

*Potens est quidem, sed nichilominus, pro ingenita benignitate, munificentissimus est Dominus.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>

### The Philosophies of Life 2



## Hedonists

### 4. Cyrenaic Hedonism

Aristippus (Ἀρίστιππος) of Cyrene (355-435BC) was the leading figure in Cyrenaic Hedonism. This philosophy is still with us although those who practice it may not know its name. Aristippus said that the virtuous man is one who knows how to achieve happiness. It comes from fulfilling your appetites so eat, drink etc for pleasure is man's highest attainable good and it is never evil. “If it feels good to do it” – it cannot be evil. Aristippus taught that all pleasure is physical and the only difference between pleasures is quantitative – do you get more pleasure out of a Mars bar or a beefsteak? He did not follow Democritus' idea of coarse and refine atoms. He thought that it is only custom that makes us think some pleasures are wrong. Different cultures have different customs – it is all relative. His Epistemology can be summarised: all we know is our sensations – we do not know not the objects that cause the sensation. Knowledge has to be useful in attaining happiness.

Aristippus also thought man needed to master his pleasures because they give us grief not pleasure if they master us. For instance drunkenness has a price to be paid with a hangover and persistent drunkenness leads to health problems. One should therefore master pleasure to maximise it.

The objections to this are that if Aristippus is right we have no way of knowing whether the pleasures of the here and now are all there are. If all we know is from our sensations do we know that “fact” also through our sensations? It may well be that as C. S. Lewis said we are, “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>3</sup>

Later Hedonists such as Hegesias (Ἡγησίας) of Cyrene took a more gloomy view. One should avoid

1 God is powerful indeed, but nevertheless most generous, through his unbegotten kindness. Andrew of St. Victor. d.1175.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnw.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*.

pain rather than seek pleasure he thought, since complete happiness is not attainable. This led him to consider that death might be preferable to life since he considered that the dead felt no pain. Again one must ask how did he know this if he considered that all knowledge comes from the senses and he had not experienced death!

## 5. Epicureanism

The Epicurean philosophers were known as the “garden philosophers” since they met in a garden. They espoused a slightly different brand of Hedonism to that of the Cyrenaic Hedonists. They were followers of Epicurus (341-270BC) who as a Hedonist and pupil of Democritus.. He was also an atomist with a materialistic outlook on life. He said that man's highest good is not spiritual or religious but it is pleasure like the Cyrenaic Hedonists. However there was a big difference since he thought that the difference between pleasures was qualitative not quantitative.<sup>4</sup> The highest pleasure according to Epicurus was intellectual pleasure. Like Hegesias he advocated avoiding all the pain you can. He advocated maximizing intellectual pleasure and pleasant emotions and feelings. One should therefore avoid excess. Instead he thought one should enjoy a little wine, cheese and discussion with friends.

Epicurus' Metaphysics was atomistic. He believed in uncuttable atoms, infinitely small, that are infinite in number and eternal. These atoms are falling through space. Even the Gods, he said, are made of refined fire atoms. His Epistemology was like that of Aristippus. He held all knowledge to be what we know we know through our experience. He also taught that death is nothing to worry about since there is no after life, no reward or punishment after death. This suffers from the same problem as that of Aristippus. Since he did not observe it he can't know what he says he knows. How can he know about the atoms that are too small to be seen? How does he know they are eternal? He can't be there long enough to witness this!

We can see Epicurus philosophy living on today. Many people believe death is the end and that only the physical world exists. If this is the case why should we trust our brains to give us an accurate picture of reality? Our thoughts are just chemical processes bearing no relationship to truth. How can there be any choices or free will.

Epicurus wanted to retain choice and free will in his system. He said that once there was a swerve in one of the atoms falling through space. This set off a chain reaction that allowed for free will and choice. This is a poor explanation to say the least and based on no evidence. In any case, what made it swerve? Materialist in our own day have the same problem: they cannot account for man's freedom and dignity.

There is another problem with Epicurus ideas. He does not prove that one ought to seek pleasure. Even if we grant that this is what everybody does, it does not follow that this is what they *ought* to do.

On Volume 9 of the *Mothers' Companion* there is an introductory Philosophy sheet. It deals with Epicureans and also Stoics whom we will meet next week. Read it through and do the little exercise at the end.

Answer to the *Mothers' Companion* Philosophy sheet are on the next page.

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<sup>4</sup> If you do not remember what the difference between quantitative and qualitative is look back at Term 1 Week 7 Lesson 4.

Answer to the *Mothers' Companion* Philosophy sheet

Met in a garden. E

Met in a porch. S

Believed that everything is controlled by “reason” or “nature”. S

Believed that the highest good is pleasure. E

Thought we can only know what our senses tell us. E

Believed that we need not worry about death. E

Believed we should control our passions and accept whatever happens with calm indifference. S