Epicurus

Diogenes Laertius

In this excerpt from Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, Diogenes reviews some of the highlights from Epicurus' life and teachings.

Epicurus, son of Neocles and Chaerestrate, was an Athenian of the Gargettus ward and the Philaidae clan, as Metrodorus says in his book On Noble Birth. He is said by Heraclides (in his Epitome of Sotion) as well as by others, to have been brought up at Samos after the Athenians had sent colonists there and to have come to Athens at the age of eighteen, at the time when Xenocrates was head of the Academy and Aristotle was in Chalcis. After the death of Alexander of Macedon and the expulsion of the Athenian colonists from Samos by Perdiccas, Epicurus left Athens to join his father in Colophon; for some time he stayed there and gathered students around him, then returned to Athens again during the archonship of Anaxicrates [307–306 B.C.].

For a while, it is said, he pursued his studies in common with other philosophers, but afterwards put forward independent views by founding the school named after him.

He says himself that he first came to study philosophy at the age of fourteen, Apollodorus the Epicurean (in the first book of his Life of Epicurus says that he turned to philosophy in contempt of the school-teachers who could not tell him the meaning of “chaos” in Hesiod. According to Hermippus, however, he started as a school-teacher, but on coming across the works of Democritus turned eagerly to philosophy, which accounts for Timon's allusion in the lines:

“Again there is the latest and most shameless of the natural philosophers, the school-teacher's son from Samos, himself the most ill-bred and undisciplined of mankind.”

At his encouragement his three brothers, Neocles, Chaeredemus, and Aristobulus, joined in his studies, as Philodemus the Epicurean relates in the tenth book of his comprehensive work On Philosophers; as did his slave named Mys, as stated by Myronianus in Historical Parallels. Diotimus the Stoic, who was very hostile to him, assailed him with bitter slanders, attributing fifty obscene letters as being
written by Epicurus; and so too did the author who ascribed to Epicurus the letters commonly attributed to Chrysippus [the Stoic].

They are followed in this by Posidonius the Stoic and his school, and Nicolaus and Sotion in the twelfth of twenty-four books of his work entitled Dioclean Refutations, also by Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

They allege that he used to go round with his mother to small cottages to perform purification rites and read charms, and assist his father in his school for a pitiful fee; further, that one of his brothers was a pimp and lived with the courtesan Leontion ['Lioness']; that he put forward as his own the doctrines of Democritus about atoms and of Aristippus about pleasure; that he was not a genuine Athenian, a charge brought by Timocrates and by Herodotus in a book On the Training of Epicurus as a Cadet, that he basely flattered Mithras, the viceroy of Lysimachus, bestowing on him in his letters Apollo's titles of ‘Healer’ and ‘Lord.’

They further charged that he extolled Idomeneus, Herodotus, and Timocrates, who had published his esoteric doctrines, and flattered them for that very reason. Also that in his letters he wrote to Leontion: ‘0 Lord Apollo, my dear little Leontion, with what tumultuous applause we were inspired as we read your letter.” Then again to Themista, the wife of Leonteus: “I am quite ready, if you do not come to see me, to roll around three times on my own axis and be propelled to any place that you, including Themista, agree upon”; and to the beautiful Pythocles he wrote: “I will sit quiet and await with desire your god-like coming” and, as Theodorus says in the fourth book of his work, Against Epicurus, in another letter to Themista he thinks he preaches to her.

It is added that he corresponded with many courtesans, and especially with Leontion, of whom Metrodorus also was enamored. It is observed too that in his treatise On the Ethical End he writes in these terms: “I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form.” and in his letter to Pythocles: “Hoist all sail, my dear boy, and steer clear of all indoctrination.”. Epictetus calls him preacher of effeminacy and showers abuse on him.

Again there was Timocrates, the brother of Metrodorus, who was his student and then left the school. In the book Merry Guests he asserts that Epicurus vomited twice a day from over-indulgence, and goes on to say that he himself had great difficulty in escaping from those notorious midnight philosophizings and the confraternity with all its secrets; further, that Epicurus's understanding of philosophy was small and his understanding of life even smaller; that his bodily health was pitiful, so much so that for many years he was unable to rise from his chair; and
that he spent a whole mina daily on his meals, as he himself says in his letter to Leontion and in that to the philosophers at Mitylene.

Also that among other courtesans who consorted with him and Metrodorus were Mammarion and Hedia and Erotion and Nikidion. He alleges too that in his thirty-seven books On Nature Epicurus says the same things over and over again and writes largely in sheer opposition to others, especially against Nausiphanes.

