**Epicurus—The Original UU?**

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Sermon by FRSUU member Doug Latham

You may be wondering, "Doug, why Epicurus?" It started with a podcast. I find podcasts fit well with an hour in the garden, or mowing the lawn, at the gym, or on a walk. My interests run to history, politics, science, and more recently philosophy. About a year ago I heard a conversation with Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt about his book, *The Swerve, How the World became Modern*. My interest piqued; I obtained the book. It's about the rediscovery in the 15th century of a monumental poem from the first century before the common era by Lucretius called "De Rerum Natura," "On the Nature of Things." Lucretius was a disciple of Epicurean Philosophy. I became fascinated with the philosophy and excited to learn about its ongoing impact on our lives today as Professor Greenblatt describes in his book, though the connection is absent from most general awareness.

Frankly, of all the ancient Greek philosophers, perhaps none has been more slandered than Epicurus. Today he is commonly recalled in the word "epicurean," which leads most of us to think of someone who appreciates refined and sensual pleasures, luxury, and indulgence, especially in food and drink. It's certainly what I thought before I started on this journey.

It turns out this is a gross misrepresentation of Epicurus's ideas. Objective study of his writings and the historical record reveals a philosophy grounded in reason and focused on helping all people live their best lives. His philosophy has had a profound influence on the emergence of our "modern" world, first through the seeds of scientific enquiry embedded in his approach that sparked a scientific revolution and second through the transmission of his ethics via liberal philosophers of the enlightenment. We are living in a world that has largely been constructed on those foundations. When I mentioned this sermon to Lark Madden, who happens to have studied philosophy, he called Epicurus "The original UU," unsolicited validation of my evolving understanding about Epicurus and his philosophy.

Sadly, our forebearers in this very church were not so open-minded. Two hundred and sixty years ago, Reverend Cary stood in this pulpit—spiritually, at least, since he was in the original meeting house—and preached a series of sermons on the importance of salvation. Among many other things in his lengthy orations, he said:

> "We are surrounded by many temptations, and we strongly incline and listen to them; and we should undoubtedly give way, were it not for the motives of future happiness set before us in the Gospel. We see, powerful as they are, they are not always sufficient; and what would be the case if there were none? If therefore it matters not whether men should conduct differently: no good comes of their mortifications and self-denials, their labors and endeavors, why should they be

> at pains? They might say as the Epicurean in regard to futurity, “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Let us take life while we have it. We are as well and shall stand as fair, as those who fear God and keep his commandments. What encouragement would be here to vice? What discouragement to virtue?”

Rev. Cary’s words stand in need of rebuttal, although my observations today can only touch on main themes. There is much more you may want to explore on your own.

Epicurus was born in 341 BCE. He received a typical ancient Greek education, steeped heavily in platonic tradition, but subsequently studied with a follower of the atomist Democritus and a follower of Pyrrho, whose philosophy had the primary goal of attaining perfect tranquility of mind. Out of his education and his own thinking, Epicurus synthesized his concepts of the world and an ethical model for human life. He wrote: “Empty is that philosopher’s argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.”

When Epicurus looked around his world, he saw four main causes of mental distress: fear of the gods; fear of pain; pains of desires; fear of death. He developed his philosophy to provide a framework of thought and lifestyle that would counter these mental distresses and enable a tranquil life. In today’s parlance, he was a self-help guru.

What strategy did Epicurus employ? He believed that the path to mental tranquility could be pursued by applying practical wisdom to understanding life and its challenges. Central to Epicurus’s practical wisdom is an atomist’s understanding of existence that claims everything in the universe is comprised of atoms interacting within a void. He uses this concept as a springboard for what might best be described as an embryonic form of scientific enquiry into how the universe functions and how our senses are able to receive inputs from the world around us. Although his science is generally flawed, it leads to what I think are still worthwhile ideas for contemplation, although in some instances we may not find his conclusions are as comforting as he obviously thought they were.

Addressing fear of the gods, he posits they must be made of atoms but be so distant and ephemeral that they have no interest in the activities of humans; therefore, we need not fear them.

Fear of pain doesn’t seem irrational, and Epicurus, as a practical thinker, recognized that pain is inevitable in life. His remedy for fear of pain was to counsel rational consideration of the risk: If a pain is minor, it can be tolerated; if a pain is great, it cannot last long.

Epicurus’s concept of pains of desires correlates with what we know as sins: greed, lust, envy, wrath, gluttony…we’ll come to his teachings on managing these desires in a moment.

Concerning fear of death, he states that the soul, like everything else in the universe, must be made of atoms. The soul is integrated within our physical being, such that it can only exist as long as the physical body lives. There is, in this model of existence, no before – or afterlife of the soul during which the gods can exact punishment or provide rewards, nor is there awareness of the state of death. He wrote, “Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not. All sensation and consciousness ends with death and therefore in death there is neither pleasure nor pain. The fear of death arises from the belief that in death, there is awareness.”

