



## Pleasing Epicurus

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Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who lived in the third century BC. The object of his philosophy was to find a practical guide to happiness. True pleasure rather than absolute truth was the end at which he aimed. Experience rather than principle was his guide.

While such views may suggest that he was laying the groundwork for a life of sensual excesses and debauchery, in all fairness Epicurus was quite ascetic in his behavior. In fact he warns us against the excesses of Hedonism...Epicureanism's philosophical predecessor...and advises us to be content with the simple things. What then is he up to?

Epicurus' intentions went far beyond pleasure as an end in itself. He sought something deeper...a system of thought, an approach to life, a worldview that not only exalts pleasure but also provides peace of mind and tranquility. This state of being, Epicurus concluded, can only be achieved by finding a remedy for the unsettling effects of a troubled conscience in this life and fear of judgment in the next. What was needed was a philosophical system that had no place for either moral law or divine judgment.

Epicurus framed his philosophy around what is essentially a self-evident truth. Any view of Nature will necessarily entail a view of Morality. Any view of Morality will necessarily entail a view of Nature. Epicurus dispenses with the discomfort of guilt and fear of judgment by embracing a view of Nature that has no place for God. With no place for God, neither can there be a place for divine morality or judgment.

Welcome to Epicurean Materialism.

How then does one pursue such a philosophy? How does one live and think if he is to succeed as an Epicurean? Epicurus points the way. It is through "right thinking" and "habits of mind" which view nature as a closed system functioning independent of the influence of God. Further, he says, the study of the natural sciences aided by the light of "right thinking" will reveal that the natural world is in fact, self-existing with no God, no moral law and no judgment. Through this means one can become a fulfilled Epicurean.

By the time of Christ, Epicurean Materialism was well established in the Greco-Roman world. Its principle competitor was Stoicism which held that the natural order was ordained by God, acknowledged a universal moral law given by God (also called Natural Law) and held virtue - not pleasure - as the highest good. Stoicism naturally fit in well with Roman republican virtues and was in many ways compatible with Christianity.

It was these two philosophical systems, Epicureanism and Stoicism, that Paul encountered at Athens on Mars Hill as recorded in the seventeenth chapter of Acts.

As evidenced by the writings of the Church Fathers during the first four hundred years after Christ, Christianity and Epicureanism were natural and bitter enemies. By the time Rome fell during the fifth century Epicureanism had succumbed to the power of the Christian Gospel and was effectively dead as a cultural and spiritual force. It looked like it was all over for Epicurus.

For 1000 years Epicurus “slept”. But suddenly, through the rediscovery of his writings by European scholastics during the Renaissance, he was awakened to a new world. The world had dramatically changed and those changes spelled new hope for Epicurus. The mechanistic view of the cosmos which emerged from Newton’s laws of mechanics breathed new life into Epicurus’ materialistic philosophy. Atheistic Enlightenment philosophers filled their sails with the Epicurean wind and with the development of Darwin’s theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century Epicureanism was ready to resume battle with its ancient foe. Its mission: the destruction of Christianity, root and branch.

Few in our culture know the name of Epicurus but all know his views. Today Epicureanism’s view of Nature is Scientific Materialism and the view of Morality that it necessarily entails is moral Darwinism.

We return to the guidance Epicurus gives on how to be a good Epicurean and we find that it is precisely that which underlies science education in our public schools. The student must demonstrate “right thinking” and “habits of mind” which may only consider material causes in providing scientific explanations of nature and human behavior. The natural world has no need of God. Darwinian principles, not design, account for the history and diversity of life. Such notions as creation and intelligent design are non-scientific and have no place in the classroom.

Epicurus would be pleased to see how well we prepare our students in public education for life as “good little Epicureans”.