Epicurus as the great opponent of the religion of guilt and immortality: "One has only to read Lucretius in order to understand what Epicurus combated," not paganism but "the corruption of souls through the concept of guilt, through the concept of punishment and immortality."[10] Nietzsche added: "to deny immortality was at that time a genuine *deliverance*."[11] Epicureans need not accept Nietzsche's whole program, with its focus on struggle, to see that on this point his diagnosis is correct and in many cases Epicurus and Nietzsche waged war against the same opponents.

"They Are Rid of the Christian God"

Nietzsche's most direct statement about Humanism is a short paragraph on George Eliot, the English novelist who translated Feuerbach and gave up her Christian faith while keeping its morality: "They are rid of the Christian God and therefore think it all the more incumbent upon them to hold tight to Christian morality."[12] Nietzsche denies that this can be done: "When we renounce the Christian faith, we abandon all right to Christian morality."[13] The reason is that "Christianity is a system, a complete outlook upon the world, conceived as a whole. If its leading concept, the belief in God, is wrenched from it, the whole is destroyed."[14] Christian morality "is a command, its origin is transcendental," and "it stands or falls with the belief in God."[15] The Humanist who thinks he knows "intuitively, and of their own accord, what is good and evil" only shows how deeply he is still ruled by Christian values: "For Englishmen morality is not yet a problem."[16]

This is the heart of the matter. The Humanist claims to have thrown off religion, but he kept the moral commands that religion gave, now with nothing beneath them.

The Shadow of God

Nietzsche's famous announcement that "God is dead" is not a cry of triumph. It is a warning that the work is not done. "God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millenniums yet, in which people will show his shadow,—And we—we have still to overcome his shadow!"[17] In the parable of the madman, the people in the market-place who "did not believe in God" laugh at the madman, because they do not see what they have done.[18] He asks them: "Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?" The Religion of Humanity is the answer Nietzsche feared: man does become the god, and worships himself.[19]

"I Am Morality Itself"

What survives in the shadow of God is the belief that there is one morality for all. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche says that in Europe "people evidently *know* what Socrates thought he did not know," namely what is good and evil, and that their morality "says obstinately and inexorably 'I am morality itself and nothing else is morality!'"[20] The political form of this belief is the creed of equal rights and universal duty: "the *democratic* movement is the inheritance of the Christian movement."[21] In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche traces equal rights back to the doctrine of the immortal soul. "When the centre of gravity of life is laid" in a world beyond, "life is utterly robbed of its balance. The great lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, all nature in the instincts."[22] The idea that each soul has infinite worth is a Christian idea, and "The poison of the doctrine '*equal* rights for all'—has been dispensed with the greatest thoroughness by Christianity."[23]

Nietzsche aims the same charge at Kant, the great philosopher of duty and of human dignity: ""Virtue," "Duty," "Goodness in itself," goodness stamped with the character of impersonality and universal validity—these things are mere mental hallucinations."[24] Against Kant he states a rule that Epicurus would have accepted: "An action stimulated by the instinct of life, is proved to be a proper action by the happiness that accompanies it."[25] And he notes that Kant, the "nihilist with the bowels of a Christian dogmatist," regarded happiness as an objection (*The Antichrist* 11, tr. Ludovici).[26]

Nietzsche saw that the Stoics had done the same thing long before. They claimed to live "according to Nature," but "In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature."[27] Every philosophy that "begins to believe in itself" does the same: "It always creates the world in its own image."[28]

"We Are No Humanitarians"

Nietzsche refused the name that so many of his readers would later want to give him. "We are no humanitarians; we should not dare to speak of our 'love of mankind'."[29] He saw in the gentle, humane age around him not strength but weakness dressed up as virtue: "weakness makes people gentle, alas, so gentle, so just, so inoffensive, so 'humane'!"[30]

What the Epicurean Takes from Nietzsche

Nietzsche's analysis gives the Epicurean a simple test for any moral rule that is said to survive the loss of belief in gods. Where does it come from? If it can be traced back to the pleasure and pain of actual living beings, it stands. If it can only be traced back to God, to the Forms or to an abstract Duty, then removing God has removed its support, whatever its defenders feel.

Epicurus had already built an ethics on that test, more than two thousand years earlier. He did not need to keep Christian morality after dropping Christian theology, because he had never had either. Justice, for Epicurus, "never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another ... it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 33).[31] Virtue is valued for the pleasant life it brings. The feeling of pleasure and pain is the standard. That is why the Epicurean can agree with Nietzsche's diagnosis of Humanism without following Nietzsche elsewhere. Humanism is what happens when men abandon gods but cannot bring themselves to take pleasure as the standard. Epicurus took that step, but Humanism never has.

Humanists and Epicureans: The Historical Record

Boethius: The Precursor

Boethius (about AD 477–524) was a Roman senator and Christian who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* in prison while awaiting execution. He was not a humanist. He belongs to the last age of the ancient world. But the Renaissance humanists honored him as a model, and the *Consolation* was among the most read books of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It shows the attitude to Epicurus that the humanists inherited.

In the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy explains that after the death of Socrates the schools fought over her inheritance: "the Epicurean herd, the Stoic, and the rest," each "went about to seize the heritage he left," and "they tore in pieces the garment which I had woven with my own hands."[32] For Boethius, true philosophy is the teaching of Socrates and Plato, and Epicurus is a thief of a fragment of it.

Boethius knew the Epicurean question about gods and evil, and puts it in his own mouth: "If God exists, whence comes evil? Yet whence comes good, if He exists not?" The rest of the book is Philosophy's answer.[33] He grants that Epicurus "with some consistency concluded the highest good to be pleasure," but only as one of the false paths men take toward happiness.[34] The true path ends in God. Philosophy proves that God and the highest good are one, and draws the conclusion: "So every man who is happy is a god," not in his own nature but "by participation in that nature."[35]

Epicurus also spoke of living "like a god among men," but in a very different sense.[36] The Epicurean gods are living beings who enjoy perfect pleasure, and a man who lives pleasantly and without fear shares their kind of life. For Boethius, happiness means union with the one God who is the Good itself. The humanists would carry this idea forward: man's worth lies in his likeness to a God who governs and judges.

Petrarch: Turning Away from Nature

Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) is often called the first humanist. He revived the study of Cicero and Seneca, collected manuscripts, and wrote letters to the ancient authors as if they were his friends. In one of them he scolds Cicero for his treatment of Epicurus: "You are continually praising his life, but his talents you ridicule."[37] Petrarch knew that Epicurus was "held in disrepute among the vulgar but esteemed by those better able to judge."[38]

But Petrarch's own philosophy was Augustine's. His most famous letter tells how he climbed Mount Ventoux in 1336 and, at the summit, opened Augustine's *Confessions* at random. He read: "And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not." He closed the book, "angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things who might long ago have learned from even the pagan philosophers that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself."[39]

This is the founding scene of humanism, and it is the opposite of Lucretius. Lucretius taught that the terror and darkness of the mind "must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and the law of nature."[40] Petrarch climbed a mountain and turned his eyes inward, away from nature, to the soul.

In his dialogue *The Secret*, Petrarch has Saint Augustine teach him that "to recollect one's misery and to practise frequent meditation on death is the surest aid in scorning the seductions of this world."[41] Augustine tells him that "of all tremendous realities Death is the most tremendous," and that "We must picture to ourselves the effect of death on each several part of our bodily frame," down to the sunken eyes and the smell of the corpse.[42] Epicurus taught the opposite: that "death is nothing to us," and that the right understanding of death "makes the mortality of life enjoyable."[43]

Lorenzo Valla: Epicurus on Trial

Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) wrote *On Pleasure* (*De voluptate*, 1431, later revised as *On the True and the False Good*), a dialogue in three books. A Stoic speaker

praises virtue. An Epicurean speaker, the poet Maffeo Vegio, answers him with a bold defense of pleasure as the only good. Valla gave the Epicurean the best speeches, and the book was long suspected of being a disguised defense of Epicurus.

But the last word belongs to a Christian, the friar Antonio da Rho. In Book III he declares: "I have now confuted or condemned both the Epicurean and Stoic dogmas, and have shown that the highest good, or the good that ought to be desired, is not found in either school or among any philosophers, but does exist in our religion, being attainable not on earth but in the heavens."[44] Valla's solution is that pleasure is indeed the good, but the true pleasure is the joy of heaven. This became the standard humanist way of dealing with Epicurus: accept the word "pleasure," and move its object to the next world.

Pico della Mirandola: The Dignity of Man

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) wrote the speech that gave humanism its motto, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486). Jacob Burckhardt, whose *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) shaped the modern idea of the Renaissance, summarized and translated its central passage. God speaks to Adam: "I created thee a being neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal only, that thou mightest be free to shape and to overcome thyself. Thou mayst sink into a beast, and be born anew to the divine likeness."[45]

Here is the root of the humanist idea of human dignity. Man's worth lies in his freedom to rise toward God or sink toward the beasts. His dignity is a rank in a cosmic order created by God, and his task is to climb. Every later appeal to the "dignity of man" carries this picture with it, even when God is no longer named.

Burckhardt also describes how the Renaissance saw Epicurus. Epicureanism, known from Lucretius and Cicero, "is quite sufficient to make men familiar with a godless universe."[46] Dante placed the Epicureans in burning tombs in Hell, and "their sin against the Church lay in their general disposition, which was summed up in the belief that the soul dies with the body."[47] The Church understood why this doctrine was dangerous: "it took away all reason for her interference in the affairs of men after death."[48]

Erasmus: The Christianized Epicurean

Desiderius Erasmus (about 1466–1536), the most famous scholar of northern Europe, wrote one of his last colloquies on Epicurus. In "The Epicurean" (1533), two friends discuss Cicero's *On Ends*. Spudaeus, the serious one, prefers the Stoics. Hedonius, the lover of pleasure, says "I like no Sect so well as the *Epicureans*," and states Epicurus's teaching fairly: "He places the Happiness of Man in Pleasure, and judges that Life to be most blessed, that has most Pleasure, and least Pain."[49] He even asks, "What can be more divine than this Sentence?"[50]

Then he turns the argument. "If we will speak the Truth, none are greater" Epicureans "than those Christians that live a pious Life."[51] The proof rests on premises that Epicurus rejected: that soul and body differ as "immortal and mortal," and "that God himself is the chiefest Good."[52] The chief pleasure is a clear conscience and "Peace with God." In the end Erasmus gives the name of Epicurean to Christ himself: "no Body more deserves the Name of an" Epicurean "than that adorable Prince of Christian Philosophers," because the Greek word *epikouros* means "helper."[53]

Erasmus's colloquy is often cited as a defense of Epicurus. It is better described as a capture. Erasmus kept the word "pleasure" and the name "Epicurean," and filled them with the Christian God, the immortal soul and the fear of sin. Nothing of Epicurus's physics, his theology or his teaching on death survives in it.

Thomas More: Pleasure Under Guard

Thomas More (1478–1535), Erasmus's friend, described an ideal commonwealth in *Utopia* (1516). The Utopians are the most Epicurean people in Renaissance literature. "They seem, indeed, more inclinable to that opinion that places, if not the whole, yet the chief part, of a man's happiness in pleasure."[54] They weigh pleasures as Epicurus did: "that a lesser pleasure might not stand in the way of a greater, and that no pleasure ought to be pursued that should draw a great deal of pain after it."[55]

But the Utopians base their pursuit of pleasure on religion. They believe "That the soul of man is immortal," and that God "has, therefore, appointed rewards for good and virtuous actions, and punishments for vice, to be distributed after this life."[56] Without these beliefs, they say, men would "seek after pleasure by all

possible means, lawful or unlawful."[57] And the founder of Utopia, though he allowed every religion, "made a solemn and severe law against such as should so far degenerate from the dignity of human nature, as to think that our souls died with our bodies, or that the world was governed by chance, without a wise overruling Providence."[58] Such men are thought "scarce fit to be counted men."[59] They are not punished, but "They never raise any that hold these maxims, either to honours or offices."[60]

Here the "dignity of human nature" is used directly against Epicurus.[61] The two doctrines that More's law forbids, the mortality of the soul and a world not governed by providence, are two pillars of Epicurean physics. In Utopia a true Epicurean could not hold public office.

