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Crooked Thinking or Straight Talk?

Modernizing Epicurean Scientific Philosophy

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To Danny and Christina

In memory of Albi, where much
of this book was written.

Preface

This book is written for oddballs like myself, who like to do their own thinking for themselves without following the herd wherever it may go. Its theme is that modern philosophical ideas with a science base can help us structure the way we think about ourselves and our society in a practical way that is a million miles from the pretentious drivel offered by academic philosophers of the old school.

The book isn't some superficial self-help manual. It will be hard going in places for nearly everybody, although it contains no equations and very little jargon. It is the kind of book better not read at one gulp. After coming upon a new idea, it will pay to sit back and ask yourself whether what is said really makes sense—especially when it denies some entrenched orthodoxy. The kind of reader I am writing for will anticipate the prospect of such intellectual challenges with pleasure.

The book has four deliberately interwoven strands, some more serious than others. The first strand is a series of diatribes against the complacency of traditional philosophy, making fun of the silliness of famous arguments once they have been stripped of complicated jargon. What a relief to get that off my chest! This line is intended to lighten up the second strand, which is a serious attempt to explain ideas from the theory of games and decisions that have the potential to improve both our personal lives—how we think about ourselves—and our societies; not in some great utopian leap, but in the kind of ways that our lives were improved by the telephone or the bicycle. The third strand is a collection of chatty and irreverent comments expressing my own views on the subject in hand—especially when it differs markedly from the opinion of the herd, which most people do not think to question. The fourth and last strand is a series of sometimes long footnotes placed at the bottom of the relevant page, and not inconveniently at the end of the book.

Nobody need read a footnote, but good footnotes can sometimes be a lot of fun—like those of Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Otherwise my style is an attempt to emulate the incomparable David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature*. I quote from him a good deal too. It is hard to say anything better than Hume. A pity we were born into these barbaric times, rather than as gentlefolk in the eighteenth century!

I want the book to be as little like an academic monograph as it is possible to be. I have therefore abandoned the practice of documenting quotations and referencing sources, which seems to me tiresomely pedantic now that we can google anything of interest, and get not only what we are looking for, but a variety of related stuff as well. So references are confined to occasional mentions of books in the footnotes.

As for myself, I began my professional life as a pure mathematician, writing research papers and textbooks in a conventional way. I was then fortunate enough to get into game theory when it was just taking off. It then made sense for me to switch to economics, where I not only pursued a standard academic career in both England and the USA, but also operated successfully as a business consultant, using my knowledge of game theory to give advice on economic regulation and auction design, notably the UK telecom auction of the year 2000 that made $35 billion. So much money attracted a lot of attention. *Newsweek* magazine described me as the ruthless, poker-playing economist who destroyed the telecom industry. It is true that I once enjoyed playing Poker for more than I could afford to lose, but I am not at all ruthless, and nor is the telecom industry destroyed. I no longer feel the need to update my vita, but the last revision is available at

www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/∼uctpa97/

I retired early to follow up my philosophical interests, but found quietude an elusive target, until I came across the work of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. I hope my use of him as a putative guide to the book may help others who have similar problems in breaking free from the herd mentality that demands so much and offers so little in return.

Ken Binmore
Monmouth, Wales
August, 2019

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Chapter 1

Epicurus

1.1 Epicurus as a Guide

What a mess we have made of things! Not just of our personal lives, but of our societies, and our planet. We look to philosophy for guidance, but the schoolmen of today—the writers of footnotes to Plato—have nothing to offer. They idle away their time building philosophical castles in the air when in a good mood, or defining each other out of existence when they aren't. Let us leave them to their empty posturing and crooked reasoning. The action is elsewhere on a rival channel, where an alternative but equally ancient branch of philosophy based on scientific principles offers genuine guidance, especially in the social world, where we are most in need of rational principles to light the way ahead. On this scientific channel, crooked reasoning is out and straight talking is in.

