

Epicurus



Epicurus: Lived from 341–270 BC. Founded a philosophical school in Athens called the Garden. Of his many written works, only a few letters and fragments remain.

Some central tenets of Epicureanism:

- **Atomism**: The natural universe consists fundamentally of indivisible, material atoms and an infinite, empty space. All other things in the universe, including us, are composed of atoms.
- **Hedonism**: Pleasure is the only intrinsic good for a person. Pain is the only intrinsic evil.
- **Deism (if not practical atheism)**: The gods, supposing they do exist, are perfectly happy doing their own thing. They don't care at all about us or the natural universe. At most, the *idea* of the gods provides us with a kind of ethical ideal.

Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*



On Hedonism:

- “The end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear.”
- “Pleasure is ... the starting-point of every choice and ... aversion.”
- “By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.” (*ataraxia* = tranquility)

On Death:

- “Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience. ... Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.”
- Termination thesis (TT): to die is to cease to exist.

Epicurus on Death



First reconstruction of Epicurus' argument (Feldman, p. 132):

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death. (TT)
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
3. If no one feels any pain while dead, then being dead is not a painful experience.
4. If being dead is not a painful experience, then being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.
5. Therefore, being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.

Feldman's critique:

- Premise (4) is ambiguous: “bad” could be either (a) *intrinsically* bad or (b) *extrinsically* bad.
- If (a), then the conclusion is true, but uninteresting.
- If (b), then the conclusion is interesting, but not obviously right.
- “Maybe death, while not itself a painful experience, is connected to pain in such a way as to make it extrinsically bad.” (p. 135)

Epicurus on Death



Causal hypothesis (CH): Something is extrinsically bad for a person only if it leads to later intrinsic evils (pain) for that person.

Second reconstruction of Epicurus' argument (Feldman, p. 136):

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death. (TT)
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
- 3*. If no one feels any pain while dead, then death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who dies.
- 4*. If death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who is dead, then death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead. (CH)
- 5*. Therefore, being dead is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

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Feldman's critique:

- Two ways something can be extrinsically bad for a person: (a) it results in future pain, or (b) it results in loss of future pleasure.
- The causal hypothesis only allows for (a). Hence, CH is false.
- The *counterfactual hypothesis* [my term]: “Something is extrinsically bad for a person if and only if he or she would have been intrinsically better off if it had not taken place.” (138)
 - Example: boy dies under anesthesia while having minor surgery. His dying is extrinsically bad for him “because his life is on the whole intrinsically less valuable for him than it would have been if he had not died when he in fact died.” (139)
 - But is there always a fact about what *would* have happened if?
 - My suggestion: Replace “would” with “would probably.”