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Questions and Answers

Robert Hanrott is the author of the Epicurus Blog, which has been useful in keeping Epicureanism relevant with regards to both contemporary issues and eternal concerns.

He has always lived between Britain and the east coast of the U.S. and was recently interviewed by students who were researching Epicureanism. His disclaimer is that the answers reflect only his understanding and not all Epicureans may agree with him. Below is the interview.

1. Why was Epicurus' philosophy looked down upon by his contemporaries and eventually abandoned?

I would like to suggest that the answer to the first part of this question is psychological. One of the main things that distinguished the Stoics from the Epicureans was that the Stoics embraced public service and politics with enthusiasm and the Epicureans did not. The extrovert Stoics were out there socializing, networking, competing for honor and advancement on the one hand; the introvert and cerebral Epicureans, were content to be in the Garden, literally and metaphorically, enjoying a more stress-free life among a small group of friends. It is understandable that the extroverts, apparently more popular and in demand (and in charge), should look down on the more retiring Epicureans, who rejected the polis and involvement in politics. Meanwhile, the bulk of the Greek population was illiterate and preoccupied with survival during a time when Greek hegemony was collapsing, and had no access to the teachings of Epicurus. It was the elite who rejected Epicurus.

Under the Roman Republic politics were relatively more responsive to the people. After the civil war, the advent of the emperors and the assumption of military rule the regime became increasingly threatening and unpredictable. Independent thought and comment could result in death. As a result, Epicureanism became hugely popular and many people retired to the countryside, eschewing public life.

Epicureanism was alive and well until the time of Constantine and the emergence of Christianity as a state religion. Epicureans after that time were anathematized as anti-establishment and atheist. In fact, Epicurus was no atheist. Gods, he thought, existed, but they did not reward or punish humans, thus eliminating anxiety about angering them. Epicurean ideas on the after-life, however, were in stark contradiction to the fundamental belief of the Christians. It has to be pointed out that Epicureans were not picked on exclusively; many groups, including "heretical" Christian groups, ceased to be tolerated.

2. How did Lucretius's epic poem *De rerum natura* contribute to Epicureanism and eventually instigate a revolution swerving the world into modernity?

One has the impression that Epicurus was a very serious person and his work, now lost, may have been hard going. At any rate, Lucretius sought to explain Epicureanism in an accessible way, and his six volumes of poetry now rank as one of the most outstanding pieces of literature in the Latin language. You might have the greatest idea ever thought up, but if you cannot popularize it you are lost. It was the role of Lucretius to elucidate the ideas of the great philosopher.

De rerum natura principally deals with atomism, nature, the universe, the body and the soul. Everything, he says, can be explained by natural laws, and not by superstition or the intervention of over-active gods. The idea set forth is that the gods waft around Mount Olympus and do not create universes. The soul dies with the body. Death is natural and not to be feared, for we and our atoms are all re-cycled in the grand scheme of things. There is a tendency for atoms to swerve at will and unexpectedly, which explains the free will enjoyed by human beings. Earthquakes and sicknesses are not caused by witchcraft. People get sick from natural causes. Nothing can be produced from nothing, and nothing can be reduced to nothing. The planets and space have their origin in an infinite number of atoms in a great void. The sun and moon, day and night, the seasons and natural calamities all obey a set of natural laws.

Lucretius has been described as a poet weak in science, but his real importance lies in the fact that his work survived until modern times, and although he postulated all sorts of wild possibilities about the nature of planets and stars, he and Epicurus (with a bow to Democritus before him) are responsible for helping to lay a foundation for the work of more scientifically proficient men during the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

The explosion, or revolution, that is scientific progress since the time of Galileo and Newton had one of its origins in the Garden. I say "one of its origins" because, for instance, a century before *De rerum natura* was rediscovered, men like William of Ockham were already applying scientific methods to the natural world. They were good scientists. Not everything can be put down to Lucretius.

3. Is there a strong connection between Renaissance Humanism and Lucretian Epicureanism? How are they similar? How are they different?

I would like to address this by quoting modern humanist beliefs, because they are almost timeless. Humanism is a philosophy of life that, without super-naturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. The following are the tenets of modern Humanism (American Humanist Society, 2003):

- * Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.
- * Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.
- * Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis (the espousal of science).
- * Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.
- * Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.
- * Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

* We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature's resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.

* We aim to free humanity from the brutalities of mere survival and to reduce suffering, improve society, and develop global community.

* We are concerned for the well-being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing yet humane views.

* We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a civic duty to participate in the democratic process and a planetary duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.

So how has time and education changed the view of humanism? What would Epicurus and Renaissance Europeans really recognize and agree with if you could explain it all in their languages and find the right words?

The Renaissance listener, and Greeks and Romans in their Epicurean Gardens, might want to query and debate the emphasis on democracy (it hadn't survived the Athenian debacle), and human rights and civil liberties, which are 20th century constructs. Conservation might not be counted as important in their sparsely populated worlds, and evolution, although implicit in Epicureanism, would be a novel idea. Time and culture make it difficult to know for certain, but after a long explanation and much debate I would guess that humanists of all centuries would be in general agreement with the drift of the above tenets.

4. How was the Enlightenment Era connected to Epicureanism?

"Dare to be free and respect the freedom and autonomy of others. It is only through the growth of knowledge that a person can be liberated from enslavement by prejudices, idols and avoidable errors." — Immanuel Kant, 1785

The Enlightenment stood for the ethics of humanism, scientific objectivity and democratic values. Humanism is in many ways the modern version of Epicureanism, rejecting superstition and supporting a rational, scientific approach to living based upon the individual, his enjoyment of life and self-realization.

Epicureanism enjoyed a big revival in the 18th Century. Part of the reason for this can be found in the history of the previous century, when religious wars wracked Europe. The Germans in particular experienced some of the most barbarous and destructive violence in history up to that time. The Catholic Church was associated with reaction and obscurantism. Anti-clericalism was rife and has continued in countries like France to this day.

18th Century Europe, while it still had its wars, enjoyed a century of increasing wealth and education. Printing put the histories, the ideas, the philosophies and the poetry of the ancients in the hands of a wide audience. *De rerum natura* became a best seller among the elite. Church men still railed against godlessness, but the cat was out of the bag. In England the Royal Society promoted new professional scientific methods, and the efforts of the first British scientists were amplified all over Europe. Isaac Newton was the most prominent of the new scientists, but he had many colleagues. Epicurus was admired for departing from the age-old religious explanations of the world and the universe, and at last careful observation and experiment started to bear fruit.

5. Who do you feel is the most influential historical figure to have been influenced by Epicureanism? Why?

Epicureanism influenced many people down the ages, including such disparate people as the poet Horace, Diderot, Montaigne, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Darwin, Ayn Rand, and Karl Marx. But my own

candidate for most influential historical figure is Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). I pick him because of his influence in creating the American Constitution, a practical model of Enlightenment thinking. He and his colleagues were careful and pragmatic, keeping what was good in ancient practice and custom, but applying modern checks and balances to avoid too much power accruing to one branch of government. His pragmatism showed in how he dealt with slavery; he was rational and no extremist. His way of dealing with the outcome of a political revolution has been an example ever since. In 1819, Jefferson wrote a letter to a Mr. Short, a letter that started:

“... 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.”

6. How has Epicureanism influenced your life and the world we live in today?

It is said that most people pick the religion, the philosophy (and the politics) that suit their character, outlook and upbringing. In my case, the idea of the Garden, the less stressful life, doing my bit to ensure that everyone gets along together, living with moderation – all this appealed. Being skeptical about received wisdom of all kinds, and finding it difficult to thrive in tribal atmospheres where conformity is king, the idea of Epicureanism attracted me. I agree with Cyril Bailey when he described Epicurus as “the apostle of common sense.”

On the other hand I find it quite difficult to discern Epicurean influence in today’s world, aside from the benefits of science. It is true that the Western world (at least) has wholeheartedly adopted the less agreeable aspect of Epicureanism, which is materialism, although one could equally argue that that is down to capitalism, not Epicurus. The modern world has become a bit more rational and rejects superstition, but the things that make Epicureanism attractive and civilized: moderation, friendship, relative lack of selfishness and greed, a calm life, avoidance of pain and acceptance of death as natural are not strong not characteristics of our dominant culture. They surely exist, but remain of interest to a minority of the population.

7. How would the world be different today if Epicureanism was never restored?

Given the number of influential thinkers affected directly or indirectly by Epicurus (see my paper, [Epicureanism after Epicurus](#)) the intellectual history of the world would have been less rich, and I doubt whether the scientific revolution would ever have taken place. This would have left the world with an ever-rising population but a fraction of the technology we now possess.

8. How strong is Epicureanism in contemporary society?

I would be surprised if more than 5% of the American public had heard of it. But its influence lives on and permeates society nonetheless, owing to the work of people like Friedrich Nietzsche, Darwin, Ayn Rand, and Karl Marx, whether you like what they stand for or not.