

Why should we learn “physics”?

The Letter to Herodotus, #76-81, 61-64:

People are disturbed by their irrational fears of both (a) “heavenly phenomena” and even (b) their own deaths

Physics teaches us the true natures and causes of both:

(a1) The gods never feel angry or grateful, never cause trouble to human beings

(a2) Meteorological phenomena can be explained by natural (vs. divine) causes

(b) When a person dies, the person’s soul is scattered and has no sense-perception (vs. the idea of an immortal soul, possibly punished in some afterlife)

By learning physics people can dissolve their fears and attain freedom from disturbance

The Epicurean Slogan: Death Is Nothing to Us

Letter to Menoecus, #124-25

- P1. All good and bad consist in sense-experience
- P2. Death is the privation (lack) of all sense-experience
- C1. Death is neither good nor bad, only nothing
- C2. Death is nothing to fear (because fear comes from anticipating something bad)

Objection:

Even *if* death is nothing, hence nothing to fear, isn't there more to happiness than the absence of fear? What about the presence of *hope*? People might hope that the human soul is immortal either because

- (a) they have a happy life and therefore want it to continue or
- (b) they have an unhappy life and want the opportunity for a better one.

Epicureanism is at best a mixed bag, because it eliminates hope for an afterlife as well as fear of an afterlife. If people are reasonably content in this life mainly because of their hope for (and belief in) an afterlife, Epicureanism might even be worse than a mixed bag.

Why does Epicurus think that his teachings remove “the longing for immortality”?

- The wise man “savours not the longest time but the most pleasant” (Letter to Menoecus, #126). -- Why?
- **“The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures”** (Principal Doctrines, III). In other words, immortality would not increase the amount of pleasure that a happy person has. Therefore,
- “. . . We do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. As soon as we achieve this state every storm of the soul is dispelled. . . . For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure” (Letter to Menoecus, #128).
- The underlying assumption (rejected by Christians): It is possible in earthly life for someone to be free of all pain, fear, and other “disturbances.”

Epicurean Hedonism

“ . . . Pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly.”

“Hedonism” comes from the Greek word for pleasure (*hēdonē*).

The Empirical Thesis (in psychology):

Only pleasure and pain motivate us to choose the actions that we do.

The Normative Thesis (in ethics) about value:

Only pleasure is good, and only pain is bad.

The Normative Conclusion (in ethics) about judging, choosing, and acting:

We *should* judge “every good by the criterion of feeling” (LM, #129).

The Unusual Aspect of Epicurean Hedonism:

There is no greater pleasure than the removal of all pain. When all of our needs are satisfied, we can only vary our pleasure (PD, III, XVIII).

Pleasures

Related to different kinds of desires (Letter to Menoeceus, #127-128):

Natural vs. Groundless Desires

Natural Desires: Merely Natural vs. Necessary

Natural, Necessary Desires: Necessary for a Blessed Life, i.e.:

- Freeing the body from troubles (making it healthy), and
- Freeing the soul from disturbance

Every pleasure is good in its own right, but some pleasures should not be chosen because of their disadvantages. We need expertise in comparative measurement in order to choose wisely (#129-30).

Why we should make do with “barley cakes and water” (#130-31):

They are easy to obtain; we won't be disturbed if we can't get fancier foods; and “they provide the highest pleasure when someone in want [need] takes them.”

Why Be Good?

Pleasure and Virtue

- Prudence (practical wisdom, esp. in measuring pleasures) is the source of all other virtues (LM, #132).
- It is impossible to have a pleasant life without living virtuously, and it is impossible to live virtuously without having a pleasant life (LM, #132).
- The problematic virtue: justice (discussed in Plato's *Republic*)

Other people benefit when I behave justly, but don't I myself reap the greatest benefit from behaving unjustly whenever I can get away with it?

Epicurus's answer (PD, XXXIV-V):

- Injustice is not bad in its own right. It is bad because of its consequences: fear of detection and punishment.

- It is *impossible* for anyone to commit an injustice secretly without this fear:

“For until his death it will be uncertain whether he will continue to escape detection.” [Isn't this empirical claim false?]

Justice, Pact, and Utility

(see the Principal Doctrines)

- The “justice of nature” (true justice) is a pact for mutual usefulness (XXXI, XXXIII)
- There is no justice or injustice with regard to beings unable or unwilling to make such a pact: all animals plus some nations (XXXII)
- We must “look to the facts” because what is actually useful can change over time, as circumstances change. What was once just ceases to be just when it ceases to be useful (XXXVII-VIII).
- Objection:

At least some acts and practices are right or wrong regardless of their utility.

Common examples:

Slavery is wrong even if it benefits society.

It is always wrong to kill an innocent person against her will.

Retribution: It is right to punish criminals because they *deserve* punishment.