

# Epicurus (d. 270 BCE)

## Historical Context and Influence

- Grew up in a “noble” family, established a school in ancient Athens
- Developed a philosophical system based on an atomistic account of nature and an ethics identifying pleasure as the goal of human life
- Wrote a few works that have survived (e.g., the letters to Herodotus and Menoceus), though his teachings are known to us mainly through the writings of others
- Teachings popularized during the Roman empire by Lucretius (d. ca. 50 BC) in a long poem: *On the Nature of Things*
- Drew strong (and sometimes unfair) criticism from Stoics and Christians
- Epicureanism revived:
  - First during the Renaissance, with efforts to “Christianize” his teachings
  - More widely beginning with the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

## Modern Influences

- An important element of *Social Contract Theory*: the state is an artificial construct, based on an agreement by individuals for mutual benefit; it does not develop from our (alleged) biological nature as cooperative “social animals.” Examples: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke
- An important element of classical *Utilitarianism*: what is good is what produces happiness as a consequence; and happiness = pleasure. Examples: Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c. *Deism*: God does not design or govern the natural world, intervene in human affairs, or punish or reward us in some (alleged) afterlife. Examples: “founding fathers” of the U.S., esp. Thomas Jefferson
- More general, indirect influences:
  - *Darwinism* (vs. Intelligent Design; see the criticisms of Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists*)
  - The *Animal Rights* movement (vs. the idea of humans as made by God for a special and higher purpose)

# Theory of Knowledge and “Physics”: The Letter to Herodotus

*Empiricism*: Knowledge ultimately rests on sense experience, but we need reason to avoid erroneous opinions about what we learn from sense experience and to make inferences about what is non-evident.

Argument that the totality of things was/is/always will be the same (#38-39):

- P1. Nothing comes into being from “what is not” (i.e., from what does not exist).
- P2. Nothing that exists can become what is not (i.e., can entirely cease to exist).
- C. The totality of things has always been just like it is now and always will be.

What exists?

Epicurus’s *materialism*: The totality of things is made up of bodies and the void (#39).

- Bodies are themselves either atoms or compounds of atoms (#40).

# The Void

A well-known logical argument against the existence of a Void:

The Void = What is not (what does not exist)

It is a logical contradiction to say that what does not exist does exist.

Conclusion: Everything is actually One; nothing actually moves.

Epicurus's view (#39-40):

The Void = Empty space (vs. What is not)

The Void cannot act or be acted upon (#67).

We cannot see or touch a Void, but we must infer its existence from what we do see.

Why? Because

Bodies obviously do move, and

They could not move without empty space to move through

## Atoms: The Components of Visible Bodies

- Atoms are only physically indivisible (“uncuttable”) – not theoretically indivisible because atoms themselves have “minimal and indivisible parts” (#58-59)
- Atoms continue to exist when a visible body dies or disintegrates
- Have only shape, weight, and size, not colors or smells (#54)
- Are always in motion; usually move at the same speed and in the same direction unless they collide with other atoms
- Sometimes “swerve,” thereby introducing an element of indeterminacy into nature (-- doctrine of the “swerve” not explicit, but see the Letter to Menoecus, #133, against Fate as “the mistress of all”)
- Clump together, forming bodies
- Compose the soul, itself a body made up of fine atoms, “distributed throughout the entire aggregate” (#63)
- Atoms serve to explain astronomical phenomena
- Serve (together with the Void) to explain *everything* in nature: *no purposiveness in nature; no rational design or “divine providence”*

# What about the Gods?

- Gods exist, but they differ from the popular conception of them (Letter to Menoecus, #123-24)
- They are indestructible and “blessed” (= supremely happy)

## Principal Doctrines, I:

What is blessed and indestructible has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone else, so that is not affected by feelings of anger or gratitude. For all such things are signs of weakness.

## Conclusion:

The gods do not create the world, govern it, or even intervene in it, nor do they punish or reward human beings.