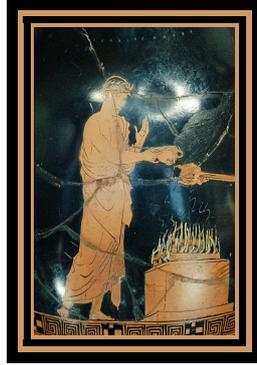*ventus enim fit, ubi est agitando percitus aeër.*[1]

Classical Thought[2]

The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: Epicureanism[3] in the Roman Empire

Epicurus (341-270BC)

We saw in a previous lesson[4] that in trying to frame a philosophy that does not take account of God, personal temperament is often the key to the philosophy we adopt. Epicurus' personality was one that craved mental calm and freedom from worry. He did not want to be afraid of the gods or answerable to them. He therefore adopted a philosophy based on a metaphysic suited to that outlook on life. He decided that man's best state was one of "repose" and we will see how this affected the philosophy he developed.

Like Zeno the Stoic,[5] Epicurus settled in Athens (the most important city in the Ancient World for philosophy) shortly after the death of Aristotle. He had previously taught in several other cities. Here he established his school in the "garden." He was such a popular teacher that some of his pupils adored him like a god. Epicurus taught that we should live for pleasure but he did not advocate a life of partying and excess. This did not suit his personal temperament. You will remember from our earlier lesson that he thought that if we are rational about our pleasures we will seek simple food such as bread and cheese, only a little wine and the pleasure of conversation with friends. Epicurus had a complicated system in which he distinguished between needs and desires and he also classified some desires as natural and others as unnatural. Then he also described some unnatural desires as vain and others as not vain. Epicurus' idea that we should seek pleasure was based on his belief in materialism. He thought that since man was only material he should seek pleasure but then he classifies some pleasures as higher than others. He had no basis for these distinctions: they cannot be learned from an empirical study of human desire. This ethical system cannot be founded on a scientific study of man. It looks like a scientific approach involving the study of human nature but it does not turn out to be scientific at all. Epicurus takes *his* own view of what is pleasurable, what is desirable, what is natural, what is unnatural and so on and founds his scheme on that as though it is some sort of scientific law. In reality what is considered desirable,

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1 Air becomes wind when it is agitated. Lucretius.

2   These lessons are derived 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.cmfnow.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   See Term 2 Week 2 Day 4 It will help you if you look over these notes before doing today's lesson.

4   Term 3 Week 2 Day 4

5   Term 3 Week 4 Day 4

natural etc. will vary from person to person.

For Epicurus man's best state was one of "repose" by which he meant an internal rest and lack of worry. The quiet pleasures, he thought, were the best pleasures. This led him to ask: what is it that man finds most disquieting? Epicurus' answer was "the fear of death." Epicurus said that this fear arises because men do not understand the world. Everything, he thought (as an atomist), is bits of matter falling through space – everything is material including man so man cannot exist beyond death. Death, according to Epicurus, was just the cessation of consciousness. He concluded therefore that this means there is nothing to worry about in dying. Epicurus' aim was to rid men of the fear of death and the fear of divine intervention in their lives. He thought these ideas were groundless superstitions. He taught that the gods cannot change the course of the atoms falling through space and since you are just material there is nothing to be afraid of in death. Here we can see his temperament reflected in the philosophy he had adopted. This element of Epicurus' philosophy is seen clearly in the writings of the Roman Epicurean, Lucretius.

Lucretius (99BC-55BC)
Lucretius' well-known book is *De Rerum Natura, On the Nature of Things.* He wanted to get rid of the troubles that haunt men and of these he considered the fear of death was the worst. He repeatedly attacked religion and Christian readers are inclined to agree with much of what he says. This is because he is not attacking the personal monotheism of the Old Testament in his writings although, no doubt, he would have rejected that as well if he had been able to consider it. Rather he made fun of the Greek gods and ridiculed men who were afraid of their intervention in human affairs. He said much of the problems in the Greek culture of his day had arisen from what people considered pious motives or trying to please the gods. Evil deeds are prompted by religion, he said. This is true but the problem is, he wanted to level all religions and lump them together. This is the logical fallacy of hasty generalisation. Lucretius saw the problem in Greek religion and generalised from it the idea that religion is the greatest enemy of man. There are many people like this today. "Religion is responsible for so much evil," they say and they are often right! But this generalises from particular instances such as the atrocities of Moslem fundamentalists to the assumption that all religions are the same.