The Religion of Humanity: Kant, Comte and Feuerbach

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many educated Europeans no longer believed in the Christian God, but almost none of them were willing to give up Christian morality. Three thinkers stand out among them.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a Christian, but he grounded morality on reason alone, without appeal to revelation. His formula of the moral law became the creed of modern Humanism: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only." He gave the modern meaning to the word "dignity": "In the kingdom of ends everything has either value or dignity." Whatever can be exchanged has a price, but "whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity."[62] And Kant named Epicurus as the great error: "The Epicureans had indeed assumed as the supreme principle of morality a wholly false one, namely that of happiness, and had substituted for a law a maxim of arbitrary choice according to every man's inclination."[63] The Stoics, by contrast, "had chosen their supreme practical principle quite rightly."

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) founded Positivism, a philosophy that claimed to accept only the findings of science. He then founded a religion. "Love, then, is our principle; Order our basis; and Progress our end." Its god is Humanity: "Towards Humanity, who is for us the only true Great Being, we, the conscious elements of whom she is composed, shall henceforth direct every aspect of our life,

individual or collective." Positivists will "regard life as a continuous and earnest act of worship."[64] Comte coined the word "altruism," and his motto was "Live for Others."[65]

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) argued in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) that religion is man's worship of his own nature: "the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species."[66] His conclusion was not that the sacred should be abandoned, but that it should be moved: "If human nature is the highest nature to man, then practically also the highest and first law must be the love of man to man. *Homo homini Deus est*" (man is a god to man).[67] "Let friendship be sacred to thee, property sacred, marriage sacred,—sacred the well-being of every man."[68] George Eliot translated this book into English in 1854. It was her morality that Nietzsche described when he wrote that "They are rid of the Christian God and therefore think it all the more incumbent upon them to hold tight to Christian morality."[69]

Organized Humanism: The Manifesto, Dewey, Russell and Lamont

In 1933 thirty-four American ministers, professors and writers, many of them Unitarian clergy, signed *A Humanist Manifesto*. They did not present Humanism as a philosophy. They presented it as a new religion. "Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions," they wrote, and "To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present."[70] The Manifesto declares that "Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created" and that "the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected."[71] But it sets as "the end of man's life" not pleasure but "the complete realization of human personality," and it calls for "a socialized and cooperative economic order."[72]

John Dewey (1859–1952), the best-known signer, explained in *A Common Faith* (1934) that he would keep the word "God" for the union of ideals and actual conditions: "It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'" (p. 51).[73] He criticized "militant atheism" for its "lack of natural piety," and argued that "Use of the words 'God' or 'divine' to convey the

union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance" (p. 52).[74]

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) accepted the Epicurean picture of nature more fully than any of them. In "A Free Man's Worship" (1903) he wrote that man's "origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms," and "that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave."[75] But he drew from these facts a conclusion that no Epicurean would draw: "Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."[76] And he built on that foundation a temple. "In this lies Man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good."[77] The way into the temple runs through "a cavern of darkness": "There Self must die; there the eagerness, the greed of untamed desire must be slain."[78] In the same essay Russell condemned "The worship of Force, to which Carlyle and Nietzsche and the creed of Militarism have accustomed us."[79]

Russell offers only two choices: worship Force, or worship "the God created by our own love of the good."[80] Epicurus would reject both, and he would reject the choice itself. Nietzsche's attack on Christian and Humanist morality is not a worship of force, and neither is Epicurus's. To deny that there is an absolute Good standing above the feelings of living beings is not to say that might makes right. Epicurus denied the absolute Good and still taught that justice is "a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 31), and that the wise man lives at peace with his friends.[81] Russell's alternative, a "worship" of ideals that he admits are his own creation, keeps the form of religion after giving up its content. The Epicurean worships neither Force nor the Good. He measures every choice by the pleasure and pain it brings, and he finds that justice and friendship serve that measure far better than violence does.

Corliss Lamont (1902–1995), later honorary president of the American Humanist Association, wrote the standard account of Humanism as a philosophy. Lamont praises Epicurus, and calls him "perhaps the outstanding example of a great philosopher who has been perpetually misunderstood" (*Humanism as a*

Philosophy, 1949, p. 51).[82] But he rejects the core of Epicurean ethics. "This pleasure ethics is founded on a false analysis of human nature," he writes (pp. 290–291), and "Humanism affirms the psychological possibility and the ethical desirability of intelligent altruism" (p. 291).[83] He describes the Epicurean ethics as "an individual quietism of minimizing desire," and he has "criticized as unsound the ethics of setting up pleasure-seeking as the supreme human aim" (p. 308).[84]

Today's organized Humanism states its creed in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002) of Humanists International: "Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual," and "Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations."[85] The words are not Epicurus's but Kant's and Comte's: dignity and duty to all humanity. Pleasure is not mentioned.

The Canon: What Is Real, and How the Humanists Say We Know It

Modern Humanists rarely ask what is real and what is true, and when they do, many of them doubt that the senses reach reality at all. Kant taught that we know things only as they appear to us, never as "a thing in itself." Russell, in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), concluded that "the senses seem not to give us the truth about the table itself, but only about the appearance of the table," and that "the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing" (p. 16).[86] Epicurus held that the table we see and touch is the real table, and that "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting'" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[87] A philosophy that doubts the reality of the world it sees will look for its standard somewhere else. This is Plato's Cave with the puppeteers taken away. In the Cave the shadows are cast by figures that men carry behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them," and so it made sense to suspect them.[88] Kant and Russell keep the screen between us and "the real table" but put no one behind it, and without a puppeteer there is no reason to suspect a screen at all. Nature has no design and no opinions, and it hides nothing from us behind the appearances.

Feeling Cannot Be the Standard

Epicurus taught that "the tests of truth are the sensations and preconcepts and the feelings," and that the feeling of pleasure and pain is the standard of good and evil in action.[89] Every major Humanist rejects the last part of this. Kant states the objection plainly: "feelings, which naturally differ infinitely in degree, cannot furnish a uniform standard of good and evil."[90] The principle of private happiness "is the most objectionable," because "the springs it provides for morality are such as rather undermine it and destroy its sublimity, since they put the motives to virtue and to vice in the same class and only teach us to make a better calculation."[91] Lamont makes the same objection in the language of psychology: "scientific psychology demonstrates that we do not in the first instance desire an object because it gives us pleasure, but that it gives us pleasure because we desire it" (*Humanism as a Philosophy*, 1949, pp. 290–291).[92]

Epicurus answers that the feelings are not a theory but a faculty of nature, like the senses. A child and an animal recognize pleasure as good and pain as bad before any argument, and no argument can replace that recognition. The Humanist who distrusts the feelings must find his standard somewhere else, and he always finds it in reason: Kant's "law," Comte's "Social Sympathy" guided by science, the Manifesto's "intelligent inquiry," the Amsterdam Declaration's "methods of science and free inquiry."[93] But reason alone, cut off from the feelings, cannot tell a man what is good. It can only tell him what follows from what he already values. In practice the values that Humanist reason "discovers" are the Christian values it inherited.

The Retreat from Nature

The Epicurean canon starts from nature: from what the senses report and from the study of things as they are. Petrarch's turn on Mount Ventoux set humanism on a different road, toward the inner life of the soul, the "dignity" of man and the moral feelings of the educated. The Renaissance humanists were masters of language, rhetoric and history, and many of them looked down on the study of nature. Modern Humanism claims the authority of science, but it uses science mainly to clear away religion, and then builds its ethics on moral feelings that science did not supply.

Uncertainty About First Principles

Because Humanism does not take its standard from the feelings, it cannot be sure of its standard at all. Russell, who wrote in 1903 of "the God created by our own love of the good," confessed fifteen years later that he felt "less convinced than I did then of the objectivity of good and evil."[94] The Manifesto keeps the door open to "realities as yet undiscovered." Dewey keeps the word "God" because it may protect men from "despair or defiance." These are the habits of Skepticism: a refusal to commit on the ultimate questions, together with a strong attachment to the moral customs of the day. Epicurus held that knowledge is possible, that the senses and feelings are reliable when used with care, and that a man can know what is good for him.

Physics: The Dignity of Man in the Universe

Man at the Center

The Renaissance idea of human dignity depended on a picture of the universe in which man stands at the center of creation, between the angels and the beasts. Pico's God tells Adam, "I created thee a being neither heavenly nor earthly," and gives him "a growth and a development depending on thine own free will."[95] Boethius taught that happiness is union with the God who is the highest good.

Epicurus taught that the universe is infinite, that worlds without number come into being and pass away, and that man is one kind of living being among many, produced by nature without design. The world was not made for us. Lucretius: "the nature of the world has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it stands encumbered."[96] There is no ladder of being for man to climb, no rank in a cosmic order that gives him a worth or a task beyond the pleasant life.

This does not mean that Epicurus offered no model to aspire to. He did. Gods are the model of the blessed life, and the man who lives by Epicurus's teaching "shall live like a god among men."[97] But the life of the Epicurean gods is a life of perfect pleasure, free of trouble and fear, and to imitate them is to pursue that same pleasure as fully as a mortal can. The Humanist ideal is different in kind. Pico's man rises toward a God who is the Good itself, Kant's toward a moral law

that "has nothing to do with enjoyment of life," and the modern Humanist toward the "complete realization of human personality."[98] In each case the goal is something other than pleasure, set above pleasure and used to judge it. The Epicurean aspires to live as gods live, pleasantly. The Humanist aspires to become something higher than he is, by a standard that is not pleasure at all.

The Law Against Chance and Mortality

The sharpest humanist attack on Epicurean physics is not an argument but a law. More's Utopia, a land of toleration, makes one exception: those who hold "that our souls died with our bodies, or that the world was governed by chance, without a wise overruling Providence" are judged to "degenerate from the dignity of human nature" and are barred from office.[99] More's reason is the one Lucretius had answered sixteen centuries before: without fear of punishment after death, men will break every law. It is the oldest charge in this book, made by Plato in the *Laws* and repeated by Cicero, now written into the constitution of an ideal state. Kant gave it its last form, a moral law that stands above nature and commands without gods to enforce it, and Nietzsche described what was left of the "true world" in Kant: "The true world is unattainable, it cannot be proved, it cannot promise anything; but even as a thought, alone, it is a comfort, an obligation, a command" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Ultimately Became a Fable").[100] Epicurus held that the wise man keeps the compact of justice because injustice brings fear and trouble in this life, and "it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly" (DL X.132).[101]

More's law is not an accident of the sixteenth century. It shows what Humanism is at bottom: a code of ethics that claims to know the good for man, and that is willing to require men to follow it. More barred the Epicurean from office. Comte designed a whole society around "Live for Others," with a priesthood to teach it.[102] The 1933 Manifesto called for "a socialized and cooperative economic order" to be built according to Humanist values, and the Amsterdam Declaration lays on every Humanist "a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations."[103] Humanists differ among themselves in how far they would go in enforcing their code, and few today would bar anyone from office for his beliefs. But the structure is the same in each case. There is a Good for man, defined by the Humanist and not by the feelings of the man himself, and society is to be ar-

ranged so that men live by it. Epicurus held that no such Good exists, and that the only rules men owe one another are the compacts they make for their mutual safety and advantage.

