

# *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*

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# 4th lesson

Epicurus and the idea  
of pleasure

1. Prior knowledge  
Q&A

*Who was the famous pupil of Aristotle?*

*A. Plato*

*B. Alexander the Great*

*C. Philip II of Macedon*

*Which of these sciences or disciplines were founded by Aristotle?*

*A. Astronomy*

*B. Physics*

*C. Logic*

*How many virtues did Aristotle distinguish ?*

- A. Two: animal virtues and no-animal virtues*
- B. Three: moral, intellectual and sensitive*
- C. Two: moral virtues and intellectual virtues*

*Virtues lead us to fulfill our nature or function, what is Aristotle's definition of virtue?*

- A. The medium between two vices*
- B. The vice between two extremes*
- C. The mean between two virtues*

*What is the short definition of happiness in Aristotle's Ethics?*

- A. Human being's creativity*
- B. Human being's self-fulfillment*
- C. Human being's return to nature*



*2. Hellenic period.  
Philosophy and Culture.*

## Three relevant schools of philosophy after Aristotle: Stoicism, skepticism and epicureism

- ◆ **Stoicism.** It begins with Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (c. 331–261 BC). When the mind is focussed on external objects, including wealth, fame, and honour, then the mind is directed away from the true.

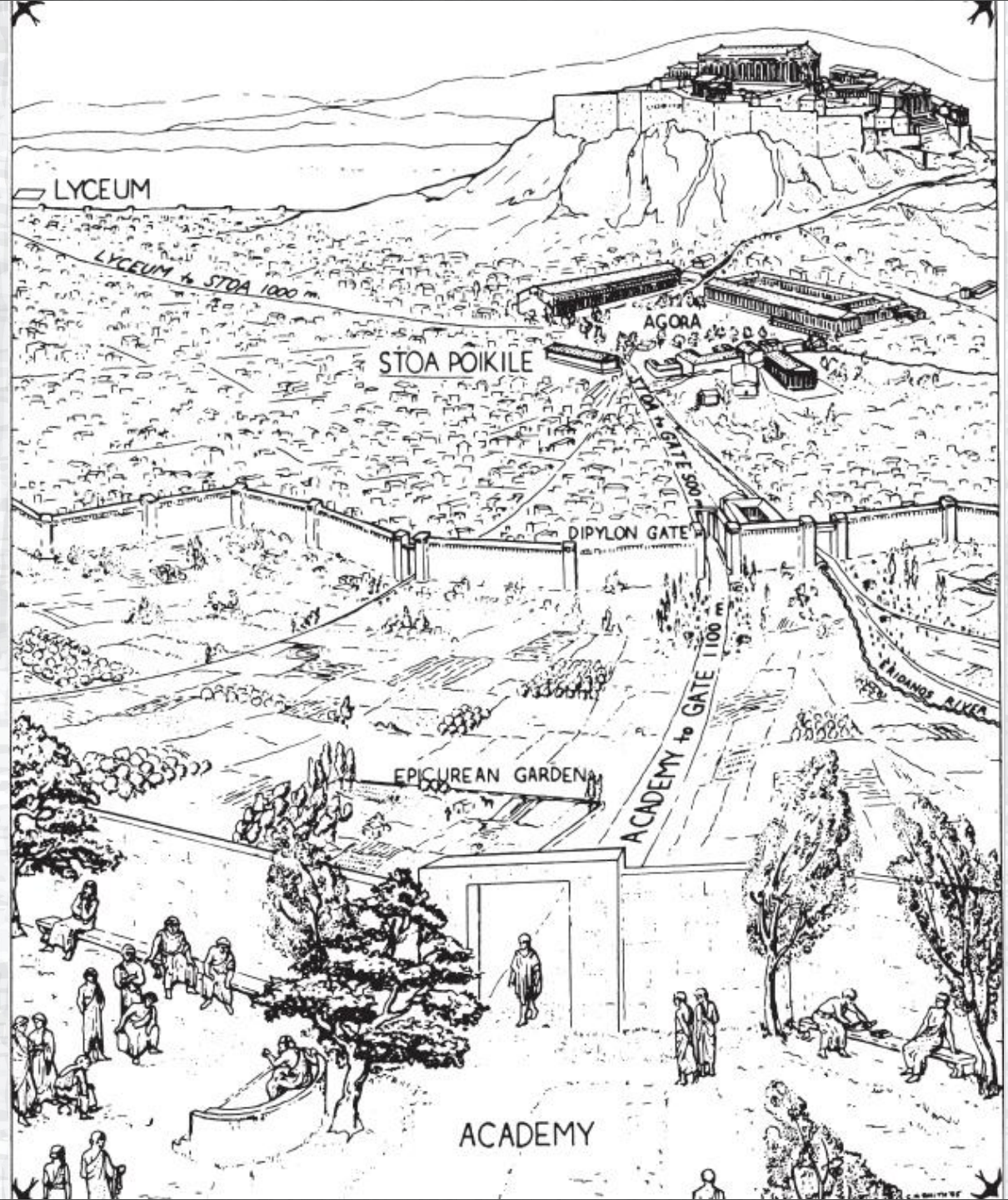
Stoic happiness therefore means bringing one's desires into line with how the world is.