This first chapter introduces the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who will be our guide on how to think straight. It surveys his life and times before examining his philosophical views, which turn out to be surprisingly up to date. The issues raised are then pursued in later chapters that show how modern techniques from game theory and elsewhere can put enough flesh on his philosophical bones to provide practical ways of structuring how we think about the many problems we face, both collectively and individually.

Why don't we take these social tools from their Epicurean box and see what we can do with them to improve our lives? In doing so, there is no need to weigh ourselves down with equations or heavy jargon. We can even laugh at ourselves a little along the way.

1.2 Epicureanism?

Which philosopher argued that the way to happiness is to give ourselves over to gluttony and lust? When asked this question, most people with an opinion go for Epicurus (341–270 BC). In congratulating the Church in having eliminated the last embers of his thought, St Augustine accordingly called Epicurus a pig. Modern

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dictionaries similarly define an epicurean as someone who luxuriates in the pleasures of the table and the flesh.

This misrepresentation of Epicurus is perhaps the most successful example of the Big Lie ever. In fact, Epicurus is on record as being satisfied with no more than barley bread and water, with perhaps a little cheese as a special treat. As for sex, he thought it best avoided, although it probably does no harm.

How come Epicurus got so badly misrepresented? The answer is simple. His philosophy was the big philosophical success story in the ancient world. Epicurus himself became something of a folk hero. So he was the major competition for the early Church.

His chief offence in the eyes of the Church was the same Epicurean doctrine that made him popular with pagans—that there is no life after death. This doesn't seem so splendid to us, but the ancient Greeks believed in a miserable after-life, in which their souls wandered forever as aimless ghosts through a dreary underworld. The Church therefore not only followed those Stoics who branded him a pig, but denounced him as a heretic. In Dante's *Inferno,* he is the worst heretic of all, doomed to roast in his tomb forever in the sixth circle of Hell. His many books were so successfully suppressed that almost nothing he wrote himself survives.

Rescue. His reputation was eventually rescued by the enlightenment philosopher, Pierre Gassendi. As a result, historians of philosophy now distinguish between the dictionary definition of epicureanism and the actual philosophy of Epicurus by calling the latter Epicureanism with a capital E.

Philosophers of science similarly recognize Epicurus—along with Aristotle when in the mood—as a pioneer of the kind of scientific philosophy pursued by such luminaries as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Benedict de Spinoza, David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Bertrand Russell, and Karl Popper—of whom my own favorite is the incomparable David Hume.

But such recognition cuts no ice with the majority of modern philosophers, who continue to regard themselves as writing footnotes to Plato. Although Epicurus didn't write in explicit opposition to Jesus Christ (who wasn't born until hundreds of years after his death), he did write in explicit opposition to Plato (who died only a few years before Epicurus was born). This makes Epicurus a secular heretic in the eyes of modern traditionalists. They are more civilized than their ancient ancestors in that they don't invent fake news to tarnish his image, but they do him no favors when mentioning him in passing.

In spite of this studied neglect, there has been a major resurgence of interest in Epicurus in recent years,[1] to which I hope this book will be regarded as a no-holds-barred contribution. The main aim of the current chapter is to list the down-to-earth doctrines of Epicurus. The rest of the book develops his ideas, with numerous asides defending them against Plato and his metaphysical followers, whose airy-fairy

[1] For example, Hans Dimetriadus: *Epicurus and the Pleasant Life,* George Strodach: *The Art of Happiness* Hermann Usener: *Epicurea,* James Warren: *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics*, Catherine Wilson: *How to be an Epicurean*. For historical perspectives, James Gaskin: *The Epicurean Philosophers,* A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley: *The Hellenistic Philosophers*.

inventions are sometimes so ridiculous that one has to laugh out loud. As Spinoza put it when writing about their thoughts on politics and morality:

> Instead of ethics, they have generally written satire . . . such as might be taken for a chimera, or might have been formed in Utopia, or in that golden age of the poets . . .