Modern Humanism: Atoms Without Joy

Modern Humanism accepts much of Epicurean physics. The 1933 Manifesto declares that the universe is "self-existing and not created" and rejects the dualism of mind and body.[104] Russell accepts "accidental collocations of atoms" and the end of the individual at death.[105] On these points the Humanists have come round to Epicurus.

But they have not come round to his conclusions. For Lucretius, the discovery that the world is made of atoms and void is a liberation. Epicurus "ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes" to religion and withstand her, and "us his victory brings level with heaven."[106] For Russell, the same discovery is "unyielding despair." For Dewey, it leaves man in danger of "isolation" and needing the word "God" for comfort. The Humanist accepts the atoms but still feels the loss of the God he no longer believes in, because his ethics was built for a world ruled by God.

The same gap shows when Humanists speak of happiness. They speak of it often. But the happiness they mean is not Epicurus's. The 1933 Manifesto makes "the complete realization of human personality" the end of man's life, and the Amsterdam Declaration describes Humanism as "a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living."[107] These are versions of the old view of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, in which happiness is the perfection of human nature through virtue, or of the Christian view, in which it is the fruit of a righteous life. They are not Epicurus's view, in which happiness is the pleasant life, "the beginning and end of the blessed life," and the feeling of pleasure is the standard by which it is judged.[108]

The same language has reached the United Nations. In 2012 the General Assembly proclaimed 20 March the International Day of Happiness (resolution 66/281), "recognizing the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives."[109] "Happiness is a

fundamental human goal," the UN's page announces, and it calls for "a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes the happiness and well-being of all peoples."[110] Pleasure is not mentioned. Happiness here is "well-being," measured by surveys of "life satisfaction," and it is something for governments and international bodies to define, plan and deliver to "all peoples."[111] Epicurus's happiness is the pleasant life of a particular man among his friends, judged by his own feelings.

Humanists also misread the Epicurean gods. Lamont writes that Epicurus and Lucretius "made one concession to convention and tradition" in admitting gods, and did so "mainly to escape being branded as outright atheists" (p. 52).[112] Epicurus says the opposite: "For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision."[113] The Epicurean gods are the model of the blessed life, not a polite fiction. The Humanist cannot imagine a god who is not a ruler, so he concludes that Epicurus did not mean it.

Freedom Without a Place in Nature

The Humanists praise human freedom more than almost any other tradition, but few of them have found a place for it in nature. Pico's freedom was a gift of God at the creation, "a growth and a development depending on thine own free will," given so that man might rise toward the angels or sink toward the beasts.[114] When later Humanists let go of God, they kept the gift and lost its source.

Kant accepted that the world of experience runs by strict natural necessity, and he placed freedom outside it. Freedom is "the keystone of the whole system of pure reason," yet we know its possibility only because the moral law requires it, "without, however, understanding it."[115] Kant grants that a man's conduct, as it appears in the world, has "the physical necessity that belongs to it as phenomenon," so that if we knew all his motives "we could calculate a man's conduct for the future with as great certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse; and nevertheless we may maintain that the man is free."[116] His freedom belongs to "the subject as a thing in itself," which no one can perceive, and its work is to make men answerable to the moral law.[117] Kant draws the conclusion himself. Men "thought to be born villains, and their character altogether incapable of improvement," are still "reproached for their faults as guilty," and rightly so.[118]

Russell, who accepted the atoms, kept even less. "Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way," and all that remains to man is to preserve "a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life."[119] "In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free."[120] Freedom has been driven out of the body and the world, and into a private worship of ideals.

This is the "destiny of the natural philosophers" that Epicurus judged worse than the myths (DL X.134).[121] Democritus first drew it from the atoms, and many modern writers have drawn it again from the laws of physics, of heredity or of history. Kant and Russell accepted that necessity in the world and then looked for freedom somewhere else. Epicurus refused the bargain. He found freedom in the same nature as everything else, in the atoms of which the mind is made, and he trusted our experience of choosing over any theory that denied it. "The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity" (VS 40).[122] Nor does Epicurean freedom exist to serve a duty. Lucretius describes it as the will "whereby we move forward, where pleasure leads each one of us" (II.251–262, tr. Bailey).[123]

Ethics: Dignity and Duty Against Pleasure

Human Dignity

The center of Humanist ethics is the idea of human dignity. Pico placed it in man's freedom to rise to the divine. More used it to exclude those who deny the immortal soul. Kant defined it as a worth "above all value," which "admits of no equivalent."[124] The Amsterdam Declaration begins its ethics with "the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual."

Epicurus does not speak of dignity in this sense. He does not hold that human beings have a worth above all value, given by God or by reason. He holds that human beings are living creatures who feel pleasure and pain, and that their good is the pleasant life. They have every reason to treat one another justly and to form friendships, because these bring security and pleasure. But a worth

"above all value" that cannot be weighed against anything else is exactly the kind of absolute Good that Epicurus rejected. It is the Platonic Good with man in place of the Forms.

Duty Against Pleasure

Kant states the Humanist view of pleasure in its purest form: "The majesty of duty has nothing to do with enjoyment of life."[125] Reason, he says, was not given to us for happiness at all: "our existence has a different and far nobler end, for which, and not for happiness, reason is properly intended."[126] The private ends of man "must, for the most part, be postponed."[127]

Epicurus taught that "we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life."[128] Duty, for Epicurus, has no majesty of its own. Prudence, justice and the other virtues are valuable because they produce the pleasant life, and they are chosen for that reason. The Kantian demand that a man act from duty "without joy" is, in Nietzsche's words, "the recipe *par excellence* of decadence."[129]

Altruism: "Live for Others"

Comte's Religion of Humanity demands that the individual live for Humanity: "The calculations of self-interest can never be substituted as a combining influence for the sympathetic instincts." Every aspect of life, "individual or collective," is to be directed to Humanity.[130] Lamont calls for "intelligent altruism." The Amsterdam Declaration speaks of "a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations."[131]

Epicurus valued friendship more highly than almost any ancient philosopher: "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (*Principal Doctrine* 27).[132] But friendship is a bond between particular people who know and help one another, and it is valued for the pleasure and security it brings. It is not a duty to all mankind. Epicurus's justice is a compact among those able to make one so as to secure their own pleasure (*Principal Doctrines* 31–33), not an obligation to an abstract Humanity.[133] The command to "live for others" makes the individual's own life a means to an end outside himself. That is what the Stoic did when he

made himself a citizen of the cosmos, and what the Christian did when he made himself a servant of God.

The Sacred Without God

Feuerbach did not want to abolish the sacred, only to move it from God to man: "Let friendship be sacred to thee, property sacred, marriage sacred,—sacred the well-being of every man."[134] The Manifesto declares that "The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained," because everything human is now religious. Russell speaks of "worship" and a "temple." Comte designed a calendar of saints.

Epicurus honored gods as models of the blessed life, and he joined in the festivals. But he did not make human relations sacred. Friendship, marriage and property, like justice itself, are good when and because they bring pleasure and security. To call them sacred is to put them beyond the judgment of the feelings, which is the very thing Epicurus would not do.

Death

The humanist tradition's attitude to death runs from Petrarch's "meditation on death," with its picture of the decaying body, to Russell's "firm foundation of unyielding despair."[135] The first teaches contempt for life in preparation for the next. The second accepts that there is no next life, but cannot be glad of it.

Epicurus taught that "death is nothing to us," because "all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation."[136] Lucretius: "Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, since the nature of the mind is proved to be mortal."[137] The knowledge that death is the end does not lead to despair. It removes the fear that spoils life, and "there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living."[138]

Pleasure Moved to Heaven

The humanists who were most friendly to Epicurus, Valla, Erasmus and More, all did the same thing. They accepted the word "pleasure" and gave it a new object. For Valla the true pleasure is the joy of heaven. For Erasmus it is "Peace with

God" and a clear conscience. For More it is a pleasure fenced in by the immortal soul and the rewards and punishments after death. In each case the pleasure that Epicurus meant, the pleasure of this life judged by the feelings of a mortal being, is set aside. Readers who meet these writers as "Christian Epicureans" should remember that Epicurus's physics, his theology and his teaching on death are all missing from their Epicureanism.

Where the Humanists Help the Epicurean Case

The Humanists are hostile witnesses on the central question of ethics, but they have helped the Epicurean cause in several ways.

- **They brought the texts back.** The humanist manuscript hunter Poggio Bracciolini recovered Lucretius's poem in 1417, and humanist scholars restored Diogenes Laertius, Cicero and Seneca to European readers. Without them most of what we know of Epicurus would have been lost.
- **They took pleasure seriously.** Valla's Epicurean speaker, Erasmus's Hedonius and More's Utopians all state the case for pleasure with force and clarity, even though their authors overrule it. Erasmus has Hedonius say that Epicurus "places the Happiness of Man in Pleasure, and judges that Life to be most blessed, that has most Pleasure, and least Pain," a fair summary, and he asks what could be "more divine."[139]
- **They confirm what was at stake.** More's law against those who deny providence and the immortal soul, and Burckhardt's account of Dante's burning tombs, show plainly which Epicurean doctrines the Christian world found most dangerous.
- **Modern Humanists accept Epicurean physics.** The Manifesto's "self-existing and not created" universe, its rejection of mind-body dualism, and Russell's "collocations of atoms" all confirm the Epicurean view of nature against Plato, the Stoics and the Church.[140]
- **Their own words show the gap.** Kant's verdict that the Epicurean principle is "wholly false," Lamont's rejection of "pleasure-seeking as the supreme human aim," and Comte's "Live for Others" make it plain that Humanism and

Epicurean philosophy differ at the root.[141] No reader who has seen these passages can mistake one for the other.

The Humanist Epicurus

The Humanist tradition has created its own picture of Epicurus. He is the fragile and gentle sage of the Garden who freed men from superstition, lived simply among his friends, and taught a mild ethics of limited desire. Lamont describes him retiring "to his garden to live quietly, abstemiously and nobly, achieving a kind of philosophic saintliness" (p. 51), and calls his ethics "an individual quietism."[142]

This picture keeps what the Humanist approves of in Epicurus, his rejection of supernatural religion, and sets aside what the Humanist cannot accept: that pleasure is the goal of life, that the feelings are the standard of good and evil, that virtue is only the means, and that there is no duty to Humanity above the good of the individual and his friends. It is the same picture the Stoics drew, with the Stoic Providence replaced by Progress and Humanity.

