



Crespo, H. (2014). On the importance of protecting one's head. *Society of Friends of Epicurus Journal*, 8, pp. 20-23.

On the Importance of Protecting One's Head

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

The dog has four legs, but he only takes one path. – Yoruba proverb

As part of my recent process of distilling the wisdom of the first-century Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara into reasonings that a modern reader can approach and understand, I had the pleasure of reading the surviving fragments of On Choices and Avoidances and write about them. This got me thinking about how destiny is born in our heads.

The Yoruba, a West African people with a rich oral wisdom tradition, associate *Ori* (literally the head, or consciousness) with the spirit of destiny. They treat it as a sort of spirit or deity that guides one throughout one's lifetime, kind of like the genius that ancient romans believed in. The *Ori* is appeased with offerings and oftentimes the pious do a ceremonial cleanse of *Ori* to cool the head when it becomes overwhelmed or charged. It is hoped that one gains *alignment with one's Ori* when one does these ceremonies.

Cooling the head is a frequent treatment for anger and hot-headedness in African wisdom traditions, and it's believed that maintaining a cool head is crucial to having healthy relationships.

There's an interesting parallel between *Ori* and the Egyptian concept of *Ba*, which is a sort of second soul or Super-Ego, to use a psychotherapeutic term. Beliefs about the *Ba* were elaborated in a fascinating ancient document titled Discussion Between a Man and his Ba, the best translation and commentary of which is Bika Reed's Rebel in the Soul: An Ancient Egyptian Dialogue Between a Man and His Destiny.

At the heart of the ancient discussion scroll is the belief that the *Ba* is the spiritual power in charge of making sure that one accomplishes one's destiny prior to leaving one's body. There is a belief that there are tasks one must complete before one dies (determinism), and it's the role of the *Ba* to ensure that one completes one's destiny and *that one has everything one needs to do so* prior to death.

In the scroll, a man has lost everything and is so lost in the world and so depressed that he apparently begins to consider suicide. The *Ba*, acting as the man's conscience, intervenes and aggressively argues against the decision using a series of metaphysical, supernatural and philosophical arguments against the man. The scroll represents an inner struggle between the lower and the higher tendencies in mortals, the evil and ungrateful self in rebellion against life versus the divine or virtuous self who is life-affirming.

In addition to making attempts to convince the man to embrace life again and to stop yearning after non-being, the *Ba* offers itself as a consolation, his presence as a brother in spirit, his assistance and love to sustain the man through his trials. The *Ba* reveals itself as a sort of Guardian Angel in whom man may take refuge. The idea here is that taking refuge in Spirit, man gets inner strength from somewhere, is able to gain perspective and to fight his battles in this world. To speak in the terms of the Philodeman scrolls, he is able to understand how the good is easy to attain and how evil is easy to endure.

Now, in the Egyptian depictions of *Ba*, it is frequently imagined as a bird leaving the body at the time of death from the crown of the head, a theme that also exists in Zoroastrianism where this same spiritual entity is known as *fravashi* and depicted as a bird.



In Jungian psychotherapy, these types of universal cultural constructs are considered archetypes of the unconscious of the species, inherited instincts. In Epicureanism, we call them anticipations and we consider them faculties that help us to make our way in life.

Perhaps another way to think of these anticipations is to consider that, just as the body has eyes and ears and other features, so does the soul have its own sort of anatomy, which is how Freud was able to construct a system for studying the psyche that included the id, the ego, and the superego, which to him carries the societal expectations from the tribe as well as the individual conscience.

In our tradition, the adage that we should *do all things as if Epicurus was watching*, and the teaching on how we should honor our Sages, clearly aligns our heads with those that crowned them with our guiding wisdom tradition so that, even without the physical crown of gray hair, we may still profit from their wisdom.

The Head as Destiny

It is not difficult to understand how the head is the spirit or principle of man's destiny. It's the place where choices and avoidances occur. It is the chief of the body and of the experience of a mortal. Wherever the attention goes, there goes our experience.

But the metaphor of the head as the ruler of destiny does not end there. Conversely, the two feet are associated with the male and female ancestors in Yoruba cosmology, where one is represented as a tree and the feet

represent one's feet. One Yoruba proverb says that *we stand on the shoulders of those that came before us*. The proverb provides imagery which is prominent in tribal and collectivist societies of emergence from our ancestors, where the elders provide the foundation, the roots from which we emerge, and the younger members of the community standing upon their shoulders in an ever-rising pyramid. As the ancestors return to the ground, to the elements, new layers and generations continue to emerge.