This is powerfully set out by Epictetus (c. AD 50–130) in his Handbook of Stoicism which states 'do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well' (Epictetus, 1983, 13).

## Three relevant schools of philosophy after Aristotle: Stoicism, skepticism and epicureism

- ◆ **Skepticism.** It becomes perhaps the most powerful philosophical perspective in Plato's Academy after Plato's death in 348/7 BC. The leader is Arcesilaus. The skeptic's principle must be 'sober and doubt all things' because the assertion of truth in one philosophy is as arbitrary as the assertion of truth in any other. They opposed to stoicism and to epicureism: neither tranquility nor pleasure can be universal philosophical aims for all people. Thought undermines or negates or opposes all claims to universality, because 'opposed to every account there is an equal account' (Sextus Empiricus).
- ◆ **Epicureism.** Also known as hedonism. It promulgates that pleasure is the beginning and the end of a happy life. We now turn to study epicureism in the remainder of the lesson.

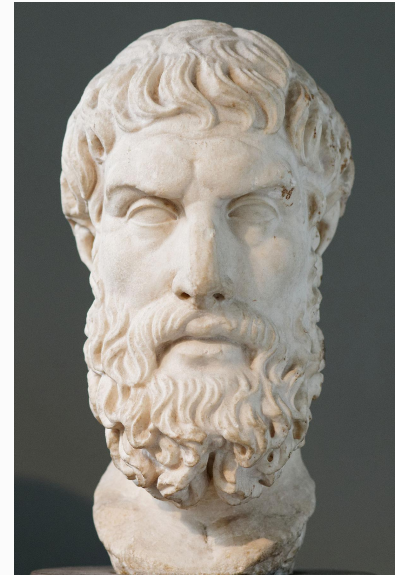
The location in Athens of the three major schools of philosophical studies: Academy, Lyceum, Epicurean Garden. Besides, the Stoa and the Agora where stoics and skepticist used to carry out their activities.



### 3. Epicurus' life and relevance

## **Epicurus** **(341–270 B.C.)**

Epicurus, born into a family of Athenian expatriates in Samos, set up house in Athens about 306 bc, and lived there until his death in 271. His followers in the Garden, who included women and slaves, lived on simple fare and kept away from public life.



Epicurus wrote three hundred books, but except for a few letters almost all that he wrote has been lost. To this day, however, we depend for our knowledge of Epicurus' teachings principally on a long Latin poem written in the first century bc by his follower Lucretius, entitled *On the Nature of Things* (*De Rerum Natura*).

## Epicurus' Relevance in Western Philosophy

- ◆ **General relevance.** Perhaps was his attributed argument about death what has attracted to him the interest of many philosophers and men of letters. Epicurus, like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca afterwards, argued that death should not be a cause of anxiety to the reasoning mind, because death is not present to the man who is alive, and is only present to the man who is not alive.
- ◆ **Impact on British utilitarian tradition (18th century).** **Jeremy Bentham.** Pleasure is the ultimate goal of a happy life, the moral rule must be then to pursue with our actions the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, and minimise the amount of pain.
- ◆ **Impact on British utilitarian tradition (19th century).** **Stuart Mill.** The greatest utility for the greatest number of people. Maximization of utility according to your interests.