Epicurus was not a Humanist. He did not hold that man has a dignity above all value, that duty has majesty, or that we must live for others. He held that pleasure, in its full sense, is the goal, that the feelings are the standard, and that virtue, justice and friendship are the means to the pleasant life. Nietzsche saw that Humanism is Christian morality living on after the death of its God. Epicurus offers what Humanism lacks: an ethics that was never built on God in the first place.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

Nietzsche's Diagnosis

- Christian morality without the Christian God: *Twilight of the Idols*, "Skirmishes" 5.[143]
- The shadow of God and the madman: *Joyful Wisdom* 108 and 125.[144]
- "I am morality itself": *Beyond Good and Evil* 202.[145]
- Against Kant's impersonal duty: *Antichrist* 11.[146]

- Immortality and equal rights: *Antichrist* 43.[147]
- Nietzsche on Epicurus: *Joyful Wisdom* 45 and *Antichrist* 58.[148]

The Renaissance

- Philosophy's torn robe and the "Epicurean herd": Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* I.3.[149]
- Petrarch turns from nature to the soul: Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux".[150]
- The dignity of man: Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.[151]
- Pious Christians as the true Epicureans: Erasmus, "The Epicurean".[152]
- The Utopian law against Epicurean physics: More, *Utopia*, Book II.[153]

The Religion of Humanity

- Humanity as an end and the kingdom of ends: Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Second Section and on dignity.[154]
- Feeling cannot be the standard: Kant, *Fundamental Principles*, Second Section.[155]
- The Epicurean principle "wholly false": Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.[156]
- Humanity the Great Being and "Live for Others": Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, Conclusion.[157]
- "Man is a god to man": Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, ch. XXVII.[158]
- Atoms and "unyielding despair": Russell, "A Free Man's Worship".[159]
- Freedom outside nature: Kant's "keystone" and the man as calculable as "a lunar or solar eclipse"; Russell's "omnipotent matter."[160]

Against The Buddhists

Why the Buddhists Matter to Epicureans

Of all the traditions referenced in this book, Buddhism is the one most often described as Epicurus's twin. Both, it is said, reject a creator god. Both teach that the fear of death can be overcome. Both counsel moderation and the limiting of desire. Both seek a calm mind, which Epicurus called *ataraxia* and the Buddha called Nirvana. Many people who come to Epicurus today come by way of meditation, mindfulness or "secular Buddhism," and they expect to find the same teaching in a Greek dress.

They will not find it. Beneath the resemblances lie opposite answers to every question that mattered to Epicurus. The Buddha taught that life is suffering, that desire is its cause, and that the goal is to extinguish desire and escape from rebirth. Epicurus taught that life is good, that pleasure is the goal, and that the natural desires for pleasure are to be satisfied. The Buddha taught that the senses are "on fire" and that the disciple should conceive an aversion for them. Epicurus taught that the senses are the standard of truth. The Buddha refused to say whether the world is eternal or what happens to the saint after death. Epicurus held that a man cannot be free of fear unless he knows the nature of the universe. And the Buddha, while denying that there is any self, taught that the deeds of one life are punished or rewarded in the next, the very concern that Epicurus's physics removes.

The Buddhists matter to Epicureans for three main reasons.

First, Buddhism is the tradition most easily confused with Epicurean philosophy today. The confusion runs both ways. Readers who think of Epicurus as a teacher of tranquility see a Buddhist in him, and readers who admire the Buddha see an Epicurean. Nietzsche himself grouped the two, at one time calling Epicurus "a *typical* decadent" driven by "the terror of pain."[1] An Epicurean who cannot understand why Nietzsche confused the two and explain the difference will find Epicurean philosophy absorbed into Buddhism.

Second, Buddhism is a philosophy of the extinction of desire, and it is the purest form of the view that pleasure is the problem. Plato, the Stoics and the Abrahamic religions subordinated pleasure to a higher good. The Buddha went further. In his teaching, craving for pleasure is the cause of suffering, and the cure is "the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst."[2] The "absence of pain" as so many modern writers read it, an emptying of desire, is very close to this Buddhist ideal, and very far from Epicurus.

Third, Buddhism keeps the afterlife while denying the soul. Epicurus freed men from the fear of punishment after death by showing that the soul is mortal. Buddhism agrees that there is no lasting soul, but teaches that "evil-doers go to hell; righteous people go to heaven," and that rebirth continues until desire is destroyed.[3] It shows that a philosophy can deny the immortal soul and still keep the fear that the immortal soul was used to teach.

The rest of this chapter follows the three divisions of Epicurean philosophy: the Canon, or how we know the truth; Physics, or the nature of things; and Ethics, or how to live. Each section states the Buddhist position in the words of the early Buddhist scriptures, the Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition, as they were first translated into English, and then sets out the Epicurean response. The passages are collected, with images of the printed pages, on EpicurusToday.com in *Buddhism - Key Passages*.[4] Buddhism later took many forms across Asia, and not every school would put every point in the same way. But the teachings quoted here are the common foundation of them all.

Buddhists and Epicureans: The Historical Record

The Buddha and His Scriptures

Siddhattha Gotama, called the Buddha, "the Awakened One," lived in northern India in the fifth century BC, a century or more before Epicurus was born. He left home, practiced severe austerities, gave them up, and after a night of meditation declared that he had found the way to the end of suffering. He spent the rest of his life teaching and founded an order of monks. His teachings were passed down by memory and written down in Sri Lanka in the first century BC, in the language called Pali. That collection, the Pali Canon, is the oldest complete body of Buddhist scripture.

Pyrrho in India

The Greeks first met Indian philosophy through Alexander's army. Diogenes Laertius reports that Pyrrho of Elis, the founder of Greek Skepticism, followed Alexander "as far as the Gymnosophists, in India, and the Magi," and that after his return he taught "the doctrine of incomprehensibility, and of the necessity of suspending one's judgment."[5] We do not know whether the Indian sages Pyrrho met were Buddhists. But his calm indifference, his denial that anything is good or bad by nature, and his suspension of judgment have reminded many readers of Indian teaching. Pyrrho's disciple Nausiphanes was the teacher whom Epicurus later rejected (see *Against The Skeptics*).

Ashoka and the Greek Kings

In the generation after Epicurus's death, the Indian emperor Ashoka converted to Buddhism and had his edicts carved on rocks and pillars across his empire. In one of them, from about 260 BC, he claims to have sent his teaching of *Dhamma* to the Greek kings of the West, naming Antiochus, Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander. Whether any Buddhist teacher ever reached the Mediterranean is unknown. But the Buddhist and Epicurean schools were alive at the same time, in kingdoms that knew of each other.

Milinda and the Greeks

The meeting of Greek and Buddhist thought that we can document took place in India. *The Questions of King Milinda* records the conversations of the monk Nagasena with Milinda, the Greek king Menander, who ruled in northwest India in the second century BC. The king's court includes "five hundred Yonakas," that is, Greeks.[6] Here a Greek king asks the Greek questions, about the self, about rebirth and about responsibility, and the Buddhist monk answers them. The most famous exchange, the argument of the chariot, is quoted below.

The Canon: The Senses on Fire

Buddhism teaches that the world the senses report is impermanent and, in the end, unreal. Things pass away, the self is only "a mere name," and "'All forms are unreal,' he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain."[7] Truth in the highest sense is reached by insight, not by the senses. Epicurus agreed that compound things pass away, but he held that what passes away is no less real while it exists, and that "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting'" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[8]

The Fire Sermon

Epicurus held that the senses are the first standard of truth and that the feelings of pleasure and pain are the standard of good and evil. The Buddha's Fire Sermon teaches the disciple to turn away from both.

"All things, O priests, are on fire. ... The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire."[9] With what are they on fire? "With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair."[10] The same is said of the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. And so "the learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for the eye, conceives an aversion for forms," and for every sensation, "pleasant, unpleasant, or

indifferent."[11] Only then is he free, and "he knows that rebirth is exhausted ... and that he is no more for this world."[12]

The Dhammapada puts the same teaching in verse: "Look upon the world as a bubble, look upon it as a mirage" (Dhammapada 170), and "'All forms are unreal,' he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way that leads to purity" (279).[13]

Insight Above Inquiry

Buddhism is often praised as a religion of experience rather than faith, and in one sense it is. The Buddha did not ask his followers to believe in a creator. But the experience he valued was not the evidence of the senses about the world. It was the insight reached in meditation, in which the disciple sees that all things are impermanent, painful and without self. In the First Sermon the Buddha says that the Four Noble Truths were "not ... among the doctrines handed down," but that "there arose within me the eye (to perceive it), there arose the knowledge (of its nature)."[14] That knowledge is the Buddha's own, reached by a path that the disciple must follow on trust until he reaches it himself.

The Epicurean Answer

Epicurus taught that the senses are not on fire. They are the instruments by which nature lets us know the world and enjoy it. "Nor is there anything which can refute the sensations" (DL X.32), and "If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false" (PD 23).[15] The world is not a bubble or a mirage. Nor is it the puppet show of Plato's Cave, where the shadows are cast by figures that men carry behind "the screen which marionette players have in front of them."[16] Nature has no design, no aims for men and no opinions, so it has no wish to mislead us, and a sensation "is not set in motion by itself, nor when it is set in motion by something else, can it add to it or take from it."[17] It is made of real bodies moving in real space, and the senses report them truly. The man who conceives an aversion for the eye and for forms has not escaped a fire. He has thrown away the means of knowing what is true and of choosing what is pleasant.

Nor did Epicurus hold that pleasure is a fire to be put out. The feeling of pleasure is the standard "by which we judge every good" (DL X.129).[18] Pleasures are to be weighed against the pains they bring, and some are to be passed over. But no pleasure is bad in itself (PD 8), and to turn away from all of them because they are "on fire" is to turn away from the only good that nature gives.[19]

Summary: Two Different Canons

- **The Buddhists:** the senses and their pleasures are fires of passion. The disciple conceives an aversion for every sensation, sees that all forms are unreal, and reaches the truth by insight in meditation.
- **Epicurus:** the world the senses report is real, though its compounds pass away. The senses, the preconcepts and the feelings are the standards of truth, and the feeling of pleasure is the standard of good.

Physics: Impermanence, No Self and Rebirth

Questions That "Profit Not"

The monk Malunkyaputta demanded that the Buddha tell him whether the world is eternal or not, finite or infinite, whether the soul and the body are the same, and whether the saint exists after death. The Buddha refused. He compared Malunkyaputta to a man shot with a poisoned arrow who will not let the surgeon draw it until he knows the name and caste of the archer and the wood of the bow: "That man would die, Malunkyaputta, without ever having learnt this."[20] The Buddha has not explained these things "Because, Malunkyaputta, this profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom, and Nirvana."[21] What he has explained is "Misery ... the origin of misery ... the cessation of misery ... and the path leading to the cessation of misery."[22]

The parable has some merit in that philosophy should serve life, but Epicurus drew the opposite conclusion. For Epicurus, the questions the Buddha set aside are exactly the ones that free a man from fear. "If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns

us ... we should have no need of natural science" (PD 11).[23] But we are troubled, and so "A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story" (PD 12).[24] Whether the soul and body are one, and whether anything of us exists after death, are not idle questions about the archer's caste. They are the arrow itself. The Buddha left them unanswered, and the doctrine of rebirth filled the gap.

Everything Is Impermanent

The Buddha taught that "All created things perish" and that "All created things are grief and pain."[25] Epicurus agreed with the first half. Every compound body, every living being and every world comes to be and passes away. But for Epicurus the atoms of which they are made are eternal, and the universe "always was such as it is now, and always will be the same" (DL X.39).[26] And he denied the second half entirely. That things pass away does not make them "grief and pain." A pleasure is no less pleasant for being temporary, any more than a banquet is spoiled because it ends. "Just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant" (DL X.126).[27]

The Chariot: No Self

When King Milinda asks the monk his name, Nagasena answers that "Nagasena" is "but a way of counting, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name ... for there is no Ego here to be found."[28] He proves it by asking the king whether the pole is the chariot, or the axle, or the wheels, or all of them together, or something besides them. Each time the king says no, and Nagasena concludes that the word "chariot" is only a name. "In exactly the same way, your majesty, in respect of me, Nagasena is but a way of counting ... But in the absolute sense there is no Ego here to be found" (*Milindapanha*).[29]

Epicurus also taught that a living being is a compound. The soul is "a body of fine particles distributed throughout the whole structure" (DL X.63), and it holds together only with the body.[30] But he did not conclude that the compound is unreal. Of the properties of bodies he says that "we must not suppose

that they are either independent existences ... nor that they absolutely do not exist," and that "the whole body in its totality owes its own permanent existence to all these" (DL X.69).[31] A chariot is a real chariot while its parts are joined, and a man is a real man while his body and soul are joined. That he is made of parts and will one day come apart does not make him "a mere name." It makes him mortal.

Rebirth Without a Self

Here the Buddhist doctrine turns back on itself. If there is no self, what is reborn? Nagasena answers that "Rebirth takes place without anything transmigrating," as one lamp is lit from another.[32] It is "not this same name and form that is born into the next existence," but "by reason of this deed another name and form is born."[33] And yet the deeds of this life are punished in the next: "inasmuch as one is born into another existence, therefore is one not freed from one's evil deeds."[34] The Dhammapada states it plainly: "Some people are born again; evil-doers go to hell; righteous people go to heaven; those who are free from all worldly desires attain Nirvana" (126).[35]

Lucretius had already answered this. If the soul existed before our birth, "why are we unable to remember besides the time already gone, and why do we retain no traces of past actions? If the power of the mind has been so completely changed that all remembrance of past things is lost, that methinks differs not widely from death" (III.670–678).[36] And even if the very atoms of our body were gathered again after death into the same arrangement, "this result even would concern us not at all, when the chain of our self-consciousness has once been snapped asunder" (III.847–851).[37] "He whom evil is to befall must in his own person exist at the very time it comes ... but since death precludes this ... you may be sure that we have nothing to fear after death" (III.862–869).[38]

By Nagasena's own account, the being reborn is "another name and form," lit from this one as a lamp from a lamp.[39] On Epicurean principles that other being is not me, and what befalls it is nothing to me. The Buddhist who denies the self and still fears rebirth is afraid of what will happen to someone else. The doctrine keeps the fear of punishment after death while removing the one who would be punished.

Karma: A Moral Order in Nature

Rebirth according to deeds makes the universe itself a court of justice. Every good deed is rewarded and every evil one punished, if not in this life then in the next, and no one escapes: "Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a man might be freed from an evil deed" (Dhammapada 127).[40] Buddhism has no creator, but its law of karma does the work that providence and judgment do in the other religions. It answers in its own way the charge that runs through this book, that men will not be good unless they believe in something beyond this world and fear what comes after death. Diogenes of Oinoanda's reply applies to karma as much as to the "Judges in Hades": those who disregard the laws of this life will "scorn fables much more" (Fr. 20).[41]

Epicurus denied any such order. Nature produces pleasure and pain through the motions of atoms, not through the weighing of deeds. "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour" (PD 1), and there is no other power in the universe to reward and punish.[42] Justice exists, but it exists among men, as "a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed" (PD 31).[43]

Karma and Fate

Buddhism is not a doctrine of fate, and the Buddha said so. Among the rival teachers of his day was Makkhali Gosala, who taught that "the attainment of any given condition, of any character, does not depend either on one's own acts, or on the acts of another, or on human effort," and that all beings "are bent this way and that by their fate."[44] The Buddhists, in the words of their translator, regarded Makkhali as "the worst of the sophists."[45] Against him the Buddha taught that deeds matter and have their fruits.

But in Buddhism the fruits of deeds reach across lives. When King Milinda asks why men are not all alike, "some long-lived and some short-lived, some healthy and some sickly ... some rich and some poor, some of high degree and some of low degree, some wise and some foolish," Nagasena answers that "it is through a difference in their karma," and quotes the Buddha: "All beings, O youth, have

karma as their portion; they are heirs of their karma; they are sprung from their karma; their karma is their kinsman; their karma is their refuge; karma allots beings to meanness or greatness."[46] A man's health, wealth, rank and wits are settled at his birth by deeds done in lives he cannot remember, by a self that, as the chariot shows, does not exist. That is not Makkhali's fate, but for the man born under it, it works in much the same way. His lot was decided before he could choose, and it was decided as a judgment.

Epicurus explained the same differences without a judgment. Some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some are within our control (DL X.133).[47] A man born sickly or poor has met with necessity or bad fortune, not with the sentence of a former life. Chance does not hand out good and evil "for the framing of a blessed life," but "opportunities for great good and great evil are afforded by it" (X.134), and the wise man takes hold of them: "In but few things chance hinders a wise man, but the greatest and most important matters reason has ordained and throughout the whole period of life does and will ordain" (PD 16).[48] What he chooses now is his own, and its fruits come in this life, the only one he has.

Gods

Buddhism does not deny gods. Its scriptures are full of them, and of heavens where the good are reborn to enjoy their reward. But gods, too, are caught in the round of rebirth, and their heavens are places to be passed through, not a final goal. The translator Max Müller notes that the Buddha himself "enjoyed these pleasures of heaven, before he was born for the last time."[49] The goal is to escape from heaven as well as from earth.

The Epicurean gods are the reverse. They are not in the round of rebirth, because there is no round. They are living beings of perfect and lasting pleasure, and they are the model of the blessed life. The man who lives by Epicurus's teaching "shall live like a god among men" (DL X.135).[50] The Dhammapada has a verse that sounds like this: "Let us live happily then, though we call nothing our own! We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness!" (200).[51] But the Buddhist bright gods are beings who must one day fall, and their happiness is not the goal.

Ethics: The Extinction of Desire Against Pleasure

Life Is Suffering

The First Sermon begins with the noble truth concerning suffering: "Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. In brief, the five aggregates which spring from attachment (the conditions of individuality and their cause) are painful."[52] The translator T. W. Rhys Davids sums up the thought: "pain results from existence as an individual."[53] The Dhammapada calls the body "the greatest of pains" (203).[54]

Epicurus held the opposite. Life is good, because the living being can feel pleasure, and Sextus Empiricus reports his reason: "it is far preferable to be alive because the good belongs to the sentient" (*Against the Professors* I.285).[55] Pain is real, but it is limited: "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh," and the worst pain is brief (PD 4).[56] Existence as an individual is not the cause of pain. It is the condition of every pleasure.

Desire Is the Cause

The second noble truth names the cause of suffering: "that thirst (or craving), causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there."[57] The third names the cure: "the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst."[58] Among the cravings to be destroyed is the love of this present life alone. Rhys Davids notes that the craving for annihilation at death, the view that "existence will cease therewith, and that there is to be no future state," was the heresy he calls "the 'let-us-eat-and-drink-for-to-morrow-we-die heresy'," and that it has "very close analogies to ... materialism."[59] The Epicurean view of death is one of the errors Buddhism exists to cure.

Epicurus taught the reverse. The desire for pleasure is not a disease to be cured, and there is nothing painful in it. It is the guide that nature gives every living thing from birth, the first and final directive of life: "we recognize pleasure as the

first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."[60] The whole of Epicurean philosophy is built on that desire. Its purpose is not to extinguish it but to pursue it well, so as to gain the most pleasure and suffer the least pain over the whole of a life.

Nor did Epicurus think life a burden to be escaped. In the Letter to Menoeceus he speaks of "the desirability of life," and he has hard words for the very doctrine on which the First Sermon is built: "much worse still is the man who says it is good not to be born."[61] The Buddha taught that birth is suffering and that the goal is never to be born again. Epicurus taught that to be born is to receive the chance of pleasure, and that the wise man enjoys his life to its end.

Desire becomes a problem only when the pursuit of it brings more pain than pleasure. That is why Epicurus sorted desires instead of condemning them. "Among desires some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination" (PD 29).[62] The natural desires are easily satisfied, and their satisfaction is pleasure: "The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured" (PD 15).[63] The empty desires, for unlimited wealth, fame or power, can never be satisfied, because the wealth they demand "stretches on to infinity" (PD 15), and so they bring far more pain than pleasure.[64] Even these are to be avoided not because desire is evil, but because their cost is greater than their return. "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself: but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures" (PD 8).[65]

This is the deepest difference between the two teachers. The Buddha looked at the pains that follow some desires and concluded that all desire must be destroyed. Epicurus looked at the same pains and concluded that desire must be guided by reason, so that it leads to the greatest pleasure. The Buddhist cure removes the patient's appetite for life. The Epicurean cure teaches him how to satisfy it.

"From Pleasure Comes Grief"

The Dhammapada's chapter on pleasure states the Buddhist teaching in its sharpest form: "From pleasure comes grief, from pleasure comes fear; he who is

free from pleasure knows neither grief nor fear."[66] The same is said of affection, of lust, of love and of greed. "Let no man ever look for what is pleasant, or what is unpleasant."[67]

Epicurus answered that pleasure brings grief only when it is chosen badly. "Since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them" (DL X.129).[68] The answer to the pleasure that brings grief is a wiser choice of pleasures, not freedom from pleasure altogether. A man who is "free from pleasure" in the Buddhist sense has not escaped grief by understanding it. He has escaped it by giving up the only thing that makes life worth living.

"Let No Man Love Anything"

The sharpest contrast is over friendship. The Dhammapada teaches: "Let, therefore, no man love anything; loss of the beloved is evil. Those who love nothing, and hate nothing, have no fetters."[69] "From affection comes grief, from affection comes fear."[70] The Buddha himself left his wife and newborn son to seek enlightenment, and the highest life in his teaching is that of the monk who has given up home and family.

Epicurus taught that "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (PD 27).[71] The Epicurean community was a community of friends, men and women, who lived and studied together and wrote to one another with affection. The loss of a friend brings grief, and Epicurus did not pretend otherwise. But he held that the pleasure of friendship is worth the risk, and that the memory of a friend who has died is itself a pleasure. To love nothing in order to lose nothing is to buy safety from grief at the price of everything good.

The Middle Path Is Not Pleasure

The Buddha's Middle Path is often compared to Epicurean moderation. It avoids two extremes: "the habitual practice ... of those things whose attraction depends upon the passions, and especially of sensuality—a low and pagan way (of seeking satisfaction) unworthy, unprofitable, and fit only for the worldly-

minded," and "the habitual practice ... of asceticism (or self-mortification), which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable."[72]

The resemblance is on the surface. Epicurus also rejected the profligate and the ascetic, but for a single reason: both fail to produce the most pleasant life. The Buddha rejected sensual pleasure as "low and pagan," and asceticism as painful and unprofitable, because neither leads to the destruction of craving. The Middle Path is a middle way between two methods of reaching Nirvana. It is not a way of living pleasantly. It ends in the same place as the Fire Sermon: aversion for the senses and the end of desire.

Meditation and the Empty House

The Dhammapada makes meditation the road away from pleasure. "Meditate, O Bhikshu, and be not heedless! Do not direct thy thought to what gives pleasure."[73] The man who "does not give himself to meditation, forgetting the real aim (of life) and grasping at pleasure, will in time envy him who has exerted himself in meditation."[74] Its picture of the happy man is the monk "who has entered his empty house, and whose mind is tranquil," and it states the conclusion plainly: "there is no happiness higher than rest."[75]

This is the source of much modern advice that is now attributed to Epicurus: clear the mind, breathe, let go of desire, and happiness will arise of itself. Even the Dhammapada did not quite say that. Its monk feels delight "when he sees the law clearly," and the law he sees is the Buddhist doctrine that life is suffering and desire its cause.[76] The modern version keeps the method and drops the doctrine, but the method still points the same way, away from desire and away from pleasure.

Epicurus also told his students to meditate, but he meant something very different. "We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness" (DL X.122).[77] "Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself" (DL X.135).[78] The things to be meditated on are the truths about gods, death, the limits of desire and the choice of pleasures, and the purpose is to fix them in mind so that they guide every choice. The Buddhist meditates in order to stop wanting. The Epi-

curean meditates in order to want wisely and to get what he wants. One empties the house. The other furnishes it with true knowledge and fills it with friends.