Notice also that the shoulders are associated, in everyday language, with responsibility and that we stand not on the heads or arms, but on the shoulders of our elders and ancestors just as new generations must stand on our own shoulders.

We arise from the germs, from the seminal fluids, from the seeds of our parents, who emerged from the seeds of their and so on. Just as the trees bear fruit when they reach maturity, and in its sweet fruits and fragrant flowers are the seeds that in pleasure bring forth the next generation, similarly when humans mature their genitalia blossom and produce seeds. In the tree of life and in ancestor-reverence-based worldviews, we are literally branches of our ancestors, as we are in genetics and science.

Notice the progression and the intuitive flow in time from the bottom to the top: in these wisdom traditions the feet are associated with the ancestors (the past, the roots, the holy ground where the remains of our ancestors lie) and the head is associated with the gods (our choices, our future and destiny). When the Lucumi (the Yoruba culture that survived in Cuba) initiate people into their presiding deity, the ceremony is known as the crowning and it is said that the guiding deity settles in the head of the devotee.

Epicureanism teaches that there is no boundary between body and soul, that the soul is fully natural and embodied. Like the Yoruba, we also believe that wisdom settles in the body itself, and we see how wisdom becomes fully embodied in other wisdom traditions.

These proverbs and these references to the body as a book of folklore in oral traditions that emerged without writing systems serve to produce an easy point of reference that permits the passing of wisdom to new generations and the creation of ceremony and other non-written *yet tangible* ways of transmitting wisdom.

The Head as Character

Epicurus spoke strongly against determinism of the kind that arises from cultural corruption, however in order to be able to discern the laws of nature it is inevitable that some form of determinism must exist, otherwise nature would be entirely unpredictable and it would be impossible to discern its laws. In Yoruba spirituality, *Ori* is inherited from the ancestors. Our destiny, insofar as it is bound to our racial, familial, genetic, and cultural identities, is inherited and determined just as any anticipation should be expected to be.

But regardless of the things that we inherit, our good character, our virtue and our wholesome beliefs can crown our heads with self-sufficiency and abiding pleasure so that we live our lives laughing at Fortuna, impervious to her whims. Our sages compared the achievement of this divine imperturbability to building a fortress around our souls.

The Yoruba solve the problem of determinism versus choice by teaching that there is a part of *Ori* which comes from the ancestors and another part which is the character and can be influenced, appeased, and reasoned with. Our choices are an expression of our character, so that it is believed that a wholesome, virtuous character is a sign of a good and healthy *Ori*. Our appearance and our inherited traits and tendencies are the elements of our destiny that we cannot control.

The entire process of Epicurean therapy is meant to protect the head and to preserve mental health and good character. Bad habits and moral diseases are treated as the enemies of the soul and one engages in a constant process of self-betterment.

One final component of healthy head as good character must be named: Epicureanism and the cultivation of virtue require a commitment to our own peace of mind and tranquility that constitutes a process of becoming one's best friend, of befriending the self and having a strong and healthy commitment with oneself.

The ancient *Discussion Between a Man and his Ba* was a dramatized expression of lack of philosophy and virtue, a dysfunctional relationship with the self. We will always have to live with ourselves, therefore it's only prudent to befriend the self, to engage the self in wholesome philosophical discourse instead of ungrateful discussions.

Philosophy as the Compass

The unplanned life is not worth living. – Norman DeWitt

Just to be clear, we do not believe in Epicureanism that the head is a double that leaves the body at the time of death as the Egyptians taught, or a deity that can be appeased as the Yoruba believe. But it's impossible not to notice the shared intuitions of these many peoples about the importance of crowning our heads with wholesome philosophy and how this affects *where we are headed* and the general quality of our lives. Therefore, these teachings deserve careful consideration among naturalist philosophers.

We must know where we're going in life and we must also have the criteria by which we can find our way. If we don't have a north when we steer the boat of our destiny, we will get lost and confused in navigation, we will inevitably choose the wrong path. Philodemus was unable to discuss choices and avoidances without constantly going back to the *doctrine of the important things (kyriotatai)* that make life worth living. Shelter. Safety. A little food. A circle of loving friends for wholesome association, and we can live like Zeus.

Like the Yoruba say, the dog has four legs, but only one head and he can only choose to walk one path. A scattered head can not truly master its destiny. On the other hand, a focused head, a clear head that knows where it stands, who it is, where it is going, what really matters, what its values are, can clearly make its way in life with maturity, with a sober and lucid art of living. This full alignment between the head and the legs, and the entire being, is integrity and authenticity.