Here are his own words: “Nay, let them go hang: for, when laboring with an idea, he too had the sophist’s off-hand boastfulness like many another servile soul.” Besides, he himself in his letters says of Nausiphanes: “This so maddened him that he abused me and called me pedagogue.” Epicurus used to call this Nausiphanes jellyfish, an illiterate, a fraud, and a trollop; Plato's school he called “the toadies of Dionysius,” their master himself the “golden” Plato, and Aristotle a profligate, who after devouring his patrimony took to soldiering and selling drugs; Protagoras a porter and the secretary of Democritus and village school-teacher; Heraclitus a muddler; Democritus Lercratus [“trifler”]; and Antidorus Sannidorus [“flattering gift-bearer”]; the Cynics enemies of Greece; the Dialecticians consumed with envy; and Pyrrho [the Skeptic] an ignorant boor.

But these people are stark mad. For our philosopher has numerous witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men—his native land, which honored him with statues in bronze; his friends, so many in number that they could hardly be counted by whole cities, and indeed all who knew him, held fast as they were by the siren- charms of his doctrine, save Metrodorus of Stratonicea, who went over to Carneades, being perhaps burdened by his master’s excessive goodness; the Garden itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues for ever without interruption through numberless successions of one director after another; his gratitude to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the Garden, the most eminent of them being the aforesaid Mys; and in general, his benevolence to all mankind. His piety towards the gods and his affection for his country no words can describe. He carried his modesty to such an excess that he did not even enter public life.

He spent all his life in Greece, notwithstanding the calamities which had befallen her in that era; when he did once or twice take a trip to Ionia, it was to visit his friends there. Friends indeed came to him from all parts and lived with him in his garden. This is stated by Apollodorus, who also says that he purchased the garden for eighty minae. And to the same effect Diocles in the third book of his Epitome speaks of them as living a very simple and frugal life; at all events they were content with a cup of thin wine and were, for the rest, thoroughgoing
water-drinkers. He further says that Epicurus did not think it right that their property should be held in common, as required by the maxim of Pythagoras about the goods of friends; such a practice in his opinion implied mistrust, and without confidence there is no friendship.

In his correspondence he himself mentions that he was content with plain bread and water. And again: “Send me a little pot of cheese, that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously.” Such was the man who laid down that pleasure was the end of life. And here is the epigram in which Athenaeus eulogizes him:

“You toil, 0 men, for paltry things and incessantly begin strife and war for gain; but nature's wealth extends to a moderate bound, whereas vain judgments have a limitless range. This lesson Neocles' wise son heard from the Muses or from the sacred tripod at Delphi.”

And, as we go on, we shall know this better from his doctrines and his sayings.

Among the early philosophers, says Diocles, his favorite was Anaxagoras, although he occasionally disagreed with him, and Archelaus the teacher of Socrates. Diocles adds that he used to train his friends in committing his treatises to memory, Apollodorus in his Chronology tells us that our philosopher was a pupil of Nausiphanes and Praxiphanes; but in his letter to Eurylochus, Epicurus himself denies it and says that he was self-taught. Both Epicurus and Hermarchus deny the very existence of Leucippus the philosopher, though by some and by Apollodorus the Epicurean he is said to have been the teacher of Democritus. Demetrius the Magnesian affirms that Epicurus also attended the lectures of Xenocrates.

The terms he used for things were the ordinary terms, and Aristophanes the grammarian credits him with a very characteristic style. He was so lucid a writer that in the work On Rhetoric he makes clearness the sole requisite. And in his correspondence he replaces the usual greeting “I wish you joy” by wishes for welfare and right living, “May you do well,” and “Live well.”

Ariston says in his Life of Epicurus that he derived his work entitled The Canon from the Tripod of Nausiphanes, adding that Epicurus had been a pupil of this man as well as of the Platonist Pamphilus in Samos. Further, that he began to study philosophy when he was twelve years old, and started his own school at thirty-two.

He was born, according to Apollodorus in his Chronology, in the third year of the 109th Olympiad, in the archonship of Sosigenes, on the seventh day of the month Gamelion, in the seventh year after the death of Plato [February 4th, 341 B.C.]. When he was thirty-two he founded a school of philosophy, first in Mitylene.
and Lampsacus, and then five years later removed to Athens, where he died in the second year of the 127th Olympiad, in the archonship of Pytharatus, at the age of seventy-two [270 B.C.]; and Hermarchus the son of Agemortus, a Mitylenaean, took over the Garden. Epicurus died of renal calculus after an illness which lasted a fortnight; so Hermarchus tells us in his letters. Hermippus relates that he entered a bronze bath of lukewarm water and asked for unmixed wine, which he swallowed, and then, having bidden his friends remember his doctrines, breathed his last.