Nirvana and Pleasure

The Dhammapada calls Nirvana "the highest happiness" (203–204), and some readers conclude that Nirvana and Epicurean pleasure are the same.[79] They are not. Nirvana means "blowing out," the extinction of the fires of passion, hatred and delusion, and with them the end of rebirth. It is reached by "aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence" (*Majjhima Nikaya* 63).[80] The disciple who reaches it "is no more for this world."[81]

Epicurus's happiness through pleasure is the opposite of extinction. It is the life of a living being whose body is free from pain and whose mind is free from fear, and who therefore enjoys to the full the particular pleasures of food and drink, friendship, conversation, adventure, achievement and the study of nature. "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful" (PD 3), but that limit is reached in a full life, not in the blowing out of life.[82] Epicurus "admits both kinds" of pleasure, the pleasure of motion as well as the pleasure of rest, "both in the soul and in the body" (DL X.136).[83] Nirvana is reached by ceasing to want. Epicurean pleasure is reached by getting what nature wants.

Nietzsche's Charge of Decadence

Nietzsche saw Buddhism more clearly than most of his contemporaries. He called it "a hundred times more realistic than Christianity," because it "no longer speaks of the 'struggle with *sin*' but ... of the 'struggle with *pain*.'"[84] But he called both "nihilistic religions ... religions of decadence," born of an excessive sensitivity to pain.[85] And at those times when he focused on Epicurus's advice on avoiding pain he put Epicurus with them: "Epicurus was a *typical* decadent: and I was the first to recognise him as such.—The terror of pain, even of infinitely slight pain."[86]

Nietzsche read Epicurus as a Buddhist, as a man whose goal was the avoidance of pain. That is the reading this chapter has argued against. Epicurus did not counsel men to flee pain at any cost: "we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time" (DL

X.129).[87] His goal was pleasure, and he faced pain as the price of it. Nietzsche's charge is a fair charge against Buddhism, and against the "tranquil" Epicurus of the modern books. It is not a fair charge against Epicurus, and Nietzsche's own praise of Epicurus in *The Joyful Wisdom* and *The Antichrist* shows that it was not his last word on him.

Where the Buddhists Help the Epicurean Case

The Buddhists are opponents on the central questions, but they share some ground with Epicurus, and their texts can be of limited use to Epicureans.

- **No creator.** Buddhism does not teach that the world was made by a god, and Nietzsche notes that in Buddhism "The concept 'God' was already exploded when it appeared."[88] Epicureans and Buddhists stand together against the creator of the Abrahamic religions and of Plato's *Timaeus*.
- **A compound mind.** The Buddhist analysis of the person into body, sensation, perception, dispositions and consciousness, with no separate soul behind them, agrees with Epicurus that the mind is not a separate, simple, immortal thing.
- **Against asceticism.** The Buddha rejected self-mortification as "painful, unworthy, and unprofitable."[89] Epicurus would agree.
- **Philosophy as medicine.** The parable of the arrow treats philosophy as a cure for suffering, not as idle speculation, as Epicurus did: "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man" (Usener 221).[90]
- **The Greek connection.** *The Questions of King Milinda* shows Greek and Indian thought meeting face to face, and its chariot argument is one of the clearest statements anywhere of the view that a whole is made of its parts. Epicurus agreed that a whole is made of its parts, but he held that the whole is real while its parts are joined (DL X.69).[91]

The Buddhists' Long Shadow

Schopenhauer and the Nineteenth Century

Buddhism reached the West in the nineteenth century through scholars such as Max Müller and T. W. Rhys Davids, whose translations are quoted in this chapter. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) found in it a confirmation of his own view that life is suffering and that the will to live must be denied. Through Schopenhauer, Buddhist pessimism entered European philosophy, and Nietzsche's charge of "decadence" was aimed at it.

Modern Buddhism and the "Tranquil" Epicurus

In the twentieth century Buddhism spread in the West in a new form, often stripped of rebirth, hells and monks, and presented as a psychology of calm, meditation and "mindfulness." At the same time scholars came to describe the goal of Epicurus as "tranquility" or the "absence of pain." The two pictures met, and today Epicurus is often presented as a Greek Buddha, a teacher of detachment who sought calm by reducing desire.

Stoicism has been remade in much the same way. Its providential god, its world-soul and its fate have been set aside, and it is sold today as a practical psychology of calm and resilience, much as Buddhism is sold as a psychology of mindfulness. The modern reader meets the Stoic sage, the Buddhist meditator and the "tranquil" Epicurus side by side on the same shelf, as three versions of the same advice: want less, accept what comes, and keep your mind at peace. Its most popular form today is minimalism, a kinder, gentler asceticism that promises happiness to the man who owns less, wants less and clears his mind. Epicurus belongs in neither company. Both the modern Stoic and the modern Buddhist are taught to quiet desire. The Epicurean is taught to satisfy it wisely.

That picture drops everything that made Epicurus himself. It drops pleasure as the goal, the senses as the standard of truth, the confident knowledge of nature, the pleasures of motion as well as of rest, and the friendships that Epicurus called the greatest possession wisdom can acquire. An Epicurean who has read the Fire Sermon, the parable of the arrow and the Dhammapada's chapter on pleasure can no longer mistake the one teacher for the other.

The Most Important Passages for Epicureans

- The Middle Path and the Four Noble Truths: the First Sermon (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*); the craving for this life alone as the "let-us-eat-and-drink-for-to-morrow-we-die heresy": Rhys Davids's note to the First Sermon.[92]
- The senses on fire, and aversion for every sensation: the Fire Sermon (*Adittapariyaya Sutta*).[93]
- Questions that "profit not": the parable of the poisoned arrow (*Majjhima Nikaya* 63).[94]
- No self: the chariot (*Questions of King Milinda*).[95]
- Karma "allots beings to meanness or greatness": *Questions of King Milinda*; the fatalism of Makkhali Gosala: Digha Nikaya 2.[96]
- Rebirth without transmigration, and punishment for deeds: *Questions of King Milinda*; Dhammapada 126.[97]
- "From pleasure comes grief" and "Let no man love anything": Dhammapada 210–216.[98]
- "Nirvana the highest happiness": Dhammapada 202–204.[99]
- Nietzsche on Buddhism and on Epicurus as "decadent": *Antichrist* 20 and 30.[100]
- The Epicurean answers to rebirth: Lucretius III.670–678 and III.843–869.[101]

Conclusion: Why You Should Choose Epicurus as Your Guide

What the Survey Shows

The seven chapters of this book have examined seven traditions over more than two thousand years: the Platonists, the Aristotelians, the Stoics, the Skeptics, the Abrahamists, the Humanists and the Buddhists. They differ from one another in many ways, and they have often fought each other as fiercely as they fought Epicurus. But when they are set side by side against Epicurus, three results stand out.

First, they are not seven views but variations on one. The view of the world that Socrates and Plato first set out passed from school to school in the West. It was edited and renamed at each step, but its core survived. Buddhism arose independently, far from Greece, but it reached many of the same conclusions by another road.

Second, at nearly every step that view puts something above the feelings of pleasure and pain, and then imposes it on others. Each tradition finds a Good that is higher than pleasure and that does not depend on what any man feels. Each then claims the right to make others live by it.

Third, Epicurus answered that view at every stage, and his answers still stand. He did not answer one school at a time. He answered the root from which they all grew.

One View of the World

The Line of Descent

The line begins with Socrates. As David Sedley shows in *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*, the argument from design first appears in Xenophon's report of Socrates, who asked whether the eyes, the eyelids and the eyebrows could be "products of chance or intelligence" (*Against The Platonists*).[1] Plato built that argument into a whole cosmology in the *Timaeus*: a good craftsman made the world, the only world, as a living creature on the pattern of an eternal Form. The soul is immortal, the senses deceive, and the good is not pleasure.

Aristotle took away the craftsman but kept the purposes. His teleology, in the words of the same book, is "a reasoned modification of Plato's creationism" (*Against The Aristotelians*).[2] Nature does nothing in vain, plants exist for animals and animals for men, and the highest life is the contemplation of a god who is pure thought.

The Stoics brought the craftsman back and put him inside the world. Their physics descends from Plato's *Timaeus*, and the early Stoics "were in fact even willing to be known by the title 'Socratics'" (*Against The Stoics*).[3] The world became a living, rational god, and providence governed every part of it.

The Skeptics, Plato's own Academy among them, seemed to break the line, because they denied that anything could be known. But they denied it in a way that left the old beliefs standing. The Skeptic "following the ordinary view" reverences gods, and the Academic Cotta says, "I must believe the word of our ancestors even without proof" (*Against The Skeptics*).[4]

The Abrahamic religions then made the Platonic and Stoic world an article of faith. The creator, providence, the immortal soul and the judgment after death were no longer arguments. They were commands, and to doubt them was a sin and, for many centuries, a crime. Augustine wrote that the Platonists came nearest to the Christian faith (*Against The Abrahamists*).

Finally the Humanists gave up the Christian God but kept much of the Christian morality. Nietzsche saw it clearly: "They are rid of the Christian God and therefore think it all the more incumbent upon them to hold tight to Christian

morality" (*Against The Humanists*).[5] The "sacred" was moved from God to man, and duty, dignity and the good of Humanity took the place of the divine law.

A Parallel Road: The Buddhists

Buddhism owes nothing to Plato, and it began before him, in India. But it arrives at the same place. It too distrusts the senses: "The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire."[6] It too holds that the soul's deeds are judged after death, though it denies the soul: "evil-doers go to hell; righteous people go to heaven."[7] And it too places the good above pleasure, in the extinction of desire: "From pleasure comes grief, from pleasure comes fear."[8] When Buddhism reached the West in the nineteenth century, it was welcomed by many who had left the older traditions behind, because it offered the same world without the creator (*Against The Buddhists*).

The Common Core

What survives through all these changes can be stated in a few sentences.

- **The truly real is above the world we see, and so is the truth.** It is found in the Forms, in universal essences, in the reason of the sage, in revelation, or in the dictates of conscience. Even the Skeptic, who denies that truth can be found, denies it by denying the senses first.
- **The world is the result of supernatural design.** It was made or ordered for a purpose, and man has a place in that purpose, often a place assigned to him before he can choose it: by the Fates, by providence, by God's decree or by the karma of former lives.
- **Man is more than his body.** Some part of him is divine, or immortal, or sacred, and it gives him a worth and a duty that do not depend on anything he feels.
- **The good is above pleasure.** It is virtue, contemplation, obedience, duty or the perfection of man. Pleasure is at best a by-product, and at worst the mark of a beast.

Epicurus denied every one of these sentences. The world we see is the real world, and to be true is to be as it is said to be. His three standards of truth are the senses, the preconcepts and the feelings. His universe is atoms and void, without beginning, without purpose and without end, and some things in it happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own choice. His soul is a body of fine atoms, scattered at death. And his good is pleasure, "the beginning and end of the blessed life," judged by "the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good" (DL X.129).[9]

That is why the seven traditions so often joined against him, even while they fought each other. They disagreed about the details of the higher world. Epicurus denied that there was one.

The Good Imposed on Others

A Pattern in Every Chapter

A Good that does not depend on what any man feels is a Good that can be enforced on any man, whatever he feels. The chapters of this book show that these traditions drew that conclusion again and again.

