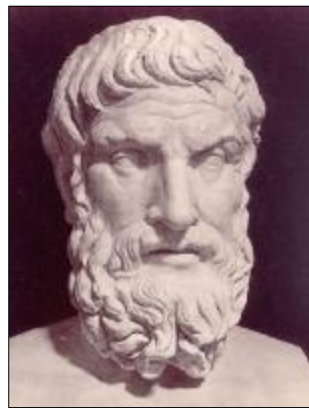


EPICURUS: FATHER OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Dr Sean Gabb



Epicurus (341-270 BC)

Dr Sean Gabb is the Director of the LA and is well-known as a writer, broadcaster, lecturer and general publicist for the libertarian movement. This is the text of a lecture given on the 6th September 2007 to the 6/20 Club in London.

Philosophical Notes No. 80
ISBN 9781856377539
ISSN 0267-7091

© 2007: Libertarian Alliance & Dr Sean Gabb

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, its Advisory Council, or its subscribers.

Dr Chris R. Tame (1949-2006): Founder
Dr Tim Evans: President
Dr Sean Gabb: Director
Nigel Meek: Editorial Director
David Farrer: Financial Director
David Carr: Legal Affairs Spokesman
Mario Huet: Libertarian Alliance Forum Listmaster

Libertarian Alliance

For Life, Liberty, and Property

Suite 35
2 Lansdowne Row
Mayfair
London
W1J 6HL

Telephone: 0870 242 1712
Email: admin@libertarian.co.uk
Website: www.libertarian.co.uk

EPICURUS: FATHER OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Dr Sean Gabb

*E TENEBRIS tantis tam clarum extollere lumen
qui primus potuisti inlustrans commoda uitae,
te sequor, o Graiaie gentis decus, inque tuis nunc
ficta pedum pono pressis uestigia signis,
non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amorem
quod te imitari aueo; quid enim contendat hirundo
cycnis, aut quidnam tremulis facere artubus haedi
consimile in cursu possint et fortis equi uis?
tu, pater, es rerum inuentor, tu patria nobis
suppeditas praecepta, tuisque ex, inclute, chartis,
floriferis ut apes in salibus omnia libant,
omnia nos itidem depascimur aurea dicta,
aurea, perpetua semper dignissima uita.
(Lucretius, III,1-13)*

Abstract

Epicurus (341-270 BC) was, with Plato and Aristotle, one of the three great philosophers of the ancient world. He developed an integrated system of ethics and natural philosophy that, he claimed and many accepted, showed everyone the way to a life of the greatest happiness. The school that he founded remained open for 798 years after his death. While it lost place during the last 200 of these years, his philosophy held until then a wide and often decisive hold on the ancient mind.

The revival of Epicureanism in the 17th century coincided with the growth of scientific rationalism and classical liberalism. There can be no doubt these facts are connected. It may, indeed, be argued that the first was a leading cause of the second two, and that we are now living in a world shaped, in every worthwhile sense, by the ideas of Epicurus.

Life and Times

Epicurus was born on the 4th February 341 BC on Samos, an island in the Aegean close by the coast of what is now Turkey. Because he was the son of colonists from that city, he was called to Athens at the age of 18 for two years of compulsory military service. With this exception, he devoted his entire life to teaching and writing.¹

His philosophical education began with Pamphilus, a follower of Plato, and ended with Nausiphanes, a follower of Democritus. He taught for a while in the school his father had established on Samos. In 311-10, he taught at Mytelene on the island of Lesbos. He then

taught for a while at Lampsacus, a city not far from what became Constantinople. He returned to Athens in 306, where he founded a school known as the Garden. Here he remained, teaching and writing, until he died from infected kidney stones in 270 at the age of 71. He died unmarried and without children.

His life overlaps what modern historians call the Classical and the Hellenistic periods of ancient history. He was born in a Greece that was divided, as it always had been, into many city states. None was larger than an English county. Few had a population of more than 30,000. Each was or sought to be a universe in itself, claiming the total commitment of its citizens and acknowledging no higher source of civil or religious authority. This world was bounded to the east by the decayed but still significant Persian Empire, and to the north by the rising but still mostly distant kingdom of Macedon. Rome was a small city state continually at war with its neighbours in central Italy. It was almost unknown to the Greeks of the Aegean.

In the year that Epicurus was born, Plato had been dead for six years, Aristotle was 43 and had another 19 years to live, and Alexander the Great was 15.

In the year of his death, Alexander had been dead for 53 years, and had conquered most of the known world, including the Persian Empire, and had spread Greek dominion and Greek civilisation from Libya to India. Some city states remained independent, but had now to survive in a world of giant empires ruled by Greek despots and Greek bureaucracies. The bond between city and citizen had been at least weakened. It was being replaced by a heightened sense of individuality, and above this by the notion of a common Greek nationality—and even by an emerging notion of a common humanity.

Six years after his death, the Romans began the first of their three wars with Carthage that would, within another century, leave them as the dominant power in the Mediterranean.

Relating what people think to what is happening around them is never easy, and our knowledge of the ancient world is not sufficient to claim anything with confidence. And the circumstances in which a philosopher lives have no bearing on the truth of what he writes. But Epicurus lived through the beginning of an age that was to be unusually favourable to the spread of

his doctrines.

Sources of Information

Before discussing what these doctrines were, however, I need to explain our sources of information for Epicurus and his school. According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus himself was the most prolific of all the main ancient philosophers. His total original writings filled 300 papyrus rolls.ⁱⁱ If we take one papyrus roll as containing the equivalent of 30 printed octavo pages, his collected works would fill 30 modern volumes. His longest single work, *On Nature*, filled 37 papyrus rolls, which makes it about as long as *Das Kapital*.

To these original writings, we must add the various writings of his followers, both during his life and during the following six centuries or so. These also were substantial. Taken together, they must easily have filled a library.

Moreover, unlike its main rivals, Epicureanism was a proselytising philosophy. There were no hidden teachings—no mysteries too complex for the written word. There was no need for long preparatory studies in logic and mathematics and rhetoric before the meaning of the Master could become plain. No one was too old or too young to embrace the truths taught by Epicurus. He accepted slaves and even women to the courses he ran in the Garden. He wrote in the plainest Greek consistent with precise expression of his doctrines.ⁱⁱⁱ He discouraged his followers from poetry and rhetoric.

For those able or inclined to study his doctrines in full, there were the many volumes of *On Nature*. For those not so able or inclined, there was a still substantial abridgement, and then a shorter summary. For the less attentive or the uneducated, there were collections of very brief sayings—whole arguments compressed into statements that could be memorised and repeated.

Nearly all of these works have vanished. Of what Epicurus himself wrote, we have three complete letters and a list of brief sayings known as the *Principal Doctrines*. Of other Epicurean writings, we have the *Vatican Sayings*, which is another collection of brief statements, some by Epicurus. We have a biography of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius, which summarises his main doctrines and also contains the only extant whole works already mentioned. We have more of the brief statements and a partial summary of the whole system inscribed at the expense of another Diogenes on a wall in Oenanda, a city in what is now northern Turkey.

There are the elaborate refutations of Epicureanism by Cicero and Plutarch. These inevitably outline and sometimes even quote what they are attacking. There

are hundreds of other references to Epicurus in the surviving literature of the ancient world. Some of these are useful sources of information. Some are our only sources of information on certain points of the philosophy.

During the past few centuries, scholars have been trying to read the charred papyrus rolls from a library in Herculaneum buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Some of these contain works by Philodemus of Gadara, an Epicurean philosopher of the 1st century BC. Much of this library remains unexcavated, and most of the rolls recovered have not really been examined. There are hopes that a complete work by Epicurus will one day be found here.

Above all else, though, is the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius. He was a Roman poet who died around the year 70 BC. His epic, in which he claims to restate the physical doctrines of Epicurus, was unfinished at the time of his death, and it is believed that Cicero himself edited the six completed books and published the text roughly as it has come down to us. This is one of the greatest poems ever written, and perhaps the strangest of all the great poems. It is also the longest explanation in a friendly source of the physical theories of Epicurus.

Therefore, if anyone tries to say in any detail what Epicurus believed, he will not be arguing from strong authority. If we compare the writings of any extant philosopher with the summaries and commentaries, we can see selective readings and exaggerations and plain misunderstandings. How much of what Karl Marx really said can be reliably known from the Marxist and anti-Marxist scholars of the 20th century? Even David Hume, who wrote very clearly in a very clear language, seems to have been consistently misunderstood by his 19th century critics. For Epicurus, we may have reliable information about the main points of his ethics and his physics. We have almost no discussions of his epistemology of his philosophy of mind. Anyone who tries writing on these is largely guessing.

All this being said, enough has survived to make a general account of the philosophy possible. Epicurus appears to have been a consistent thinker. Though it may only ever be a guess—unless the archaeologists in Herculaneum find the literary equivalent of Tutankhamen's tomb—we can with some confidence proceed from what Epicurus did say to what he might have said. Certainly, we can give a general account of the philosophy.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Epicurus begins with the question asked by Socrates at the end of the fifth century—what is the good life? His answer is that the good lies not in virtue or justice or

wisdom—though these are not to be ignored—but in happiness.

“Pleasure” he writes, “is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.”^{iv}

Now we have more than enough of Epicurus to know that he is not arguing for what are called the self-indulgent pleasures—of eating and drinking and sex and the like. Aristippus of Cyrene (c435-366 BC), we are told, had already argued for these. He also claimed that happiness was the highest good, but went on to claim that happiness lay in the pursuit of pleasure regardless of convention or the feelings of others or of the future.

This interpretation was attached to Epicurus in his own lifetime, and the attachment has been maintained down to the present—so that the words “Epicure” and “Epicurean” have the meaning of self-indulgent luxury.

What Epicurus plainly means by happiness is the absence of pain. We are driven to act by a feeling of discontent. We seek food because we are hungry. We seek warmth because we are cold. We seek medicine because we are sick. Once we have acted correctly and removed the cause of discontent, we are happy.

Turning to his own words, he says:

When we say... that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice or wilful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not by an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, nor by sexual lust, nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul. Of this the beginning and the greatest good is wisdom. Therefore wisdom is a more precious thing than even philosophy; from it springs all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honourably and justly; nor live wisely, honourably and justly without living pleasantly.^v

In this scheme, therefore, happiness is to be defined as peace of mind, or *ataraxia*. This pursuit of happiness does involve bodily pleasure, but such pleasure is a

means to the greater end of *ataraxia*. “No pleasure” he says, “is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.”^{vi}

His ethics of pleasure can be summarised as:

The pleasure which produces no pain is to be embraced. The pain which produces no pleasure is to be avoided. The pleasure is to be avoided which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain. The pain is to be endured which averts a greater pain, or secures a greater pleasure.^{vii}

And so the happy man for Epicurus is one who lives simply within his means, who seeks only those pleasures which contribute to his long term peace of mind.

And while hedonism is ultimately a doctrine of selfishness, what Epicurus had in mind was not a life spent in the pursuit of solitary happiness. He says: “Of the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship.”^{viii}

It may be that we seek friendship for selfish reasons. But friendship is to be persistently sought and maintained throughout life. Epicurus himself had an immense capacity for friendship.

A Scandalised Reception

This is a very brief overview of his ethical teachings. Hedonism has always been a controversial doctrine, so far as it is opposed to the teachings of the explicitly altruistic philosophies and religious systems. There are difficulties with hedonism when it comes to the exact comparison of pleasures. We do not have any of the more detailed works in which Epicurus might have attempted what Jeremy Bentham later called a “felicific calculus”. But, bearing in mind the difficulties that Bentham and the 19th century utilitarians found when they tried to move from principles to details, there is no reason to suppose he was more successful.

However, it is hard to see anything so scandalous in the pursuit of happiness through moderation and through friendship that should have brought on a flood of often hysterical denunciation and misrepresentation in antiquity that began in his own lifetime and did not end even with the loss of virtually the whole body of Epicurean writings.

The early accusations are very detailed, and are cited by Diogenes Laertius. Among much else, it is alleged:

*That he wrote 50 obscene letters;
That one of his brothers was a pimp;
That his understanding of philosophy was
small and his understanding of life even
smaller;
That he put forward as his own the doctrines
of Democritus about atoms and of Aristippus
about pleasure;
That in his On Nature Epicurus says the
same things over and over again and writes
largely in sheer opposition to others, espe-
cially against his former teacher Nausiphanes;
That he was not a genuine Athenian:
That he vomited twice a day from over-
indulgence.^{ix}*

Three centuries after his death, Plutarch (46-127 AD) wrote against him in almost hysterical tone. He says:

*Epicurus....actually advises a cultivated mon-
arch to put up with recitals of stratagems and
with vulgar buffooneries at his drinking par-
ties sooner than with the discussion of prob-
lems in music and poetry.^x*

And again:

*Colotes himself, for another, while hearing a
lecture of Epicurus on natural philosophy,
suddenly cast himself down before him and
embraced his knees; and this is what Epicurus
himself writes about it in a tone of solemn
pride: 'You, as one revering my remarks on
that occasion, were seized with a desire, not
accounted for by my lecture, to embrace me
by clasping my knees and lay hold of me to
the whole extent of the contact that is custom-
arily established in revering and supplicating
certain personages. You therefore caused me,'
he says, 'to consecrate you in return and dem-
onstrate my reverence.' My word! We can
pardon those who say that they would pay
any price to see a painting of that scene, one
kneeling at the feet of the other and embrac-
ing his knees while the other returns the sup-
plication and worship. Yet that act of hom-
age, though skillfully contrived by Colotes,
bore no proper fruit: he was not proclaimed a
Sage. Epicurus merely says: 'Go about as one
immortal in my eyes, and think of me as
immortal too.'^{xi}*

Now, all this and more was said against Epicurus when the whole body of his writings was still available, and by men who had access to those writings. It is unlikely, bearing in mind their general ability, that they were incapable of understanding plain Greek. So what could have been their motivation for misrepresenting him in

defiance of the evidence, or in repeating personal libels irrelevant to his philosophy?

A possible answer is that they hated his philosophy for other reasons that they were not able or did not wish fully to discuss.

What does make Epicurus and his philosophy so contro- versial is one further piece of advice on the pursuit of happiness. It is impossible to be happy, he insists, unless we understand the nature of the universe and our own place within the universe.^{xii}

The Maintenance of Social Control

The central problem of almost every society before about 1950 has been how to reconcile the great majority to distributions of property in which they are at a disad- vantage. Only a minority has even been able to enjoy secure access to abundant food and good clothing and clean water and healthcare and education. Whether actually enslaved or formally free sellers of labour, the majority have always had to look up to a minority of the rich and often legally privileged. How to keep them quiet?

Force can only ever be part of the answer. The poor have always been the majority, and sometimes the great majority. Armies of mercenaries to protect the rich have not always been available, and they have never by themselves been sufficient to compel obedience on all occasions in every respect.

Force, therefore, has always been joined by religious terrors. In Egypt, the king was a god, and the privileged system of which he was the head was part of a divine order that the common people were enjoined never to challenge. In the other monarchies of the near east, the king might not actually be a god. But all the priests taught that he was part of a divinely ordained order that it was blasphemy to challenge.

In the Greek city states until about a century before the birth of Epicurus, securing the obedience of the poor had not been a serious problem. There had been some class conflict, even in Athens. But most land was occu- pied by smallholders, and excess population could be decanted into the colonies of Italy and the western Mediterranean. There were rich citizens, but they were usually placed under heavy obligations to contribute to the defence and ornament of their cities.

Then a combination of commercial progress and the disruptions of the war between Athens and Sparta cre- ated a steadily widening gulf between rich and poor. There was also a growing problem of how to maintain large by unknown numbers of slaves in peaceful subjec-

tion.

The result was a class war that destabilised every Greek state. The sort of democracy seen in Athens could survive in a society where citizens were broadly equal. Once a small class of rich and a much larger class of the poor had emerged, there was a continual tendency for democratic assemblies to be led by demagogues into policies of levelling that could be ended only by the rise of a tyrant, who would secure the wealth of the majority—but who could secure it only so long as the poor could be terrified into submission. Once they could not be terrified by the threat of overwhelming force, they would rise up and dispossess the rich, until a new tyrant could emerge to subdue them again.

Unlike in the monarchies of the near east, no settled order could be maintained in Greece by religious terrors. During the sixth and fifth centuries, the Greek mind had experienced the first enlightenment of which we have record. There had been a growth of philosophy and science that revealed a world governed by laws that could be uncovered and understood by the unaided reason.

Now, enlightenments are always dangerous to an established religion. And the Greek religion was unusually weak as a counterweight to reason. The Greeks had no conception of a single, omnipotent God the Creator. Instead, they had a pantheon of supernatural beings who had not created the world, but were subject to many of its limitations. They were frequently at war with each other, and so they could be set against each other by their human worshippers with timely sacrifices and other bribes. They did not watch continually over human actions, and beyond the occasional punishment and reward to the living, they had no means of compelling observance of any code of human conduct.

And so, when the mental disturbance of philosophy and science spilled over into demands for a reconstruction of society in which property would be equalised, there was no religious establishment with the authority to stand by the side of the rich.

The Contribution of Plato

This is a problem addressed by Plato in at least two of his works—*The Republic* and *The Laws*. The first is his description of an ideal state, the second of a state less than ideal but still worth working towards. I do not claim to be an expert on Plato, though am dubious of many of the claims made against him. However, his general solution to the problem is to stop the enlightenment and to reconstruct society as a totalitarian oligarchy.

His ideal society would be one in which democracy and any degree of accountability would have been abolished, together with married life and the family and private property. Poetry was to be abolished. All other art and music were to be controlled. There was to be a division of society into orders at the head of which was to be a class of guardians. These would strictly control all thought and action.

His workable society would be one in which some property and some accountability would be allowed to remain. Even so, there was to be the same attempt at controlling thought and action.

The stability of these systems was to be maintained by a new theology. A single divine being would take the place of the quarrelling, scandalous gods of mythology and the Homeric poems. The common people could be left with a purified version of the old cults. But these gods would be increasingly aligned with the secondary spirits through which the One God directed His Creation.

People were to be taught that the Platonic system was not a human construct, but that it reflected the Will of Heaven. Rebellion or disobedience would be punished by the direct intervention of God through His Secondary Spirits. Before then, though, it would be punished by the state as heresy. At the end of the fifth century, Anaxagoras had been exiled from Athens for claiming that the sun was a ball of glowing rock. This had been an occasional persecution—indeed, it is hard to think of other instances. In the Platonic system, there was to be a regular inquisition that would punish nonconformity with imprisonment or death.^{xiii}

Thus there is at the heart of the Platonic system a “noble lie”—though Plato may have believed much of it himself. This is of a religion that looks into the most secret places of the mind, and dispenses rewards and punishments according to what is found there. In the old theology, Poseidon had no power beyond on land. Apollo had none in the dark. Zeus had no idea who was thinking what. The Platonic God was just like ours. No sin against His Wishes could go undetected or unpunished.

And so the people were to be kept in line by fear not quite of hellfire, but by fear of everything short of that.^{xiv}

True Physics

It seems to have been against all this that Epicurus reacted. For Plato, the world of appearance was a kind of dream, and the real world was something that only the initiated could begin to understand through logic and

mathematics. So far as it existed, matter was evil, and the universe was strictly bounded in space and time.

For Epicurus, the world of appearance was the real world. There is a void, or vacuum, which is infinite in space and time. It has always existed. It will always exist. It goes on forever and ever. In this void is an infinite number of atoms. These are very small, and therefore imperceptible, but indivisible particles of matter. They have always existed and will always exist. They are all moving through the void at an incredibly rapid and uniform speed. The world as we see it is based on combinations of these atoms. Every atom is hooked, and the collision of atoms will sometimes lead to combinations of atoms into larger structures, some of which endure and some of which we can eventually perceive with our senses. All observed changes in the world are the result of redistributions of the invisible atoms that comprise it.

Though we are not able to see these atoms, we can infer their existence by looking at the world that our senses can perceive. All events—the wearing away of a rock by water, for example, or the growth of crystals or trees—can be fully explained by an atomic hypothesis. Since there is nothing that cannot be so explained, there is no need of any other hypotheses. In a surviving explanation of his method, he says:

...[I]n our study of nature we must not conform to empty assumptions and arbitrary laws, but follow the prompting of the facts.^{xv}

Everything in the universe is made of atoms. We are made of atoms. Our souls are made of very fine atoms. Our senses work because every other physical object is continually casting off very thin films of atoms that represent it exactly as it is. These films strike on our senses and give us vision and sound. Heat is produced by the vibration of atoms temporarily trapped in structures that prevent them from their natural onward motion.^{xvi}

Whether or not anyone can at any moment think of a likely explanation, all events in the universe can be explained in purely naturalistic terms. Assuming atoms and motion, no further hypotheses are needed to explain the world.

Epicurus was not the first to explain the world by an atomic hypothesis. That was Democritus (460-370 BC). But he seems to have developed the hypothesis with a consistency and detail that took it far beyond anything that earlier philosophers had conceived.

