

## Early Greek Philosophers/Cosmologists

~480-420 B.C.E. – Leucippus

Divided the world into two entities – atoms (atamos – uncuttable) and void. Thought atoms were all interconnected.

470- 399 B.C.E. – Socrates “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Plato’s teacher

460-370 B.C.E. – Democritus

Student of Leucippus. Expanded on Leucippus theories of atoms and void.

427 – 348 B.C.E. – Plato

384 – 322 B.C.E. – Aristotle.

Rejected atoms and empty space for the four elements: earth, air, fire, water

341 – 270 B.C.E. – Epicurus

Reformulated the theories of Democritus. Atoms are singular, eternal, uncreated. All atoms move downward, except when they “swerve.” The swerves are what allow new things to be created. The gods have no influence on our lives. They exist, but are not interested in us.

Saw pleasure as the greatest human good

“Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not.”

Epicurus, who totally rejected Plato’s teaching and insulted both Aristotle and his successors, established his sect in opposition to the Socratic schools. The Epicureans, who taught that the soul is material, renounced the incorporeal soul of the Platonists and the substantial form of the Aristotelians.

Roman Republic – last days. Ended in 31 B.C.

99 – 55 B.C.E. Lucretius (about 200 years after Epicurus).

Roman poet in the last days of the Roman Republic. Contemporary of Cicero and Virgil.

Resurgence of interest in ancient Greece philosophies during the later years of the Roman Republic. Epicurian ideas were popular, but controversial.

Wrote a long poem presenting Epicurianism as emphasizing the ultimate authority of reason and the senses.

106 – 43 B.C.E. Cicero – contemporary of Lucretius. Mentions Lucretius poem, wrote of Epicurianism as geared toward “excess and luxury” and “reduces men to animals.”

70 – 19 B.C.E. Virgil – Poet influenced by Lucretius. “Aeneid”

Interest in Epicurianism and other philosophies of ancient Greece died out in late antiquity, with the end of the Roman Republic and the coming of the Roman Empire with constant wars.

Dark Ages – Early Middle Ages 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century

During the Middle Ages, society lived in the remains of classical society from a thousand years ago but knew little of it. The Church considered curiosity about the “pagans” to be a sin.

Later Middle Ages – 1250 - 1500

Petrarch (1304-1374) “Father of Humanism” “ ... a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason”. Devout Catholic. “attempts to reconcile an admiration of the pagan past with Christian doctrine”

“made the recovery of the cultural heritage of classical Rome a collective obsession.”(Greenblatt)  
“Petrarch's rediscovery of Cicero's letters is often credited with initiating the 14th-century Italian Renaissance and the founding of Renaissance humanism.” (Wikipedia)

Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) found the Lucretius work just as the Late Middle Ages was beginning the shift to the Renaissance, especially in Florence. An effort was underway to revive and surpass the ideas and achievements of classical antiquity. Growing interest in ancient Greek manuscripts.

1415 - Poggio found two previously unknown orations of Cicero. Niccoli's copy of the scribe's copy of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century copy Poggio found is what we have (plus some other partial copies found subsequently).

### **January 1417 Poggio finds Lucretius**

Epicurian content also shaped the development of Western philosophy.

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1695), whose work Thomas Jefferson praises, is the French philosopher who is primarily responsible for the modern reconstruction of Epicurean thought. Gassendi revived Epicurean philosophy in order to provide a viable alternative to Scholasticism, the blend of Christianity and Aristotelianism that was prevalent in universities throughout Western Europe.

.....Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679)

Thomas Hobbes, who spent over a decade in France and who formed a close friendship with Gassendi, exported Epicurean materialism to England. Indeed, Hobbes's mechanistic political philosophy is indebted not only to Galileo's science of motion, but also to Gassendi's restatement of Epicureanism.

Francis Bacon (1711-1768) although he later recanted, produced a work very favourable to Epicureanism in 1612. The school of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, he wrote, deserved more than Plato and Aristotle to have prospered, since “in most things it agrees with the authority of the early ages.” In other words, it had a better pedigree.

John Locke (1632-1704)

Influenced by the new science of Newton, Boyle, and Bacon, Locke, in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1690), tried to apply scientific methods to establish the reliability, scope, and limitations of human knowledge . . . . Like Epicurus, he believed that all ideas come from experience, and offered a strictly hedonistic account of human motivation, according to which our preferences are invariably determined by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Isaac Newton (1643-1727) declared himself an "atomist."

### **Epicureanism after Epicurus – The influence of Epicurus on Western thought**

by Robert Hanrott

...Thomas Jefferson, Epicurean (1743-1826)

Monticello, October 31, 1819.

To Mr. Short.

.....As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurian. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus indeed, has given us what was good of the stoics; all beyond, of their dogmas, being hypocrisy and grimace. Their great crime was in their calumnies of Epicurus and misrepresentations of his doctrines; in which we lament to see the candid character of Cicero engaging as an accomplice. Diffuse, vapid, rhetorical, but enchanting. His prototype Plato, eloquent as himself, dealing out mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind, has been deified by certain sects usurping the name of Christians; because, in his foggy conceptions, they found a basis of impenetrable darkness whereon to rear fabrications as delirious, of their own invention. These they fathered blasphemously on him who they claimed as their founder, but who would disclaim them with the indignation which their caricatures of his religion so justly excite. Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the Memorabilia of Xenophon; for Plato makes him one of his collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies under the mantle of his name; a liberty of which we are told Socrates himself complained. Seneca is indeed a fine moralist, disguising his work at times with some Stoicisms, and affecting too much of antithesis and point, yet giving us on the whole a great deal of sound and practical morality. But the greatest of all the reformers of the depraved religion of his own country, was Jesus of Nazareth. Abstracting what is really his from the rubbish in which it is buried, easily distinguished by its lustre from the dross of his biographers, and as separable from that as the diamond from the dunghill, we have the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man; outlines which it is lamentable he did not live to fill up.

Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves, Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others. The establishment of the innocent and genuine character of this benevolent moralist and the rescuing it from the imputation of imposture, which has resulted from artificial systems invented

by ultra-Christian sects and unauthorized by a single word ever uttered by him, is a most desirable object, and one to which Priestley has successfully devoted his labors and learning. It would in time, it is to be hoped, effect a quiet euthanasia of the heresies of bigotry and fanaticism which have so long triumphed over human reason, and so generally and deeply afflicted mankind; but this work is to be begun by winnowing the grain from the chaff of the historians of his life.....

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided." Your love of repose will lead, in its progress, to a suspension of healthy exercise, a relaxation of mind, an indifference to everything around you, and finally to a debility of body, and habitude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure; fortitude, you know is one of his four cardinal virtues. That teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards; and to fly, too, in vain, for they will meet and arrest us at every turn of our road.....

I will place under this a syllabus of the doctrines of Epicurus, somewhat in the lapidary style, which I wrote some twenty years ago; a like one of the philosophy of Jesus of nearly the same age, is too long to be copied. Vale, et tibi persuade carissimum te esse mihi.

(The above is a lightly edited version of the letter to Mr. Short)

What, then, might Jefferson have meant when he proposed in the Declaration of Independence that each individual has an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness? In Jefferson's own words, "happiness" consists in "[well-regulated indulgences](#)," satisfactions of desire that accord with political conventions that are designed to promote mutual advantage. They are well-regulated insofar as they do not prevent others from pursuing their own advantage in their own way. For Jefferson, at least, happiness does not consist in the kind of virtue extolled by the classical philosophers. Instead, as Jefferson declares, "The [summum bonum](#) is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind."