



Epicurus' Principal Doctrines

Edited by Glyn Hughes © 2005

"No pleasure is a bad thing in itself"

INTRODUCTION to Epicurus's Sovran Maxims

Epicurus was born in 341BC on the island of Samos. He studied philosophy under the successors of Democritus and Plato, and eventually founded his own school and community at the 'garden' in Athens. Epicureanism, a philosophy of refined and calculating pleasure-seeking (in contrast to the rival creed of Stoicism with its watchword of 'duty'), flourished for centuries, spawning colonies and followers throughout Europe, only to fade with the coming of Christianity.

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.