Perhaps his most notable innovation is the doctrine of the swerve. There are two objections to the atomism of Democritus. The first is that if the atoms are all moving

at the same speed and in the same direction, like drops of rain, there is no reason to suppose they will ever collide and form larger compounds. The second is that if they are not moving in the same direction, they will collide, but they will form a universe locked into an unbreakable sequence of cause and effect. This conflicts with the observed fact of free will.

And so Epicurus argues that every atom is capable of a very small and random deviation from its straight motion. This is enough to give an indeterminacy to the universe that does not conflict with an overall regularity of action.

The Physics Developed

It would be easy to diverge from this general overview into a detailed examination of the physics. This is because Epicurus seems to have been largely right. We now believe, as he did, that the universe is made of atoms, and if we do not now talk about motion, we do talk about energy and force. His physics are an astonishing achievement.

Of course, he was often wrong. He denigrated mathematics. He seems to have believed that the sun and moon were about the same size as they appear to us.^{xvii} Then there is an apparent defect in his conception of the atomic movements. Does the universe exist by accident? Or are their laws of nature beyond the existence and movement of the atoms? The first is not impossible. An infinite number of atoms in an infinite void over infinite time will, every so often, come together in an apparently stable universe. They may also hold together, moving in clusters in ways that suggest regularity. But this chance combination might be dissolved at any moment—though, given every sort of infinity, some of these universes will continue for long periods.

If Epicurus had this first in view, what point in trying to explain present phenomena in terms of cause and effect? Causality only makes sense on the assumption that the future will be like the past. If he had the second in mind, it is worth asking what he thought to be nature of these laws? Might they not, for example, have had an author? Since Newton, we have contented ourselves with trying to uncover regularities of motion and not going beyond these. But the Greeks had a much stronger teleological sense.

Perhaps these matters were not discussed. Perhaps they were discussed, but we have no record of them in the surviving discussions. Or perhaps they have survived, but I have overlooked them. But it does seem to me that Epicurean physics do not fully discuss the nature of the laws that they assume.

On the other hand, let me quote two passages from his surviving writings:

Moreover, there is an infinite number of worlds, some like this world, others unlike it. For the atoms being infinite in number... are borne ever further in their course. For the atoms out of which a world might arise, or by which a world might arise, or by which a world might be formed, have not all be expended on one world or a finite number of worlds, whether like or unlike this one. Hence there will be nothing to hinder and infinity of worlds....

And further, we must not suppose that the worlds have necessarily one and the same shape. For nobody can prove that in one sort of world there might not be contained, whereas in another sort of world there could not possibly be, the seeds out of which animals and plants arise and the rest of the things we see.^{xviii}

What we have here is the admission that there may, in the infinite universe, be other worlds like our own, and these may contain sentient beings like ourselves. And there may be worlds inconceivably unlike our own. And there is the claim that living beings arise and develop according to natural laws. Epicurus would not have been surprised either by modern physics or by Darwinism.

The Purpose of the Physics

However, while the similarities between Epicurean physics and modern science are striking, there is one profound difference. For us, the purpose of science is to give us an understanding of the world that brings with it the ability to control the world and remake it for our own convenience. This is our desire, and this has been our achievement because we have fully developed methods of observation and experiment. The Greeks had limited means of observation—no microscopes or telescopes, nor even accurate clocks. Nor had they much conception of experiment.

Moreover, scientific progress was neither conceived by Epicurus nor regarded as desirable. He says very emphatically:

If we had never been troubled by celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by fears about death, nor by our ignorance of the limits of pains and desires, we should have had no need of natural science.^{xix}

He says again:

...[R]emember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm convictions.^{xx}

From Darkness into the Light

The purpose of the 37 volumes of his *On Nature* is to free us from the fear of death and therefore from the control of priests and from the internal fears of the religion that Plato and his followers had in mind. Epicurus says:

...[W]e must recognise generally that the soul is a corporeal thing, composed of fine particles, dispersed all over the frame....

...[T]he rest of the frame, whether the whole of it survives or only a part, no longer has sensation, when once those atoms have departed.... Moreover, once the whole frame is broken up, the soul is scattered and has no longer the same powers as before, nor the same notions; hence it does not possess sentience either.^{xxi}

The atoms that comprise the soul are immortal. They are passed on from being to being like the torch in one of the Athenian foot races. But the larger structure of atoms that is the soul of any one individual is itself mortal. Once we are dead, our atoms are recycled. Since there is nothing but atoms moving in the void, we as individuals are annihilated. After death, there is nothing; and because of that, death is nothing. Epicurus says:

Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensations is nothing to us.^{xxii}

After two thousand years of Christian spiritual hegemony, this may seem to many of us a gloomy doctrine. For Epicurus and his followers, however, it was a removal of the greatest barrier to happiness as they conceived it. That barrier was fear of endless punishment for the alleged sin of seeking their own happiness in life.

It may be, Lucretius says, that beating down religion is impious and the entry to a life of crime. Much rather, it is religion which has brought forth criminal and impious deeds. He lived before the most notable acts of religious mania. But he was poet enough to know the psychology of enthusiasm. In Book One of his poem, he produces one of the most striking of all denunciations of religion. He describes how, at the beginning of the Trojan War, the priests tell Agamemnon that a good

passage across the Aegean required the sacrifice of his daughter. So a young girl was dragged to the altar for her throat to be cut by her own father.

Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum he concludes—“Such are the evils to which religion leads”

He says later, in Book Three:

Some wear out their lives for the sake of a statue or a name. Religion and its resulting fear of death can induce one man to violate honour, another to break the bonds of friendship, and to overthrow all natural feeling. It has induced men to betray their country or their parents for the sake of avoiding hellfire. For just as children tremble and fear all in the darkness, so we in the light of day often fear what is no more real. This terror must be dispersed, not by rays of sunshine nor by the bright shafts of daylight, but by the sight and understanding of nature.^{xxiv}

It is Epicurus, he says, who brought us into this light of understanding. Do not fear the priests. Do not fear death. Pay no attention to dreams or omens. These latter have a natural explanation. The former

Have neither a divine nature nor a prophetic power, but they are the result of images that impact on us.^{xxv}

Follow the ethical teachings of Epicurus, and be happy.

None of this means, by the way, that Epicurus and his followers were atheists. They did accept the existence of gods, and were willing outwardly to conform to whatever cults were established. They only denied that the gods were immaterial, and that the gods had any interest in human affairs. Confronted with evidence for any supernatural event, they were content with insisting on a natural cause, whether or not they were able to think of one that convinced.

The Social Contract

But we return to the great question: what of social order? How, without the terrors of religion, can the many be kept from murdering and plundering the more fortunate?

The answer, says Epicurus, lies in friendship and in an understanding of natural justice. This is, he says,

a pledge of reciprocal benefit, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another.^{xxvi}

He says also:

There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm.

We do not have any full explanation of this side of Epicureanism. But it seems that Epicurus believed a stable and just social order could be sustained by the self-interest of individuals. Let each person pursue his own happiness, only refraining from the lives and property of others, and a natural order of society would emerge—rather as the collision of atoms in the void had led to the emergence of a vast self-sustaining universe.

