

[1968. In Encyclopedia of Christianity. Edwin A. Palmer, ed. Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education.]

EPICUREANISM. Founded about 300 B.C., Epicureanism accepted the earlier Cyrenaic principle that pleasure is the aim of life, but reacted against the Cyrenaic motto of “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Epicurus saw that with this type of life would tomorrow bring gout, cirrhosis of the liver, and delirium tremens. The aim of life, it taught, is not so much positive pleasure as absence of pain. The universe is composed of atoms in motion and every event is naturally produced. Man has free will because any atom at any time, for no reason or cause may swerve from its otherwise mechanical path. The good life is therefore in man's power. It consists of eating good meals, dozing in the sun, avoiding the frustrations of politics and family life, and doing justly and honestly to escape the fear of human punishments. The Epicureans did not recommend licentiousness: “Sexual intercourse has never done a man any good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him.” Disbelieving that there is Divine punishment, fear of death is looked on as a great evil. Atomism removes this fear. While a man is alive, death is absent and cannot cause pain. When death comes, the atoms disperse, the percipient person ceases to exist and pain is impossible. With this fear removed, Epicureanism teaches that one can live a happy life.

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