## 4. Epicurus Ethics. Hedonism



## Epicurus' ethics (hedonism)

- ◆ The aim of Epicurus' philosophy is to make happiness possible by removing the **fear of death** which is its greatest obstacle. Because men are afraid of death, they struggle for wealth and power in the hope of postponing it, and throw themselves into frenzied activity so that they can forget its inevitability. The fear of death is installed in us by religion. If we are not afraid, then we can enjoy life.
- ◆ For Epicurus and his followers, pleasure is the **ultimate good**. Human life and moral behaviour have as its only goal to procure the greatest pleasure possible.
- ◆ **Types of pleasure.** Inferior pleasures are those of satisfying desires (such as food, drink, sex); its satisfaction leads us to a renewal of desire). Superior pleasures are those that come when all desires have been satisfied (quiet pleasures such as friendship).

## *Criticism on hedonist ethics (laid by Ciceron)*

- ◆ *Pleasure is sometimes rejected for higher reasons*
- ◆ *All pleasure is no bodily*
- ◆ *Bodily pleasures are stronger than mental ones*
- ◆ *Absence of pain (need) is not pleasure*
- ◆ *Memory and anticipation of pleasure are not real pleasures*

## *4. Text on epicureism and its idea of pleasure*

The text we are going to read was written by Cicero (I century BC). A text of great value by which a critical discussion on hedonism is presented in the form of dialogue between Cicero and a follower and supporter of Epicurus. Thus, the text offers us a two-sided story.

“We are enquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds it in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delight in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the sense, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure or pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say

...that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect and by the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a natural and innate idea of the mind. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain [...] Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means of the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the *Telos*, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to life agreeably (in pleasure).” Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, Book 1. pp. 33-35, 46) .

## 6. Questions for text comprehension

# 1. What must be the nature of the ultimate good in life?

## Answer A

It must be the end to which all other things are means, while it is itself the means to everything else.

## Answer B

It must be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else

## Answer C

It must be the means to which all other things are ends and the end to which none of the other things are means.

2. How does Epicurus prove that the ultimate good is pleasure and the ultimate or chief bad is pain?

*Answer A*

He observed that every animal, since it is born, seeks for pleasure and recoils from pain.

*Answer B*

He observed that every animal and living being seeks for pain and aggravated situations.

*Answer C*

He observed that every animal most of the time prefers pleasure rather than pain.



3. According to Hedonist (Epicurus followers) how do we know that pain is to be avoided and pleasure is to be sought?

*Answer A*

The epicurean philosophers think that this knowledge is a sort of principle or innate idea of our mind.

*Answer B*

The members of the epicurean school think that we know this fact purely through our senses (sensation).

*Answer C*

The members of the epicurean school think that we know this fact through our senses (sensation) but other members also think that this knowledge is a sort of principle or innate idea of our mind.

# Summary

## *Hellenic philosophy*

After Aristotle and Plato, there are three important schools of philosophy in Athens: Stoicism (They seek to conform with the world in order to obtain tranquility and peace of mind), skepticism (they doubt every truth and every dogma, for every argument can be proved wrong), and Epicurism (They look for pleasure as the final goal).

## *Epicurus' hedonist ethics*

Epicurus thought that to seek pleasure and avoid pain was a sort of principle of human nature. The happy life is a life in which prevails pleasure and pain is minimized. The superior pleasure is that which is attained when all desires are fulfilled. To be able to enjoy life and pursue its pleasures, men must not be afraid of death, for when death comes, they are not.

# Thanks!

Any questions?

See you next week

# *History of Western Philosophy*

*This presentation and the program of the subject  
can be found at this website:*

[\*https://www.danigareses.wixsite.com/pensarenespanol\*](https://www.danigareses.wixsite.com/pensarenespanol)