- **Plato** made unbelief a crime. A man who held "that the gods exist, but have no care for men," the Epicurean view, was to be reported to the magistrates and held in a "reformatory," and "if he be convicted again on a like charge, he shall be punished by death."[10] The rulers of the *Republic* would tell the citizens a "royal lie" for their own good (*Laws* 909a; *Republic* 414b).[11]
- **Aristotle** reasoned from the order of nature that "she has made all these things for men," and that a war against those "intended by nature for slavery" who "are unwilling to submit to it" is "by nature just" (*Politics* I.8).[12] From the order of the heavens he drew the motto "one ruler let there be" (*Metaphysics* XII.10).[13]
- **The Stoics** asked each man to will whatever fate brings. Seneca translates Cleanthes: "Fate leads, but the unwilling drags along" (*Letters* 107.11).[14] Chrysippus said that the foot, "if it had a mind, would seek to be covered with mud" (Epictetus, *Discourses* II.6.10).[15]

- **The Skeptics**, having no Good of their own, followed whatever Good their city imposed. The Skeptic lives by "the tradition of laws and customs ... whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good" (*Outlines* I.24).[16]
- **The Abrahamists** set before every man "life and good, and death and evil," with everlasting punishment for disobedience, and wrote the name of Epicurus into their law as the name of a man who "has no share in the world to come" (*Against The Abrahamists*).[17]
- **The Humanists** began, in Thomas More's *Utopia*, with "a solemn and severe law against such as should so far degenerate from the dignity of human nature, as to think that our souls died with our bodies, or that the world was governed by chance" (*Utopia*).[18] Kant declared that "the majesty of duty has nothing to do with enjoyment of life" (*Critique of Practical Reason*), and Comte gave his religion of Humanity the motto "*Live for Others*" (*A General View of Positivism*).[19]
- **The Buddhists** need no ruler to enforce their Good, because they place the enforcement in nature itself. Every deed is weighed by the law of karma: "Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a man might be freed from an evil deed" (*Dhammapada* 127).[20]

The language changes from chapter to chapter, but the structure does not. There is a Good above feeling. Some men know it better than others. Those who know it may rule, persuade, deceive or punish those who do not.

The Higher World and the Noble Lie

One charge runs through every chapter, and it is the most practical of all. It holds that whatever the truth may be, men will not be good unless they believe in something higher and truer than this world, and above all in gods who watch them and will punish them, so that the belief must be kept alive by myth, by law or by force. Nietzsche traced that "true world" from Plato to Kant, and found it in its last form still claiming to be "a comfort, an obligation, a command" (*Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'True World' Ultimately Became a Fable").[21] Plato let his rulers tell a "royal lie" and made unbelief a crime. Aristotle approved the myths added "with a view to the persuasion of the multitude."[22] Cicero warned that without piety "justice itself, the queen of all the virtues" would disappear.[23]

The Abrahamic writers made the judgment after death the reason to obey, and Lactantius concluded that without it "it is the part of the wise man to do evil."[24] More's Utopia barred from office anyone who denied providence and the immortal soul. Karma carries the same threat across lives.

Epicurus answered that the good is found in this world, that a morality built on a lie cannot be trusted, and that the lie does not work. Wrongdoers who do not fear the laws do not fear the gods either, and the wise are just because they understand what injustice costs. "On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades." (Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fr. 20).[25] The Epicurean keeps the compact of justice because it secures his own safety and the friendships that make life pleasant, and he needs no myth to make him keep it.

Nietzsche's Diagnosis

Nietzsche saw this pattern in the morality of his own day. "In Europe people evidently *know* what Socrates thought he did not know ... they 'know' today what is good and evil," and the morality they know insists that it is the only one: "*Morality in Europe at present is herding-animal morality*" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 202).[26] He traced it, as this book has, back through Christianity to Socrates and Plato.

Epicureans need not accept Nietzsche's own program to see that his diagnosis fits. Plato set up the absolute Good, and every one of the seven traditions either inherited it or, like the Skeptics, left it in place.

The Epicurean Alternative

Epicurus offered no source of supernatural Good above the feelings of pleasure and pain given to us by nature, and so he claimed no right to impose a Good on anyone else. Pleasure and pain are felt by each living thing, and no philosopher-king, priest or moralist can feel them for another. Justice is not a Form or a command but "a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed" (PD 31).[27] A law that does not serve that advantage "no longer has the essential nature of justice" (PD 37).[28] Gods

neither command nor punish. "The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour" (PD 1).[29]

This does not make Epicureanism a doctrine of "anything goes." The Epicurean measures every choice by its consequences in pleasure and pain, and he finds that "it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly" (DL X.132).[30] But the standard is one that each man can test for himself, by his own feelings, and not one that some other man claims to know on his behalf.

The Charges Answered

The Canon

The deepest disagreement came before the question of how we know. Plato made the eternal Forms the only true reality. Aristotle placed the highest reality in form and in an eternal mind. The Stoics made truth an "incorporeal judgement" of reason. The Skeptics doubted that anything is true at all. The Abrahamists placed reality in an unseen God, the Humanists doubted that the senses reach "the real table," and the Buddhists taught that "All forms are unreal."[31] Epicurus held that the world we see is the real world, and that "there is no difference between saying that a thing is 'true' and saying that it is 'subsisting'" (*Against the Logicians* II.9).[32]

From that first disagreement came the second. Every one of the seven traditions that competed with Epicurus distrusted the senses. Plato called them deceivers and sent the soul back to what it knew before birth. Aristotle began with them but crowned them with an intellect that grasps essences. The Stoics trusted only a rare class of impressions that the Skeptics showed no one could identify. The Skeptics turned the distrust on everything. The Abrahamists blessed those "that have not seen, and yet have believed."[33] The Humanists put conscience and reason above the evidence of feeling. The Buddhists called the senses "on fire" and taught the disciple to conceive an aversion for them.

The Epicurean answer holds against them all. "If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say

are false" (PD 23).[34] Every critic of the senses relies on his senses to read the texts, hear the arguments and live his life. The Skeptic eats when he is hungry. The Platonist steps out of the way of a cart. The question is not whether to trust the senses but whether to admit it, and to build on them. Nor is there any reason to fear that nature deceives us on purpose. Plato pictured the world of the senses as shadows of puppets cast on the wall of a cave by men hidden behind a screen, but nature is no puppeteer. It has no design, no aims for men and no opinions, so it cannot hand us false ones. The rivals who put a designing mind behind the world could not say as much: the Academics asked the Stoics how their god could send visions "which appear to be false," and Paul wrote that "God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie."[35] Error comes only from the opinions we add.

Physics

The chapters show the argument from design in age after age: Socrates' eyebrows, Plato's craftsman, Aristotle's nature that does nothing in vain, Balbus's orrery, Paul's "invisible things ... clearly seen," and the Humanists' dignity of man in a universe that was supposed to have no purpose. Epicurus answered it with a single principle: "nothing was born in the body that we might use it, but that which is born begets itself a use" (Lucretius IV.832–835).[36] The order of nature comes from the nature of its elements and from the survival of what works.

On the question of gods, the seven traditions offered a craftsman, an unmoved mover, a providence, a custom, a judge, a Humanity and a law of karma. Each of them gives men something to fear or to obey. Epicurus offered gods who are happy and who trouble no one, and he showed that the fear of gods comes from "false suppositions" and not from the evidence of the senses (DL X.124).[37]

On fate, the traditions offered the throne of Necessity and a choice of lives made before birth, a Stoic chain of causes that leads the willing and drags the unwilling, a suspension of judgment on "what is in our power," a God who has decreed everything and still judges, a freedom that Kant and Russell could find only outside nature, and a karma that "allots beings to meanness or greatness."[38] Aristotle stood closest to Epicurus here, but his system, which had no atoms,

never had to meet the necessity that Democritus had drawn from them. Epicurus faced it and answered it: "that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame" (DL X.133).[39] "It were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers" (X.134).[40]

On death, the seven traditions offered judgment, transmigration, survival until the burning of the world, suspension of judgment, resurrection and hell, a morality still shaped by them, and rebirth without a self. Epicurus offered the plain truth: "Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us" (PD 2).[41] "There is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living" (DL X.125).[42]

Ethics

The seven traditions placed the good in virtue, contemplation, quietude, obedience, duty, dignity and the extinction of desire. Again and again the arguments against pleasure turned out to be arguments against a caricature of pleasure: the leaky jar of Callicles, the beast at its trough, the glutton who says "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."[43] Epicurus rejected that caricature in his own words: "it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning" (DL X.132).[44]

The traditions also confess, again and again, that they cannot do without pleasure. Plato's *Phaedo* admits that ordinary men are temperate in order to obtain greater pleasures. Aristotle calls the life of his god a life whose "actuality is also pleasure."[45] Balbus lets slip that Stoic Providence "appears to have been at times a disciple of Epicurus" (*On the Nature of the Gods* II.160).[46] Sextus admits that no argument can talk a hungry man out of his hunger. Augustine admits that, but for his belief in an afterlife, Epicurus "had ... won the palm." Even the Dhammapada calls its goal "the highest happiness."[47] Each of them, at some point, bears witness that pleasure is what nature seeks.

The Buddhists went furthest of all. They made desire itself the cause of suffering and its extinction the goal, and the modern world often places them beside the

Stoics as twin teachers of calm. Epicurus answered both. The desire for pleasure is not a disease but the guide that nature gives every living thing, and the task of philosophy is not to quiet it but to satisfy it wisely, choosing the pleasures that bring the least pain and the greatest return over a whole life.

In our own time the pieces of several traditions have been assembled into a single piece of advice, and it is often presented as the teaching of Epicurus himself: clear the mind, meditate, let go of desires and concerns, own less and want less, and happiness will arise of its own accord. It takes the Buddhist's meditation and "there is no happiness higher than rest," the Stoic's "freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire," the Skeptic's quiet that follows giving up "as a shadow follows its substance," and the Gospel's "Take no thought for your life."[48] Its practical form, minimalism, is a kinder, gentler asceticism. It is a major modern corruption of Epicurus. He taught that happiness is produced by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance" (DL X.132), not by emptying the mind; that the ability to live on little is valuable "not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things" (DL X.130), but so that we need not fear the loss of many; and that the surest joy belongs to those who "rightly calculate" the stable condition of the body and "the sure hope of its continuance" (Fragment 11).[49] The Epicurean does not wait for happiness to arise. He reasons his way to it.

Why Choose Epicurus as Your Guide

The question this book set out to answer is a practical one. Which philosophy should a man choose to guide his life?

The seven traditions covered here each ask him to give up something real for something he cannot see. Plato asks him to give up the world of the senses for a world of Forms. Aristotle asks him to give up pleasure for contemplation. The Stoics ask him to give up his own judgment of good and evil for the will of providence. The Skeptics ask him to give up the search for truth and to follow custom. The Abrahamists ask him to give up the evidence of his senses for faith, and this life for the next. The Humanists ask him to give up his own happiness for duty and for Humanity. The Buddhists ask him to give up desire itself, and even love, for the blowing out of Nirvana.

Epicurus asks him to give up nothing but his fears. He asks him to trust the senses that nature gave him, to understand the world well enough to see that there is nothing in it to dread, and to choose among pleasures and pains with care. What he holds out in return is not a reward after death but the confident expectation of a pleasant life now, among friends, free from the fear of gods, of death and of fate. "Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men" (DL X.135).[50]

The book began with this choice, and it ends with it. Trusting the senses takes nerve, and Lucretius states what is at stake if we lose it. "For not only would all reason give way, life itself would at once fall to the ground, unless you choose to trust the senses and shun precipices and all things else of this sort that are to be avoided, and to pursue the opposite things" (IV.507–510).[51] Where Munro writes "choose," the Latin is stronger: *nisi credere sensibus ausis*, "unless you dare to trust the senses." The seven traditions asked men to doubt the senses. Epicurus asks them to have the courage to trust them, and to build their lives on what they find.

The evidence is now before you: the words of Epicurus and of his opponents, set side by side on the questions that divide them. The verdict is yours.