Here is something of my own about him:

“Farewell, my friends; the truths I taught hold fast, thus Epicurus spake, and breathed his last. He sat in a warm bath and neat wine quaff’d, and straightway found chill death in that same draught.”

Such was the life of the sage and such his end...

But as to the conduct of life, what we ought to avoid and what to choose, he writes as follows. Before quoting his words, however, let me go into the views of Epicurus himself and his school concerning the wise man.

There are three motives to injurious acts among men—hatred, envy, and contempt; and these the wise man overcomes by reason. Moreover, he who has once become wise never more assumes the opposite habit, not even in semblance, if he can help it. He will be more susceptible of emotion than other men: that will be no hindrance to his wisdom. However, not every bodily constitution nor every nationality would permit a man to become wise.

Even on the rack the wise man is happy. He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed. When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans. As regards women he will submit to the restrictions imposed by the law, as Diogenes says in his epitome of Epicurus' ethical doctrines. Nor will he punish his servants; rather he will pity them and make allowance on occasion for those who are of good character.

Epicureans do not suffer the wise man to fall in love; nor will he trouble himself about funeral rites; according to them love does not come by divine inspiration: so Diogenes in his twelfth book. The wise man will not make fine speeches. No one was ever the better for sexual indulgence, and it is well if he be not the worse.

Nor, again, will the wise man marry and rear a family—so Epicurus says in the Problems and in the On Nature. Occasionally he may marry owing to special circumstances in his life. Some too will turn aside from their purpose. Nor will he drivel, when drunken: so Epicurus says in the Symposium. Nor will he take part in politics, as is stated in the first book On Life; nor will he make himself a tyrant;
nor will he turn Cynic (so the second book On Life tells us); nor will he be a mendicant.

But even when he has lost his sight, he will not withdraw himself from life: this is stated in the same book. The wise man will also feel grief, according to Diogenes in the fifth book of his Epilecta. And he will take a suit into court. He will leave written words behind him, but will not compose panegyric. 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. The wise man will set up votive images. Whether he is well off or not will be matter of indifference to him. Only the wise man will be able to converse correctly about music and poetry, without however actually writing poems himself. One wise man does not move more wisely than another. 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 skeptic; and he will be like himself even when asleep. And he will on occasion die for a friend.

The school holds that sins are not all equal; that health is in some cases a good, in others a thing indifferent; that courage is not a natural gift but comes from calculation of expediency; and that friendship is prompted by our needs. One of the friends, however, must make the first advances (just as we have to cast seed into the earth), but it is maintained by a partnership in the enjoyment of life's pleasures.

Two sorts of happiness can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures...

Elsewhere he rejects the whole of divination, as in the short epitome, and says, “No means of predicting the future really exists, and if it did, we must regard what happens according to it as nothing to us.”

Such are his views on life and conduct; and he has discoursed upon them at greater length elsewhere. He differs from the Cyrenaics with regard to pleasure. They do not include under the term the pleasure which is a state of rest, but only that which consists in motion. Epicurus admits both; also pleasure of mind as well as of body, as he states in his work On Choice and Avoidance and in that On the
Ethical End, and in the first book of his work *On Human Life* and in the epistle to his philosopher friends in Mytilene.

So also Diogenes in the seventeenth book of his *Epilecta*, and Metrodorus in his *Timocrates*, whose actual words are: “Thus Pleasure being conceived both as that species which consists in motion and that which is a state of rest.” The words of Epicurus in his work *On Choice* are: “Peace of mind and freedom from pain are pleasures which imply a state of rest; joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity.”

He further disagrees with the Cyrenaics in that they hold that pains of body are worse than mental pains; at all events evil-doers are made to suffer bodily punishment; whereas Epicurus holds the pains of the mind to be the worse; at any rate the flesh endures the storms of the present alone, the mind those of the past and future as well as the present. In this way also he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body.

And as proof that pleasure is the end he adduces the fact that living things, so soon as they are born, are well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the prompting of nature and apart from reason. Left to our own feelings, then, we shun pain; as when even Heracles, devoured by the poisoned robe, cries aloud, “And bites and yells, and rock to rock resounds, Headlands of Locris and Euboean cliffs.”

And we choose the virtues too on account of pleasure and not for their own sake, as we take medicine for the sake of health. So too in the twentieth book of his *Epilecta* says Diogenes, who also calls education recreation. Epicurus describes virtue as the sine qua non of pleasure, i.e. the one thing without which pleasure cannot be, everything else, food, for instance, being separable, i.e. not indispensable to pleasure.

Come, then, let me set the seal, so to say, on my entire work as well as on this philosopher's life by citing his *Principal Doctrines*, so to bring the whole work to a close and making the end of it to coincide with the beginning of happiness:

1. A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness.

2. Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us.
3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

4. Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain.