Certainly, we know that he recommended his followers to avoid politics. This did not mean withdrawal from the world. Bearing in mind the quantity of his own writings and the missionary zeal of the school he founded, he was as active in impressing his ideas on the world as Plato or Aristotle were.

According to Diogenes Laertius, the Epicurean

will take no part in politics.... But... he will not withdraw himself from life....And he will take a suit into court....He will have regard to his property and to the future.

He will be fond of the country. He will be armed against fortune and will never give up a friend. He will pay just so much regard to his reputation as not to be looked down upon. He will take more delight than other men in public festivals.

....And he will make money, but only by his wisdom, if he should be in poverty, and he will pay court to a king, if need be. He will be grateful to anyone when he is corrected.

He will found a school, but not in such a manner as to draw the crowd after him; and will give readings in public, but only by request. He will be a dogmatist but not a mere sceptic; and he will be like himself even when asleep. And he will on occasion die for a friend.^{xxvii}

As said, we do not have much Epicurean writing on this point. As with the Benthamites, he does not seem to have found any imperative for these ethical teachings. We may ask, for example, what reason there is against my killing someone if I can thereby take possession of his property—or just enjoy the sensation of killing—and if there is no chance of my being caught. The only an-

swers we have are:

Do nothing in your life that will cause you to fear if it is discovered by your neighbour.^{xxviii}

And:

The just man is most free from disturbance, while the unjust is full of the utmost disturbance.^{xxix}

If these are attempts at answering the question, they are feeble attempts. That the unjust are invariably unhappy is plainly false. As for the threat of discovery, the opportunities for secret crime have always been everywhere.

Nor does Epicurus take issue with the greatest injustice of ancient society. He admitted slaves to his school. He encouraged kindness to slaves. But he does not seem ever to have questioned the morality of or the need for slavery.

But, these reservations being granted, what we seem to have in the complete system of Epicurus is something remarkably similar to modern classical liberalism. While respecting the equal rights of others, we should pursue our own happiness in life. We can do so sure that we exist in a universe governed by knowable and impersonal laws that are not hostile to the pursuit of such happiness.

Popularity and the Response of the Intellectuals

It is all this that made Epicurus and his philosophy so scandalous in the ancient world and beyond. Plato never did get to create his perfect society. But his followers did manage to establish variants of Platonism as the dominant philosophy of later antiquity. And all the other main schools of philosophy were agreed that the world should be ruled by intellectuals. These should tell the civil authorities how to govern. They should provide the moral and spiritual justification for the rule of absolute and unaccountable systems of government—systems of which the Roman imperial system was only the most developed. They should have positions of honour within these systems.

Epicureanism was a standing challenge to these pretensions. We have no precise evidence for the spread of Epicureanism in the ancient world. But it does seem to have spread very widely. Why else should Cicero, Plutarch and many of the Christian Fathers have given so much effort to sustained attacks on it? Why else, in spite of his emphatic remarks on the nature of happiness, was Epicurus, even in his own lifetime, subjected to the most outrageous accusations?

We have one statement from Cicero, that Epicureanism in his own day was one of the dominant schools of philosophy in Italy. So far, he says, Greek philosophy had been available only in the original language. But writers such as Amfinius had translated several Epicurean works—

on the publishing of whose writings the people were moved, and enlisted themselves chiefly under this sect, either because the doctrine was more easily understood, or because they were invited thereto by the pleasing thoughts of amusement, or that, because there was nothing better, they laid hold of what was offered them.^{xxx}

There is no doubt that it influenced the classical literature of Rome. Of course, there is the great poem by Lucretius. But there is also Catullus and Horace and even Vergil. Without citing them, their works are imbued with an Epicurean outlook on life, either directly from Epicurus or indirectly from Lucretius.

Another indication of popularity is that once converted to Epicureanism, people hardly ever switched to another philosophy. The philosopher Arcesilaus testifies to this fact even as he tries to explain it:

You can turn a man into a eunuch, but you can't turn a eunuch into a man.^{xxxi}

Then there is the curious testimony of the Jews. During the three centuries around the birth of Christ, the main everyday language of many Jewish communities was Greek. The Gospels and Letters of Saint Paul were all directed at mainly Jewish audiences and are in Greek. One of the most important philosophers of the age, Philo of Alexandria, was a Jew. Many Jews took on Greek ways. Many, no doubt, stopped being Jews and made themselves into Greeks.

The condemnation of these Hellenised Jews is *Apikorsim*, which may easily be taken as a Semitic version of Epicurean. The term survives in Jewish theological writing. According to one Internet source,

Apikorsim are what Chasidim refer to as Jewish Goyim, or secular Jews. They seem to be the worst opposition for Hasidic Jewry.^{xxxii}

A term of abuse so loaded with contempt is unlikely to have been taken from the doctrines of an insignificant philosophical tradition among ordinary people of the age. It is reasonable to suppose that many lapsed Jews became Epicureans. If so, Epicureanism must already have had large numbers of adherents among at least the semi-educated classes.

Decline and Apparent Death

The philosophy seems to have continued strong into about the 3rd century AD. Thereafter, it went into decline. By the middle of the 6th century, when the Emperor Justinian closed all the philosophical schools in Athens and dispersed the teachers, Epicureanism appears to have been already dead.

The main traditions of thought during the last few centuries of the ancient world were turned away from the everyday world. There were the neoplatonists, with their settled belief in a higher reality that could be approached through a combination of mathematics and magic. There were, of course, the Christians, for whom the world is simply a preparation for the better life that is to come.

As said, relating what people think to what is happening around them is not easy. But the last few centuries of the ancient world were ages of great uncertainty. There were epidemic diseases that swept away multitudes without warning and without apparent cause. There were barbarian attacks and civil wars. There was catastrophically overextended government to grind the survivors into helplessness and poverty. In this sort of world, teachings of Epicurus about seeking happiness in this life may have lost their attraction.

In one of his more sensible comments on Epicurus, Plutarch writes:

As to the vulgar sort... when they lose their children, wives, or friends, they would rather have them be somewhere and still remain, though in misery, than that they should be quite destroyed, dissolved, and reduced to nothing. And they are pleased when they hear it said of a dying person, that he goes away or departs, and such other words as intimate death to be the soul's remove and not destruction.

.... And they are discomposed when they hear it said of any one, he is perished, or he is gone or he is no more....

And therefore it is very plain that with the belief of immortality they [the Epicureans] take away the sweetest and greatest hopes the vulgar sort have.^{xxxiii}

In a world where life is uncertain and often unpleasant, there will tend to be an emphasis on some happier supernatural future.

There may be nothing sinister in the loss of virtually the whole body of Epicurean writings. Perhaps they

were destroyed by a triumphant Church that had room for Plato and Aristotle but none for a naturalist enemy of all that Christianity proclaimed. But there is no reason to suppose any deliberate act of destruction. Papyrus rolls were by their nature delicate things. They were also far more expensive and therefore scarce in number than modern books. In any European climate, a papyrus roll would last for about a century, and then the glue that held it together would perish. Without careful recopying, a work might easily be lost.