Whether you agree with this or not, the net result in Epicurus’s thinking is what I find most interesting. This life is, in Epicurus’s philosophy, the totality of existence, and as such, he accords life the highest value. The ethics of his philosophy are pointed squarely at helping people live the best life possible without reference to a deity for either guidance or regulation. In that sense, Epicurus was essentially amoral. He did not believe in a system of moral laws emanating from a higher being to dictate the right and wrong of human behavior, rather he believed in the dictates of nature, and he used observation of nature to inform his ethics. In a real sense, this is as far as his detractors want us to look. In the words of Reverend Cary, “What encouragement would be here to vice? What discouragement to virtue?”

Let us look further! Observing infants, both human and those of other species, Epicurus identified two primary drivers for behavior—pleasure and pain—and pointed out instinctual preferences for pleasure over pain. From this observation, he proposes that seeking pleasure is the natural objective of life. But—and this is a massive refutation of our common understanding of epicureanism—he proposed that there is a hierarchy of pleasures. The most important are natural and necessary: essential to the preservation of life; think basic sustenance, shelter, clothing. Then there are pleasures that are natural but not necessary; think a fancy meal, elegant clothes. Finally, there are the pleasures that are neither natural nor necessary; this is having a statue of yourself erected or having a military parade on your birthday.

Further, Epicurus argued that striving for pleasures beyond the natural and necessary will both generate unnecessary stress and likely place a person in conflict with others in order to attain those pleasures. He practiced, and strove to teach others, to live in harmony with their world, to seek in all things to limit desires, thereby minimizing the negative impact one has on the world and reducing the chances of entering into conflict with others. In this way, he says to us, you will remove the need to stress yourself with worry about how to attain your wants and about the consequences of your actions.

It appears that Epicurus lived by his precepts. While other philosophers of his day focused on civic action and government and did their teaching in the center of public life, Epicurus made his school in a garden near his home, away from the bustle of the city. Government, he believed, should limit its role strictly to serve only as a means of protecting the liberty of the

governed to pursue a happy life. In his garden, he welcomed anyone wishing to learn his philosophy, uniquely not just the free males of Athens, but also women and slaves.

Epicurus developed a highly organized body of teaching materials—ancient sources indicate he wrote some three hundred books, and he also developed condensed versions of his precepts to serve both as a basic introduction to his teachings and as a handy reference. To spread his message, he employed a large team of scribes—let's call it a prototype Beacon Press.

As Norman DeWitt observes in his book, *Epicurus and his Philosophy*, "When a philosopher chooses the role of missionary and launches a campaign 'to awake the world to the blessedness of the happy life,' he may still be a hedonist, but he ceases to be egoistic. If correctly described, he must be seen as an altruistic hedonist. This is not a contradiction in terms, but a higher hedonism." Epicurus practiced extreme simplicity in all his wants. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, "please send me a piece of cheese, that I might have a feast."

Indeed, hedonism hardly seems like an appropriate epithet when Epicurus writes, "Of all the things which wisdom provides to make us entirely happy, much the greatest is the possession of friendship." Friendship, for him, was both an aesthetic and a utilitarian good. Aesthetic because friendship is beautiful, and utilitarian because friends offer mutual support to one another. On his deathbed, Epicurus wrote to a friend, "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings are so great that nothing could increase them, but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations…"

Epicurus's philosophy was actively practiced in the ancient world for seven centuries until Christianity became the state religion of Rome and suppressed, among others, Epicureanism. Propagandized against for the particular reasons of rejecting divine influence on life and denying the existence of the soul beyond death, Epicureanism went into hibernation until the Renaissance. Even at its reemergence, the church, as we know, strove to suppress budding ideas about scientific enquiry and ethics of human interaction. The strength of Epicurus's ideas could not be repressed, however. Consider these familiar words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Late in life, Thomas Jefferson wrote to a friend: "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."

As philosopher Ludwig von Mises states in his treatise, *Human Action*, "[Liberal thought] consummated the spiritual, moral, and intellectual emancipation of mankind inaugurated by the philosophy of Epicureanism... Law and legality, the moral code and social institutions are no longer revered as unfathomable decrees of Heaven. They are of human origin and the only yardstick that must be applied to them is that of expediency with regard to human welfare."

As I conclude, I'd like to circle back to the conversation between Preet and Professor Santos: Consider the scientific approach applied by Prof. Santos and her colleagues—I think you'll see, as I have, a through-line of practical wisdom that Epicurus applied to understanding our universe. And the conclusions they draw about happiness offer empirical validation of Epicurus's observations on what best promotes human happiness.

Indeed, when I contemplate Epicurus's ideas and then read our affirmation of faith, there are many compelling parallels: the quest of truth, seeking knowledge in freedom, dwelling together in peace, and above all, love and the desire to serve humankind in fellowship. I happily affirm that Epicurus, living more than 2,000 years ago, was a UU at heart and echo his words, which still ring forth as a benediction: "Friendship dances around the world, announcing to us all to be awaken to happiness."