Cicero's Epicurean spokesman named the two things Epicurus did, in the order in which he did them: he was "that discoverer of truth and architect of the happy life" (*On Ends* I.32).[52] Nearly every rival tradition reversed that order. Each began with the good it wanted, a world of Forms, a providence, a God, a duty or an escape from desire, and shaped its account of nature to support it. Epicurus began with nature as the senses reveal it, and built the happy life on what he found. That is why his ethics still stands: it rests on the truth.

Lucretius described what Epicurus did for those who followed him. "When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion ... a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face" (I.62–79).[53] He "rescued life from such great billows and such thick darkness and moored it in so perfect a calm and in

so brilliant a light" (V.1–12).[54] And he chose Epicurus as his own guide in words that can close this book:

> "THEE, who first was able amid such thick darkness to raise on high so bright a beacon and shed a light on the true interests of life, thee I follow, glory of the Greek race, and plant now my footsteps firmly fixed in thy imprinted marks" (Lucretius III.1–6, tr. Munro).[55]

Epilogue: What Next?

The First Step

If this book has persuaded you that Epicurus is the better guide, the next question is what to do about it. The first thing to do is also the most challenging: educate yourself accurately about Epicurean philosophy.

The word that matters is "accurately." A great deal is written about Epicurus today, and much of it is friendly in tone. But friendliness is not accuracy, and a guide who gets Epicurus wrong on the main points can lead you further from him than an open enemy would. Epicurus himself told his students where to begin. "It is necessary to go back on the main principles, and constantly to fix in one's memory enough to give one the most essential comprehension of the truth" (DL X.36).[1] The rest of this chapter is about how to do that.

Why Reliable Guides Are Few

The sad state of affairs, for reasons covered at length in the previous chapters, is that very few reliable guides to Epicurean philosophy are available. For more than two thousand years the traditions surveyed in this book ran the schools, the churches and the universities, and each of them had reason to bury Epicurus or to remake him in its own image. Nearly all of his own three hundred rolls were lost. Much of what survives about him reached us through his opponents, such as Cicero, Plutarch and Seneca, who quoted him in order to refute him. Norman DeWitt summed up the result: "As for classical scholars, their attitude toward Epicurus has been contemptuous in the main and their treatment perfunc-

tory," and "many tedious investigations remain to be made if the misrepresentations of centuries are to be rectified" (*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 358).[2]

The popular books are often worse. Most "self-help" discussions of Epicurus cut many corners, and some outright contradict core Epicurean doctrine. Among the most common errors:

- **Tranquility in place of pleasure.** They make calm, or the absence of disturbance, the goal of life. Epicurus named pleasure as "the beginning and end of the blessed life" (DL X.129).[3]
- **"Absence of pain" as minimalism.** They read it as a rule to want as little as possible, and they turn Epicurus into an ascetic. The chapter "Champion of Truth, Architect of the Happy Life" shows what he meant by it.
- **Happiness by letting go.** They teach that if you clear your mind, meditate, "just breathe" and let go of your desires and concerns, happiness will arise by itself. Epicurus taught that the pleasant life is produced by "sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance" (DL X.132), and when he told his students to meditate "night and day," he meant to think hard about the truths of nature, not to empty the mind of them (DL X.135).[4]
- **Epicurus as a Stoic in a garden,** or as a teacher of mindfulness and detachment beside the Buddha. This book has shown how deep the differences run.
- **Physics left out,** as obsolete, or treated as a comforting story instead of the truth about nature on which everything else depends.
- **The senses doubted,** with "all sensations are true" dismissed as naïve, so that the Canon disappears.[5]
- **Virtue made an end in itself,** when Epicurus held that "virtue is preferred for the sake of pleasure, and not for its own sake" (DL X.138).[6]
- **Withdrawal from life as the ideal,** when Epicurus founded a school, wrote hundreds of books, sent letters to friends in many cities and built a movement that lasted for centuries.

Each of these errors is answered in the earlier chapters. A guide who makes several of them is teaching something other than Epicurus, whatever name he puts on it.

DeWitt: The Best Modern Book, but Not the Last Word

As of this writing, the best modern book on Epicurus remains Norman DeWitt's *Epicurus and His Philosophy* (1954). DeWitt took Epicurus seriously as a systematic thinker and as a reformer and leader. He saw that the Canon, with its preconcepts, is the foundation of the system, and he saw how badly the centuries had treated it. Anyone who wants to understand Epicurus should read him.

But even DeWitt is far from perfect. At times he does not go far enough in pursuing his own insights, and leaves the reader to draw conclusions that he points toward but does not state. At other times, especially in regard to Christianity, he dwells on what the two have in common more than on the far more important differences. He closed his book on that note: "In particular the New Testament must be diligently studied anew for traces of the language and thought of Epicureanism, which in that day was flourishing both in Judaea and in the Greek cities where the apostles sought their converts. This background was helping to shape the new doctrine" (p. 358).[7] He developed the theme in a second book, *St. Paul and Epicurus*. Paul may well have borrowed Epicurean words and methods. But the chapter on the Abrahamists shows how little else he borrowed: a creator in place of a world without design, judgment after death in place of "death is nothing to us," faith in place of the senses, and the denial of pleasure in place of pleasure as the guide of life.[8] Those differences decide which way a man's life will go. Read DeWitt first, but read him with the questions of this book in hand.

No Schools, So Start With Friends

There are no reliable schools of Epicurean philosophy in the modern world. The ancient Epicureans had the Garden in Athens, communities in many cities, and teachers who could trace their learning back to Epicurus himself. Nothing like that exists today.

So the first step in recovering Epicurus for the modern world has to be taken by individuals, working through small groups of like-minded people who are truly

dedicated to Epicurean philosophy, not to some eclectic amalgam of their own. That last point matters. It is tempting to take a little from Epicurus, a little from the Stoics and a little from the Buddhists, and to call the result a personal philosophy. But this book has shown that those traditions disagree with Epicurus at the root: on what is real, on whether nature has a design, on whether the soul survives death, and on whether pleasure is the goal. A mixture of contradictory roots will not grow into a coherent life. A group that studies Epicurus has to be willing to take him as he is, and to test its conclusions against what he actually taught.

This is how Epicureanism began. Epicurus told his students to study "night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself" (DL X.135), and in his will he provided for "the assembly of my disciples which takes place on the twentieth of each month" (DL X.18).[9] Centuries later, Diogenes of Oinoanda carved the teaching on a wall in his city because "[it is] right to help [also] generations to come (for they too belong to us, though they are still unborn) and, besides, love of humanity prompts us to aid also the foreigners who come here" (Fr. 3).[10] EpicureanFriends.com, the forum behind this book, has been active since 2015 for the same purpose: to bring together people who want to study Epicurus as he was, and to test their understanding against the texts and against each other.

This Book as a Test

Part of the purpose of this book has been to provide a test by which you can judge which guides to Epicurus are reliable. The chapter on the Charges sets out the main points. Hold any book, article, course or teacher against them:

- **What is real and what is true?** The world we see is the real world, the senses are the first standard of truth, and nature, which has no design and no opinions, does not deceive us.
- **Where did the world come from?** From atoms moving in the void, with no creator.
- **Do gods govern the world?** No. A class of beings Epicurus calls gods exists, but they neither govern the world nor punish or reward men.
- **What happens at death?** The soul is scattered, and death is nothing to us.

- **Does nature act for a purpose?** No.
- **Is everything fated?** No. Some things happen by necessity, some by chance and some by our own choice.
- **What is the goal of life?** Pleasure, in the full sense in which Epicurus used the word, not tranquility or the mere absence of feeling. It is reached by reasoning and choice, not by emptying the mind or by wanting less.
- **What is virtue for?** Virtue is chosen because it leads to a pleasant life, not for its own sake.
- **What are justice and law?** Agreements among men not to harm or be harmed, with no absolute justice behind them.
- **Can men be good if there is no world beyond this one?** Yes. The good is found in this world, the wise are just because they understand what injustice costs, and the fear of gods restrains no one whom the laws do not.

If a guide omits, distorts or contradicts Epicurus on these major issues, that source should not be considered reliable. It is as apt to lead you astray as to lead you in the right direction. A guide who gets them right may still make mistakes on smaller points, but he is at least walking the same road as Epicurus.

Why Not Go Straight to the Texts?

It may seem that the cure for unreliable guides is to skip them and go straight to the original texts. That is not likely to be the best approach either, at least not at first.

What survives of Epicurus is fragmentary. We have three letters, which are summaries written for students who already knew the system; two collections of short sayings; a long poem by Lucretius; an inscription in pieces; and reports by enemies who quoted him in order to refute him. Epicurus's views rest on foundations, the Canon, the atoms and the void, and pleasure as the guide of every living thing, that are so poorly known today that a reader who starts with the sayings will waste a great deal of time spinning his wheels. Many of the sayings can be read in more than one way, and the reader who does not already know the direction of Epicurus's thought will usually read them in the way his own culture has taught him.

So first identify the direction of Epicurus's thought, and then look for interpretations of his specific statements that fit the overall picture. This is the method Epicurus himself prescribed. He wrote his summaries so that his students could "keep adequately in mind at least the most general principles in each department," and he promised that "the accurate knowledge of details will be fully discovered, if the general principles in the various departments are thoroughly grasped and borne in mind" (DL X.35–36).[11]

The phrase "absence of pain" shows why. Read alone, "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful" (PD 3) can sound like a call to want as little as possible.[12] Read in the direction of the whole system, in which pleasure is the guide that nature gives every creature and every experience we find desirable counts as pleasure, it describes a life full of pleasure with no pain mixed in. The same words point in opposite directions depending on the picture into which they are fitted.

Once the direction is clear, the texts open up. A good order, in general, is the Letter to Herodotus, then the Letter to Pythocles, then the Letter to Menoeceus and the Principal Doctrines. Lucretius is extremely valuable, but very difficult to read if you do not already know what you are looking for, so he is best read once the letters are familiar. Then come Torquatus's speech in Cicero's *On Ends* I and Velleius's in *On the Nature of the Gods* I; then Diogenes of Oinoanda. Read the hostile reporters, Cicero in his own voice, Plutarch and Seneca, knowing that they are hostile. All of these texts are on EpicurusToday.com, and the Works Cited lists the editions quoted in this book.

Living It

Study is the first step, but it is not the goal. Epicurus taught a way of life, and the test of the teaching is whether it makes your own life more pleasant. Thomas Jefferson, who called himself an Epicurean, saw that clearly. When an old friend wrote that he was yielding to a life of repose, Jefferson answered that he was "not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding," and that "fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards" (Letter to William Short, October 31, 1819).[13]

The pleasures open to an Epicurean are as wide as life itself: a good meal with friends, a quiet hour with a book, a garden in the evening, but also climbing a mountain, sailing open water, building a business, traveling to places you have never seen, and perhaps someday flying to Mars. Choose among them with care, weigh each against the pains it brings, and do not let anyone tell you that pleasure is something to be ashamed of.

The recovery of Epicurus will not come from the universities or from the popular books. It will come, if it comes at all, from individuals who take the trouble to learn him accurately, who find others who share that commitment, and who show in their own lives that his way works. "Friendship goes dancing round the world proclaiming to us all to awake to the praises of a happy life" (VS 52).[14]

A Note on the Sources

Every quotation in this book is taken from a published translation. The Notes that follow identify the source of each quotation, chapter by chapter, and the Works Cited lists the editions used. In the electronic editions the quotations also link to the full texts on EpicurusToday.com, where the passages can be read in context and most can be checked against images of the printed pages. Each chapter of this book is also published on EpicurusToday.com, together with guides to the source texts it draws on.

Modern works still under copyright are quoted briefly, for purposes of criticism. Where no suitable published translation was available, a passage has been rendered directly from the original language, and the page of the printed original is linked.

Notes

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