Of course, Epicurus isn't entirely free of absurdities himself—any more than Spinoza or anyone else. It is silly, for example, to suppose that our souls (whatever they may be) are made of atoms, but whoever got everything right?

1.3 Life and Times

There is surely something to the idea that creativity flourishes best in open societies, especially those that succeed in retaining their cohesion in the face of invasion or civil war. The eruption of all kinds of philosophical thought among the many city-states of ancient Greece certainly fits this story. Athens fits particularly well.

History. Athens survived being burnt to the ground during a traumatic invasion of Greece by the Persian Empire, which was eventually defeated by a coalition of Greek cities led by Athens and Sparta. Athens seized the opportunity to grab a small empire of its own made up of Greek cities and islands previously held by Persia, but this led to the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (in which Socrates fought with courage and distinction for Athens). After Athens was defeated, Sparta replaced its democracy by the "tyranny of the thirty tyrants" (among whom followers of Plato were prominent). The democracy was restored, but didn't survive the invasions of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great (famously tutored by Aristotle). Alexander went on to overthrow the Persian Empire altogether. His reign didn't last long, but the Hellenic period that followed left Greek culture deeply embedded across the whole Near East and Mediterranean.

Bunkum? Henry Ford was good at making cars, but he couldn't have got things more wrong when he said that history is bunk. We should pay attention to the fact that the kind of direct democracy practised in ancient Athens—so much admired by modern politicians who neither know nor care what history has to teach—was a disaster in the Peloponnesian War. Populist demagogues of the day persuaded the assembly of all citizens to vote for too many ill-thought-out ventures that proved catastrophic. Nor was the assembly at all kind to the cities they liberated from Persia. It selfishly voted to squeeze them dry to finance its own architectural glory.

Our own representative form of democracy is by no means perfect but does much better in keeping us out of trouble. So why are we currently moving in the direction of direct democracy with referenda and the like? In a referendum, each individual vote has a negligible impact, so there is no incentive for most voters to think hard about the issues (Section 4.2.3). So they let whatever enthusiasm is currently popular guide their vote, without thought or reflection—as though voting in a TV talent show. Even appointing a smallish body of representatives *at random*

to make decisions that are now settled by referendum would be better. At least the representatives would have an incentive to think the issues through.

Even when we continue to let representatives decide for us, we do our best to reduce them to delegates—as in the electoral college that the founding fathers of the American republic set up to prevent the selection of the president becoming a referendum. We have nobody to blame but ourselves if populists get into power this way. Those who don't learn from history are compelled to repeat it.

Life. Epicurus was born in 341 BC to humble Athenian parents who were settled on the island of Samos when it was part of the brief Athenian empire. He was tutored by a Platonist but he reacted negatively to the teaching while still a teenage boy. To retain his Athenian citizenship, he served a military apprenticeship for two years in Athens from the age of eighteen, where he doubtless took what opportunity he could to listen to the leading philosophers of the day. After the death of Alexander in 323 BC, the Athenian colonists were forcibly removed from Samos to what is now the Turkish mainland, where Epicurus rejoined his family, to which he was always close. There he studied with a follower of the philosopher Democritus, who famously guessed right about matter being made of atoms.

We don't know how he eventually became sufficiently well-established to set up a philosophical school in the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, but we do know that he and his followers were expelled from the city in 311 BC after their teaching led to civil strife. Epicurus relocated first to Lampsacus and then to Athens in 306 BC, where he established what became known as the Garden, in open opposition to Plato's Academy. He is thought never to have married. He died what must have been a painful death from kidney stones at the age of 72 in 270 BC.

Philosophical Schools. Plato's Academy lay at walking distance to the northwest of the walled city of Athens. The Lyceum of the polymath Aristotle lay at a similar distance to the northeast. Zeno's Stoa—where Stoicism began—was in the Agora, within the city itself.[2] The Agora also hosted Diogenes, the philosopher who brightened things up by living in a barrel and poking fun at his fellow philosophers.