5. It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.

6. In order to obtain protection from other men, any means for attaining this end is a natural good.

7. Some men want fame and status, thinking that they would thus make themselves secure against other men. If the life of such men really were secure, they have attained a natural good; if, however, it is insecure, they have not attained the end which by nature's own prompting they originally sought.

8. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.

9. If every pleasure had been capable of accumulation, not only over time but also over the entire body or at least over the principal parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ from one another.

10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death, and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad.
11. 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.

12. It is impossible for someone to dispel his fears about the most important matters if he doesn't know the nature of the universe but still gives some credence to myths. So without the study of nature there is no enjoyment of pure pleasure.

13. There is no advantage to obtaining protection from other men so long as we are alarmed by events above or below the earth or in general by whatever happens in the boundless universe.

14. Protection from other men, secured to some extent by the power to expel and by material prosperity, in its purest form comes from a quiet life withdrawn from the multitude.

15. The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity.

16. Chance seldom interferes with the wise man; his greatest and highest interests have been, are, and will be, directed by reason throughout his whole life.

17. The just man is most free from disturbance, while the unjust is full of the utmost disturbance.

18. Bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation. The limit of mental pleasure, however, is reached when we reflect on these bodily pleasures and their related emotions, which used to cause the mind the greatest alarms.

19. Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason.

20. The flesh receives as unlimited the limits of pleasure; and to provide it requires unlimited time. But the mind, intellectually grasping what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of the future, procures a complete and perfect life, and we have no longer any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless the mind does not
shun pleasure, and even when circumstances make death imminent, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life.

21. He who understands the limits of life knows that it is easy to obtain that which removes the pain of want and makes the whole of life complete and perfect. Thus he has no longer any need of things which involve struggle.

22. We must consider both the ultimate end and all clear sensory evidence, to which we refer our opinions; for otherwise everything will be full of uncertainty and confusion.

23. If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those sensations which you claim are false.

24. If you reject absolutely any single sensation without stopping to distinguish between opinion about things awaiting confirmation and that which is already confirmed to be present, whether in sensation or in feelings or in any application of intellect to the presentations, you will confuse the rest of your sensations by your groundless opinion and so you will reject every standard of truth. If in your ideas based upon opinion you hastily affirm as true all that awaits confirmation as well as that which does not, you will not avoid error, as you will be maintaining the entire basis for doubt in every judgment between correct and incorrect opinion.

25. If you do not on every occasion refer each of your actions to the ultimate end prescribed by nature, but instead of this in the act of choice or avoidance turn to some other end, your actions will not be consistent with your theories.

26. All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but the desire is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm.

27. Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship.

28. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that in the limited evils of this life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.
29. Of our desires some are natural and necessary, others are natural but not necessary; and others are neither natural nor necessary, but are due to groundless opinion.

30. Those natural desires which entail no pain when unsatisfied, though pursued with an intense effort, are also due to groundless opinion; and it is not because of their own nature they are not got rid of but because of man's groundless opinions.

31. Natural justice is a pledge of reciprocal benefit, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another.

32. Those animals which are incapable of making binding agreements with one another not to inflict nor suffer harm are without either justice or injustice; and likewise for those peoples who either could not or would not form binding agreements not to inflict nor suffer harm.

33. 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.

34. Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions.

35. It is impossible for a man who secretly violates the terms of the agreement not to harm or be harmed to feel confident that he will remain undiscovered, even if he has already escaped ten thousand times; for until his death he is never sure that he will not be detected.

36. In general justice is the same for all, for it is something found mutually beneficial in men's dealings, but in its application to particular places or other circumstances the same thing is not necessarily just for everyone.

37. Among the things held to be just by law, whatever is proved to be of advantage in men's dealings has the stamp of justice, whether or not it be the same for all; but if a man makes a law and it does not prove to be mutually advantageous, then this is no longer just. And if what is mutually advantageous varies and only for a time corresponds to our concept of justice, nevertheless for that time it is
just for those who do not trouble themselves about empty words, but look simply at the facts.

38. Where without any change in circumstances the things held to be just by law are seen not to correspond with the concept of justice in actual practice, such laws are not really just; but wherever the laws have ceased to be advantageous because of a change in circumstances, in that case the laws were for that time just when they were advantageous for the mutual dealings of the citizens, and subsequently ceased to be just when they were no longer advantageous.

39. The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.

40. Those who possess the power to defend themselves against threats by their neighbors, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee of security, live the most pleasant life with one another; and their enjoyment of the fullest intimacy is such that if one of them dies prematurely, the others do not lament his death as though it called for pity.