The last centuries of the ancient world were mostly ages of depression. There was a shortage of all the means that had so far kept libraries together. Such means as remained were naturally given to recopying works for which there was an active demand. That means Christian theology, those parts of the pagan philosophies that could be reconciled to Christianity, and the greatest products of the pagan high culture. Since, with the exception of Lucretius—whose work largely survived—the works of Epicurus and his followers were in a style remarkable only for its plainness, it is unreasonable to suppose that librarians, forced to choose what to copy and what to leave to die, would take up the 37 volumes of *On Nature* and not the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius.

So far as I can tell, whatever works of Epicurus survived were not studied in the Byzantine Empire. In the West, all but his name and whatever is said about him in Cicero vanished for a thousand years.

The Age of Reason

For the 19th century liberal and historian of ideas William Lecky, the most striking fact about England and France in the 17th century was the decline of belief in the supernatural.^{xxxiv} And the most striking instance of this fact was the collapse of belief in witchcraft.

At the beginning of that century, belief in witchcraft had been universal and unchallenged. James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) was one of the most learned men of his day. He believed without question in witches, and was a notable persecutor. When he became King of England as well in 1603, he brought his policies with him. It was for the King that Shakespeare introduced the witchcraft theme into *Macbeth*.

James procured a law that punished witchcraft with death on first conviction, even though no harm to others could be proven. This law was carried in a Parliament where Francis Bacon was a Member.

The law was carried into effect throughout England, and was especially used during the *interregnum* years of the 1650s. In 1664, under the restored Monarchy, Sir

Matthew Hale—one of the greatest jurists and legal philosophers of the age, presided over the trial of two alleged witches in Suffolk. He told the jury that there could be no doubt in the reality of witchcraft. He said:

For first, the Scriptures had affirmed so much; and secondly, the wisdom of all nations had provided laws against such persons, which is an argument for their confidence of such a crime.^{xxxv}

One of the witnesses called for the prosecution was Sir Thomas Browne, one of the most notable writers of the age. Appearing as a medical expert, he assured the jury “that he was clearly of opinion that the persons were bewitched.”^{xxxvi} They were convicted and hanged.

It was the same in France. In the town of St Claude, 600 persons were burnt in the early years of the century for alleged witchcraft and lycanthropy. In 1643, Cardinal Mazarin wrote to a bishop to congratulate him on his zeal for hunting out witches.

Yet, in 1667, Colbert, the chief minister of Louis XIV, directed all the magistrates in France to receive no more accusations of witchcraft. Those convictions still obtained he frequently commuted from death to banishment. By the end of the century, witchcraft trials had all but ceased.

In England, belief collapsed later, but even faster than in France. The last trial for witchcraft was in 1712. Jane Wenham, an old woman, was accused of the usual offences. The judge mocked the prosecution witnesses from the bench. When the jury convicted her against his directions, he made sure to obtain a royal pardon for the old woman and a pension.

Whatever the lowest reaches of the common people might still believe, belief in witchcraft had become a joke among the educated. Anyone who tried to maintain its existence was simply laughed at. Laws that had condemned tens or hundreds of thousands to death, and usually to the most revolting tortures before death, were now sneered into abeyance.

We should expect that a change of opinion so immense had been accompanied by a long debate—something similar to the debates of the 19th century over Darwinism, or to the debates of the day over the toleration of nonconformity. Yet Lecky maintains that there was almost no debate worth mentioning. There were sceptics, like Montaigne, who disbelieved all accounts of the supernatural, or Hobbes, who was a materialist and atheist. But, while, book after book appeared in England during the late 17th century to defend the existence of witches and the need for laws against them, almost no one bothered to argue that witches did not exist.

Lecky says:

Several... divines came forward...; and they made witchcraft, for a time, one of the chief subjects of controversy. On the other side, the discussion was extremely languid. No writer, comparable in ability to Glanvil, More, Cudworth, or even Casaubon, appeared to challenge the belief; nor did any of the writings on that side obtain any success at all equal to that of [Glanvil].^{xxxvii}

Belief in witchcraft perished with hardly a direct blow against it. What seems to have happened, Lecky argues, is a change of world view in which belief in witches ceased to have any explanatory value. The belief is perfectly rational granted certain assumptions.

Let us assume that the world is filled with invisible and very powerful beings, that some of these are good and some evil, that some human beings are capable of establishing contact with these evil beings, and that some compact can be made in which the power of the evil beings is transferred to human control. Granting these assumptions, it becomes reasonable to ascribe great or unusual events to magical intervention, and that it should be the purpose of the law to check such intervention.

Now, the Platonic philosophies do accept the existence of such beings. That is how Plato reconciled his One Creator with the many gods of the Greek pantheon. This belief was taken over by the Church Fathers, who simply announced that the ancient gods were demons. It then continued into the 17th century.

During that century, however, the educated classes came increasingly to believe that the world operated according to known, impersonal laws, and that God—assuming His existence—seldom interfered with the working of these secondary laws. In such a view of the world, the supernatural had no place. Belief in witchcraft, therefore, did not need opposition. It perished as collateral damage to the system of which it was a part.

The Epicurean Revival

Lecky ascribes this intellectual change to the growth of scepticism. This may have been part of the answer. But while sceptics doubt the existence of the supernatural, they do not necessarily affirm the existence of invariable laws of nature. A more powerful cause of the change may be the revival of Epicureanism during the first half of the 17th century.

In this revival, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) is the most important philosopher. A French priest and professor

of philosophy, he conceived a strong dislike both of Aristotelianism and of the new philosophy of Descartes. He turned instead to Epicurus. His work falls into two parts. First, there is the immense scholarship with which he went through every extant ancient source to try to reconstruct what Epicurus had said. Second, there is his attempted reconciliation of Epicureanism and orthodox Christianity.

Briefly put, his reconciliation is to deny that the atoms have existed from eternity and to deny that motion is natural to them. The atoms were created by God, and they move in paths directed by God. This being so, he cleared the way for a view of the universe in which God exists, but operates by secondary causes. For all practical purposes, knowledge of the world is to be obtained by observing the world.^{xxxviii}

I say again that influences are very hard things to trace. But there is no doubt that Gassendi had made all that remained of the Epicurean writings available in one convenient place, and had made some attempt to remove any charge of impiety. Nor is there any doubt that Epicureanism began suddenly to exert a decisive influence over English science from about the middle of the 17th century.

Edwin N. Hooker writes:

Scientists found [Epicurean physics] a highly useful working hypothesis in their investigations in physical nature. But by 1660 the working hypothesis had been blown up into a very different shape, and in its altered shape was being peddled as the final truth concerning nature, man, and human society. The new monster had a wide appeal. In 1662 Edward Stillingfleet wrote in Origines Sacrae that of all theories the Epicurean at that time was making the greatest noise in the world. A few years later John Wilkins, the remarkable Bishop of Chester who had been for years the leading spirit in that amazing group of scientists laboring at Oxford (a group which became the nucleus of the Royal Society), commented on the extravagant and irrational opinions then afloat, inspired by Epicurus and his atoms. A little later Ralph Cudworth, probably the most learned member of the Cambridge Platonists, remarked that of late there had been an extraordinary enthusiasm for Epicurus. From all sides came testimony to the effect that Epicurus had indeed risen from the dead and that the atomistic theory had burst its seams.^{xxxix}

Both Locke and Newton appear to have read Gassendi. There are obvious similarities between them and Epicu-

rus. Newton, for example, constructs his physics in terms of matter and motion and motion through a void. For him, light is a stream of atoms. He accepts the revised physics of Gassendi, denying any implicit motion to atoms, and then goes further with his hypothesis of motion at a distance, or gravity.^{xl}

For the growth of empiricism and utilitarianism, it would be necessary to write a book. These are both similar to the ideas of Epicurus. They emerged in an intellectual climate where Epicurus had been made available again and where he had been made respectable to Christian orthodoxy. There is no necessary reason to suppose that these facts are connected. It may be that interest in Epicurus had revived in a civilisation that was autonomously moving toward the same general approach. But it does seem reasonable to suppose a connection.

If, however, there was a connection, it was not merely a revival of Epicurus and his philosophy. As in every other recovery of ancient thought, save perhaps the cultural, the moderns very quickly transcended the ancients. The moderns began by revering the giants on whose backs they had climbed. They soon grew into giants of their own.

I have already mentioned the differences between Epicurus and ourselves with regard to the natural sciences. Knowledge for us is valued not mainly because it liberates us from mental pain, but because it leads to mental and physical happiness. We observe. We form hypotheses. We experiment. We make use of the mathematics that Epicurus derided. We use the knowledge thereby gained to change our conditions of life. We check suffering. We cure illness. We extend life. We fill our lives with the wealth that comes from our knowledge.

With regard to his ethical theories, the modern utilitarians have also gone beyond Epicurus. They begin with the same premise, that the purpose of life is happiness, but pass then to the notion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This leads them into politics—to an investigation of what social orders are most productive of the general happiness, and to a willingness to argue for the removal of impediments to that happiness.

We can add to this the knowledge of economics that comes from the application of Newtonian physics to human affairs—that is, the investigation of the natural forces that lead spontaneously to the generation and maintenance of an order in which individuals pursue their own happiness and promote the happiness of others—we come inevitably to the doctrine of individual rights that is implicit in the philosophy of Epicurus and that is central to modern classical liberalism.

The Debt We Owe to Epicurus

Notes

Thomas Jefferson understood the value of Epicurus. In 1819, he wrote to a friend:

As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us...Their great crime [the stoics] was in their calumnies of Epicurus and misrepresentations of his doctrines; in which we lament to see the candid character of Cicero engaging as an accomplice. Diffuse, vapid, rhetorical, but enchanting. His prototype Plato, eloquent as himself, dealing out mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind, has been deified by certain sects usurping the name of Christians; because, in his foggy conceptions, they found a basis of impenetrable darkness whereon to rear fabrications as delirious, of their own invention.^{xli}

So too did Ludwig von Mises. In *Human Action*, he says:

The historical role of the theory of the division of labor as elaborated by British political economy from Hume to Ricardo consisted in the complete demolition of all metaphysical doctrines concerning the origin and the operation of social cooperation. It consummated the spiritual, moral and intellectual emancipation of mankind inaugurated by the philosophy of Epicureanism.^{xlii}

When classical liberals and libertarians discuss the intellectual roots of their ideas, they are quick to cite Aristotle and Aquinas. It would show justice if Epicurus could be given at least equal place of honour.

Indeed, whether or not you call yourself a libertarian, if you are content to live in a world in which you can make the best for yourself and your loved ones, in which there are no supernatural terrors, but instead a body of natural science that assists us in the pursuit of happiness, you too are an Epicurean.

It is sad that we have virtually everything that Plato wrote and almost nothing that Epicurus wrote. Plato, after all, has had no discernable impact on the social sciences beyond providing legitimation to various cliques of demented and often murderous intellectuals. But, for all we have so few of his writings, the ideas of Epicurus have survived. And they have made the world a better place.^{xliii}

(i) Nearly all our biographical information about Epicurus comes from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book X. Diogenes was an otherwise unknown biographer and compiler of the 3rd century AD. An English translation of his Life of Epicurus is available at <http://www.epicurus.net/en/lives.html>—checked August 2007. All quotations from Epicurus are taken from the translations made available on this site. Many of these are duplicated in different versions at <http://www.epicurus.info>.

(ii) “Epicurus was quite a prolific author, surpassing all in the quantity of books produced. He authored, in fact, some three hundred books, and he never cited any other authors—all the words contained in them were Epicurus’ own.” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, X.26:)

(iii) See, among many others, Diogenes Laertius: “He uses plain language in his works throughout, which is unusual, and Aristophanes, the grammarian, reproaches him for it. He was so intent on clarity that even in his treatise On Rhetoric, he didn’t bother demanding anything else but clarity” (*ibid.*)

(iv) Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus”, contained in Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.*,

(v) *Ibid.*

(vi) *Principal Doctrines*, 8, quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.*

(vii) W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (first published 1869), Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1911, volume 1, p. 14. Lecky is translating Pierre Gassendi, *Philosophiae Epicuri Syntagma*, who in turn is summarising the ancient sources.

(viii) *Principal Doctrines*, 27.

(ix) Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.*

(x) Plutarch, *That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible*, 13, p. 1095C, helpfully collected by Erik Anderson, *Epicurea: Selections from the Classic Compilation of Hermann Usener* (1834-1905), 2005—available at: <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/epicurea.html>—checked August 2007.

(xi) Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 17, p. 1117B, in Anderson, *ibid.*

(xii) Adapted from *Principal Doctrines*, 12.

(xiii) Plato is an incredibly verbose writer in English translation, and is almost unreadable in Greek. Finding any useably short quotation to explain what he appears to be arguing is next to impossible. But take this on the duty of the magistrate to punish “impiety”: “After the prelude shall follow a discourse, which will be the interpreter of the law; this shall proclaim to all impious persons:—that they must depart from their ways and go over to the pious. And to those who disobey, let the law about impiety be as follows:—If a man is guilty of any impiety in word or deed, any one who happens to present shall give information to the magistrates, in aid of