On his return to Athens, Epicurus bought some land, outside the city on the road between the Agora and the Academy. The group of friends that met there supposedly tended the garden with their own fair hands, which is why their philosophical community became known as the Garden. It was actually the third Athenian philosophical school that we remember from that time. The Stoa was the fourth, having been established some years later.

One of the surviving quotes of Epicurus says that the most important ingredient for a happy life is a circle of close friends. The Garden seems to have been an attempt to realize this ambition. However, all can't have been entirely sweetness

[2] The founder of Stoicism is Zeno of Citium, not the earlier Zeno of Elea, famous for his paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise. The Agora wasn't only a market place, but the center of city life. The Stoa was a portico in which the Stoic philosophers would walk up and down exchanging views. Walking up and down was also popular at the Lyceum, for which reason the followers of Aristotle were called Peripatetics. Dante classifies Plato and Aristotle as noble pagans and places them untortured in the first of the nine circles of Hell. Zeno doesn't get a mention.

and light, since some of the slanders directed against Epicurus derived originally from erstwhile followers rejected from the community.

Very unusually for ancient Greece, the Garden is said to have been open to both women and slaves on equal terms with free-born men. How true such claims may be is difficult to evaluate, although women were certainly part of the community, and the same is true of at least one freed household slave of his own.[3] The obloquy that would have been directed against the Garden for this reason would have been mitigated by the community's refusal to participate in the social and political life of the city—which Aristotle regarded as essential to the well-lived life. My own guess is that this feature of the Garden's social contract was less a matter of principle than a reaction to whatever got Epicurus into serious trouble in Mytilene.

Saints? This last observation accepts that Epicurus wasn't a saint—and nor was the real Socrates (as opposed to the fictional Socrates invented by Plato to add authority to his later dialogues). They were just human beings, probably more vain than they thought themselves to be, but with much to be vain about. It would have been a lot of fun to meet them—especially Socrates.[4] A serious argument with either would have been possible with no risk of anybody getting upset.

What of the other Athenian giants? My guess is that Zeno was worthy but dull. Diogenes would have been good for a laugh, but too much of a show-off to be bearable for long. Plato's sense of entitlement would have made him seriously uncomfortable as a companion. Aristotle is more of a mystery: affable but distant? Whatever the truth, we don't need to treat them or anyone else with exaggerated respect. Epicurus wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Surviving works. Epicurus wrote at least 300 books, only fragments of which survive. Much of his work would have been lost even without the hostility of the Church. We would have little even of the work of Aristotle—who was a favorite of the medieval Church—if a hidden cache of his writings hadn't been discovered by chance in ancient times. Ironically, a small cache of Epicurean fragments similarly turned up in the Vatican Library.

[3] Respectable Athenian women of the time seldom left their married quarters. So a female member of the Garden would have been suspected of being kept for immoral purposes. At a time when even Aristotle is on record as believing that barbarians were natural slaves, treating a slave or freedman as an equal was socially unacceptable. Even if women and slaves were not fully equal, Epicurus was therefore making himself a target by including them in his community at all.

[4] Robert Burton's magnificently eccentric *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1651 has this to say of Socrates: "Theodoret in his tract manifestly evinces as much of Socrates, whom though that Oracle of Apollo confirmed him to be the wisest man then living, and saved him from the plague, whom 2,000 years have admired, of whom some will speak evil as soon as Christ, yet in reality he was an illiterate idiot, as Aristophanes calls him, a mocker and ambitious, as his Master Aristotle terms him, an Attic buffoon, as Zeno, an enemy of all arts & sciences, as Athenæus, to Philosophers and Travellers, an opinionative ass, a caviller, a kind of Pedant; for his manners, as Theod. Cyrensis describes him, a Sodomite, an Atheist (so convict by Anytus) hot tempered, and a drunkard, and prater &c., a pot companion, by Plato's own confession, a sturdy drinker, and that of all others he was most sottish, a very mad-man in his actions and opinions." His supposedly shrewish wife Xanthippe wasn't pleased with him either.