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## Carvaka and Epicurus

Carvaka is the Indian philosophy of materialism. It is considered a precursor of Epicureanism, and here we will look primarily at Carvaka, leaving to the end a brief comparison of the two philosophies.

It is worth establishing a few parallels at the outset, however. Both Carvaka and Epicureanism are materialisms, and since materialism is the basic concept for atheism, it is not surprising that both reject the influence, if not the existence, of gods. As a result, both are seen as threatening by the dominant religious authorities, to the point that their works were destroyed. Much of what we know about them derives from writings about them rather than by them. Due largely to persecution by the Christians, Epicureanism had died out by 400 CE, with the last significant revival occurring in the 18th century. Similarly, Carvaka's philosophy seems to have died out shortly after 1400 CE. Carvaka scriptures consist of the Brhaspati or Lokayata sutras.

As the Brahmins could not refute these sutras logically, the Carvakas were demonized and they were destroyed. Neither these texts nor any other writings of the Carvaka school have been preserved, although there are many references to them in the Vedas, a large body of texts originating in India, written roughly between 1500 and 500 BCE. They form the basis of the Hindu religion, and orthodox Hindus believe the Vedas were not written by man but directly revealed, just as fundamentalist Christians and Muslims believe that the Bible and the Koran respectively were not written by man. Despite India's reputation for religion and mystics, the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen maintains that there is a larger volume of atheistic and agnostic writings in Sanskrit and Pali (an Indo-Aryan dialect) than in any other classical tradition—Greek, Latin, Hebrew, or Arabic. He points out that Buddhism, developed in India, is the only agnostic world religion.

Materialists were among the earliest Indian philosophers and arose primarily as a reaction to the “heretics” and especially the “nihilists” who rebelled against the Vedas. The heretics denied the authority of the Vedas, and the nihilists claimed that nothing existed except thought. The materialists rejected gods and the dominance of the Vedic priests but also nihilism. They attempted to understand and explain natural phenomena through the properties of the four material elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Carvakas believed that the elements may change their nature at any time; thus nature does not contain eternal laws. Like modern day scientists, they believed that life and intelligence originate from inanimate substance by chance. Thus, the mind is not separate from the body, but part of it. When the body dies, life and intelligence perish also.

As materialists, Carvakas believed that direct perception is the surest method to prove the truth of anything. Some interpreters say that they thought inference (or cause and effect relationships) was useless, while others suggest they thought inference can be useful in extending knowledge in the real world but should not be used to establish dogma regarding the supernatural, life after death, or any other phenomenon which is not available to ordinary perceptual experience. In any case, they thought that we need not and should not rely on testimony or comparisons to make inferences. Rather we should discover direct cause and effect in nature itself and not base our beliefs on the experience and teachings of others.

Carvakas believed there is no hell except hell on earth and there is no paradise except the sensual pleasures of everyday life; that the activities of religious priests are not an indication of the existence of another world but simply represent a livelihood.

Both Epicureans and Carvakas advocated joyful living (unlike Buddhism and Jainism, which emphasize penance) but were accused wrongly of advocating hedonism. Both believed we should "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." And Carvakas even suggested that a person go into debt if necessary to live a happy life.

Like Epicurus, Carvakas thought one should be careful in choosing one's pleasures to make sure that they do not bring pain as a consequence. The fine arts like music were to be encouraged as they bring pleasure and Carvakas (followers of Carvaka) contributed to their development.

Many of the above teachings of the Carvakas and Epicurus are admirable and appealing. However, some believe there is an anti-social side to both. Nothing is recognized by the Carvakas as a duty, and they do not recognize vice and virtue. They believed that one could do what one wanted to acquire wealth which would in turn facilitate pleasure. Thus Carvakas have been associated with Machiavellian behaviour to accumulate wealth and power, behaviour that many today would view as unethical, if not illegal.

Some commentators believe that the amorality of the Carvakas is only a logical conclusion of their premises, however. They may have had a more moral view than some believe, disliked the killing of animals, and some Carvakas were vegetarians. And we know that they were not without social concerns, as they accused the Brahman pundits of exploiting poor people by getting them to support unnecessary rituals and sacrifices in the name of god. Also, Carvakas denied the artificial divisions in society promoted by the caste system and restrictions on women.

Carvakas did have an answer to those who would accuse them of encouraging amoral behaviour. They believed that the rationale for good conduct does not arise out of perception, but is rather a logical conclusion based on the desirability of social harmony. Regulation of negative human activity (theft, murder, etc.) should be undertaken by the state, and man will abstain from activities prohibited by the state in order to avoid punishment. Moreover, the science of the laws of state are the ones worth studying, as they are man-made and can be changed and perfected.

Epicurus was clearly much influenced by the Carvakas, perhaps through intervening materialists, despite the 300 years that separated them. In some sense, one can view Epicurus as a more sophisticated version of Carvaka philosophy, which taught that the elements are divisible into tiny particles, but not into atoms, as atoms are invisible and hence incompatible with the premise that all knowledge is based on perception. But there is a weakness in relying completely on perception; we remain ignorant of things invisible, and we can be deceived and misled by our own fears, prejudices and expectations. Epicurus was able to go the next step and accept the concept of atoms even though we can not see them.

Regarding the supernatural, the position of Epicurus is again similar to but not as extreme as that of Carvakas, who rejected the idea of all supernatural phenomena whether in terms of gods or the afterlife, but Epicurus

acknowledged that there could be gods, only the gods are not interested in the affairs of man. Hence, we should live our lives as if there were no gods. Both schools believed that pleasure should be our main goal in life, but Carvakas wrote mainly about pleasures of the body whereas Epicurus believed that pleasures of the mind are actually superior to pleasures of the body, again, a more sophisticated concept. Finally, just as Carvakas claimed dignity for all people, Epicurus denied the divisions in Greek society associated with women and used his Garden to promote the idea of freedom and equality.

Read about the Carvaka School in [HumanisticTexts.org](http://HumanisticTexts.org)

Read about [Indian Materialism](#) from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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