the law; and let the magistrates who first receive the information bring him before the appointed court according to the law; and if a magistrate, after receiving information, refuses to act, he shall be tried for impiety at the instance of any one who is willing to vindicate the laws; and if any one be cast, the court shall estimate the punishment of each act of impiety; and let all such criminals be imprisoned. There shall be three prisons in the state: the first of them is to be the common prison in the neighbourhood of the agora for the safe-keeping of the generality of offenders; another is to be in the neighbourhood of the nocturnal council, and is to be called the 'House of Reformation'; another, to be situated in some wild and desolate region in the centre of the country, shall be called by some name expressive of retribution. Now, men fall into impiety from three causes, which have been already mentioned, and from each of these causes arise two sorts of impiety, in all six, which are worth distinguishing, and should not all have the same punishment. For he who does not believe in Gods, and yet has a righteous nature, hates the wicked and dislikes and refuses to do injustice, and avoids unrighteous men, and loves the righteous. But they who besides believing that the world is devoid of Gods are intemperate, and have at the same time good memories and quick wits, are worse; although both of them are unbelievers, much less injury is done by the one than by the other. The one may talk loosely about the Gods and about sacrifices and oaths, and perhaps by laughing at other men he may make them like himself, if he be not punished. But the other who holds the same opinions and is called a clever man, is full of stratagem and deceit—men of this class deal in prophecy and jugglery of all kinds, and out of their ranks sometimes come tyrants and demagogues and generals and hierophants of private mysteries and the Sophists, as they are termed, with their ingenious devices. There are many kinds of unbelievers, but two only for whom legislation is required; one the hypocritical sort, whose crime is deserving of death many times over, while the other needs only bonds and admonition. In like manner also the notion that the Gods take no thought of men produces two other sorts of crimes, and the notion that they may be propitiated produces two more. Assuming these divisions, let those who have been made what they are only from want of understanding, and not from malice or an evil nature, be placed by the judge in the House of Reformation, and ordered to suffer imprisonment during a period of not less than five years. And in the meantime let them have no intercourse with the other citizens, except with members of the nocturnal council, and with them let them converse with a view to the improvement of their soul's health. And when the time of their imprisonment has expired, if any of them be of sound mind let him be restored to sane company, but if not, and if he be condemned a second time, let him be punished with death. As to that class of monstrous natures who not only believe that there are no Gods, or

that they are negligent, or to be propitiated, but in contempt of mankind conjure the souls of the living and say that they can conjure the dead and promise to charm the Gods with sacrifices and prayers, and will utterly overthrow individuals and whole houses and states for the sake of money—let him who is guilty of any of these things be condemned by the court to be bound according to law in the prison which is in the centre of the land, and let no freeman ever approach him, but let him receive the rations of food appointed by the guardians of the law from the hands of the public slaves; and when he is dead let him be cast beyond the borders unburied, and if any freeman assist in burying him, let him pay the penalty of impiety to any one who is willing to bring a suit against him. But if he leaves behind him children who are fit to be citizens, let the guardians of orphans take care of them, just as they would of any other orphans, from the day on which their father is convicted." (*The Laws*, X, translated by Benjamin Jowett—available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.html>—checked August 2007.)

(xiv) For a short and explicit statement of the "noble lie", see Polybius: "But the quality in which the Roman commonwealth is most distinctly superior is in my opinion the nature of their religious convictions. I believe that it is the very thing which among other peoples is an object of reproach, I mean superstition, which maintains the cohesion of the Roman State. These matters are clothed in such pomp and introduced to such an extent into their public and private life that nothing could exceed it, a fact which will surprise many. My own opinion at least is that they have adopted this course for the sake of the common people. It is a course which perhaps would not have been necessary had it been possible to form a state composed of wise men, but as every multitude is fickle, full of lawless desires, unreasoned passion, and violent anger, the multitude must be held in by invisible terrors and suchlike pageantry. For this reason I think, not that the ancients acted rashly and at haphazard in introducing among the people notions concerning the gods and beliefs in the terrors of hell, but that the moderns are most rash and foolish in banishing such beliefs. The consequence is that among the Greeks, apart from other things, members of the government, if they are entrusted with no more than a talent, though they have ten copyists and as many seals and twice as many witnesses, cannot keep their faith; whereas among the Romans those who as magistrates and legates are dealing with large sums of money maintain correct conduct just because they have pledged their faith by oath. Whereas elsewhere it is a rare thing to find a man who keeps his hands off public money, and whose record is clean in this respect, among the Romans one rarely comes across a man who has been detected in such conduct..." (*Histories*, VI, 56—available at: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/6*.html—checked August 2007.)

(xv) "Letter to Pythocles", contained in Diogenes Laer-

tius, *op. cit.*,

(xvi) This summary of Epicurean physics is taken from the very full explanation given in Books One and Two of the *De Rerum Natura* of Titus Lucretius Carus. There is also the summary given by Epicurus himself in his “Letter to Herodotus”, contained in Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.*

(xvii) “Letter to Pythocles”.

(xviii) “Letter to Herodotus”, *op. cit.*

(xix) *Principal Doctrines*, 11.

(xx) “Letter to Pythocles”, *op. cit.*

(xxi) “Letter to Herodotus”, *op. cit.*

(xxii) *Vatican Sayings*, 2.

(xxiii) Lucretius, *op. cit.*, I, 101 *et supra*.

(xxiv) Adapted from *ibid.*, III, 74-93.

(xxv) *Vatican Sayings*, 24.

(xxvi) *Principal Doctrines*, 31.

(xxvii) Diogenes Laertius, *op. cit.*

(xxviii) *Vatican Sayings*, 70.

(xxix) *Principal Doctrines*, 17.

(xxx) Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), *Tusculan Disputations*, IV, iii.

(xxxii) Quoted in D.S. Hutchinson, *The Epicurus Reader*, translated and edited by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, Hackett Publishing Company Inc, Indianapolis, 1984, “Introduction”.

(xxxiii) “Basic Jewish Terminology”, in *Hebrew for Christians*—available at: http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Glossary/Common_Terms/Common_Terms.html—checked August 2007.

(xxxiiii) Plutarch, *That It Is Not Possible to Live Pleasurably According to the Doctrine of Epicurus*, complete though bad translation available at: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/essays/complete.html>—checked August 2007.

(xxxv) W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe* (first published 1865), Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1893, I,i, “On the Declining Sense of the Miraculous”.

(xxxvi) Quoted, *ibid.*, p.110.

(xxxvii) *Ibid.*

(xxxviii) *Ibid*, p.119.

(xxxix) His most important works are: *De Vita et Moribus Epicuri Libri Octo*, 1647; *Syntagma Philosophiae Epicuri cum Refutationibus Dogmatum Quae contra Fidem Christianam ab eo Asserta Sunt*. 1649. There is also the very influential summary and translation into French of his works, François Bernier. *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, 1678. Excerpts from this translation are given in English by Erik Anderson at http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/gassendi_concerninghappiness.html—checked August 2007.

(xl) Edwin A. Hooker, “Dryden and the Atoms of Epicurus”, *English Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 3. (Sep., 1957), pp. 177-190.

(xli) For a short but useful discussion of these matters,

see the article “Pierre Gassendi” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*—available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gassendi/#5>—checked August 2007.

(xli) Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William Short, 31st October 1819—available at: <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/Jefferson.html>—checked August 2007.

(xlii) Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (first published 1949), Contemporary Books Inc, Chicago, no date, Chapter VIII, p.147. This passage is quoted in Martin Masse, *The Epicurean Roots of Some Classical Liberal and Misesian Concepts*, available at—<http://www.quebecoislibre.org/05/050415-14.htm>—checked August 2007.

(xliii) All this being said, Karl Marx wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841), and it is rather a good read. It opens: “Greek philosophy seems to have met with something with which a good tragedy is not supposed to meet, namely, a dull ending. The objective history of philosophy in Greece seems to come to an end with Aristotle, Greek philosophy’s Alexander of Macedon, and even the manly-strong Stoics did not succeed in what the Spartans did accomplish in their temples, the chaining of Athena to Heracles so that she could not flee.” (available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/index.htm>—checked August 2007.) None of the erudition and insight one finds here seems to have made Marx a better person—let alone the inspiration for a better world.