

A talk given by the Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Epicurus and Atomic Gratitude

The philosopher Epicurus—who died 270 BCE—is the victim of an ancient hatchet job. “Epicurean” has come to mean gluttony. But his teachings were far from hedonistic or nihilistic. In other words, Epicurus was not an Epicurean.

Rather than teaching all-out consumption, Epicurus taught:

The wealth of *nature* is limited and easy to attain, but the wealth of *vanity* keeps growing larger and moving farther away. (*Precepts* 15)

This is from a gathering of his sayings, called *Precepts*. Here’s another:

Of our desires, some are natural and *necessary*; others are natural but *not* necessary; others, again, are *neither* natural *nor* necessary but are due to baseless opinion. (29)

So, the desire for food is natural; the desire for a *particular* food is *natural* but not *necessary*; and the desire for an expensive, trendy food is *neither* natural *nor* necessary. That’s a manufactured need—“due to baseless opinion.”

Central to true Epicureanism was simplicity in living and in diet. Added to this simplicity is friendship. Epicurus said,

Of all the ways that wisdom finds to acquire happiness in life, by far the most important is making friends. (27)

Epicurus sounds like a nice guy, so why did other schools of philosophy and religion hate his thought so much? The answer lies in a summary of Epicurean philosophy known as the *Tetrapharmakos*, or “four part remedy.” (*Pharmakos* is where we get the English term *pharmacy*.) A short summary of the *Tetrapharmakos* was found at Herculaneum, one of the cities buried by Mt. Vesuvius long ago:

Don't fear god,

Don't worry about death;
What is good is easy to get,
What is terrible is easy to endure.

A fuller explanation of the Tetrpharmakos was written by Diogenes Laertius, a third-century CE biographer of philosophers:

1. A happy and eternal being has no trouble and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence this being is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness.
2. Death means nothing. When we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist.
3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When 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 pain does not last long in the body; on the contrary, pain, if extreme, is present a short time, and even that degree of pain which barely outweighs pleasure in the body does not last for many days together. Illnesses of long duration even permit of an excess of pleasure over pain in the body.

Again, that summary from Herculaneum:

Don't fear god,
Don't worry about death;
What is good is easy to get,
What is terrible is easy to endure.

Others hated Epicureanism because Epicurus was, like many Humanists today, a strict materialist: he thought that *only nature* and its laws exist and shape our lives. Following the atomic theory of Democritus, Epicurus believed that all reality is only atoms and the spaces between them.

Since atoms are all that exist and the gods don't intrude into human affairs, what is the basis for human action? Why do we do what we do and how do we know what we *shouldn't* do? Epicurus proposed that human motivation is based on pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.

Yes, at first glance, this appears to be a completely hedonistic proposal. But the pleasure Epicurus believed drives human action isn't what we commonly consider pleasure. Pleasure is *moderation*. After all, the pleasure of wine intake can lead to the pain of a hangover. The pleasure of eating cheesecake can lead to the pain of a bellyache and weight gain. Again, back to that precept:

Of our desires, some are natural and *necessary*; others are natural but *not* necessary; others, again, are *neither* natural *nor* necessary but are due to baseless opinion. (29)

True, reasoned, pleasure comes from seeking and acquiring the natural and necessary pleasures . . . in moderation.

Epicurus said, "Before you eat or drink anything, consider carefully *who* you eat or drink *with* rather than *what* you are to eat or drink: for feeding without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf."

Simplicity in everything.

Care in the choices we make.

Friendship . . .

Not a bad formula for living. The goal is "eudaemonia," a good spirit.

The Roman writer Cicero, who studied both Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, said, "Gratitude is *not only* the *greatest* of virtues, but the parent of all the others."

For those of us who live in the materialist universe that Epicurus imagined, a universe of atoms and the spaces between them, we wonder at the passing of the seasons of the year and the incredible fruitfulness of the earth; we take pleasure in this short life we have on the planet; and we gather in gratitude with friends. That's eudaemonia.

And it's what a place like FUS is all about. Today, celebrating Lammas, we gather in gratitude for the bounty of the earth; in gratitude for the skills that have led to the warm bread we will be having, and in gratitude of the people who gather here.

Let's allow Epicurus the last word. One of his sayings has come down to us in Latin. It goes like this:

Non fui,

*fui,
non sum,
non curo.*

Translated, that is:

I did not exist.
Then, I existed.
Now I don't.
I don't care.