



## Epicurus, Death and the Need for Power

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### Abstract

*Culture seeks to explain our existence in the universe and to provide information about how any given society should be structured in that universe. This structure consists of a set of roles and moral rules that should be followed in that society. Human beings are the only creatures who have sufficient consciousness to establish elaborate institutions to deal with the unfortunate reality of their death. Most cultures in the world have sought to avoid this reality by establishing myths about the continuance of life in another form, such as life in a paradise or in reincarnation, for example. Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosopher who understood that the inability to confront this reality could lead to personal distress and unhappiness. Now research is confirming what Epicurus believed, by demonstrating that the denial of death may not only lead to unhappiness but to sociopathic behavior in the form of an excessive need for power. Much of human history has been influenced by (mostly) men whose need for power has led many societies to engage in endless war and conquest. It's time to recognize this problem as we seek survival in a better civilization.*

### 1. Culture and Science

All living creatures on earth are born, live and die. However, the only species that has developed elaborate institutions in an effort to confront death is *Homo sapiens*. We have consciousness and this affects everything we do as a species. This is not to say that we are not limited in our behavior by natural laws, as scientists increasingly reveal to us through their research. But our consciousness has led us in an amazing variety of directions through the cultures we have created in order to survive as creatures. Anthropologists, especially, have also revealed this to us through their research.

Culture is socially constructed and includes a moral system that governs our behavior as human beings. This is again within the limits of nature, which, however, cannot fully explain culture since it is a human creation based upon our consciousness. Some social scientists, nevertheless, often attempt to explain our behavior as if it were governed by laws. This is because natural science has been so influential in society owing to its success in explaining nature and aiding in the evolution of both capitalism and socialism as economic systems. In other words, these social scientists would like to be regarded, symbolically, as if they were natural scientists, with all the material and psychological rewards, including the sense of certainty, that have accompanied natural science as a human endeavor.

Culture and science are both human constructs. They interact but they are not interchangeable. Science discovers laws that govern nature, while culture creates laws

that govern society. They would be interchangeable only if society were converted into a Newtonian mechanism. At times it would appear as if some scientists and engineers might be trying to accomplish this in their applications of scientific knowledge, especially in their efforts to replace humans with robots, or by supplying data analysis to allow greater influence and control over common people (Zuboff 2019). As society becomes more and more mechanized, often with labor saving devices, we seem to be evolving into such a technological reality (Ellul, 1964). This may be what the counterculture movement that began in the 1960s was actually marching against.

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## 2. Epicurean Philosophy

The ancient philosopher Epicurus understood well the difference between science and culture (Dewitt 1954). In both cases he sought to create a culture that would allow humans to enjoy their life on this planet. In the case of science, he sought to diminish the fear that humans had of their gods, by exploring the laws that governed nature. In the case of society, he sought to create a culture that would diminish the fear that humans might have of one another. Confronting the reality of death was important as a prerequisite for accomplishing both of these goals.

In ancient Greece, science came to life and as was rediscovered during the Renaissance, it was an integral part of philosophy. Philosophy, as well as art, sought and still seek to answer the many questions about human existence that science may not be able to answer. One such question has to do with change and the uncertainty it might entail. This relates to the idea of the dialectic, and the limitations that might exist in the sought after eternal deterministic laws that scientists and many others seek to uncover. This question of change has concerned many thinkers, including Heraclitus, Hegel, Marx and Engels, Darwin, and Thomas Kuhn, among others.

Other questions concern the explanation for the actual form of any given culture at any given time and place on the earth. Currently the most important form internationally is related to capitalism, with its ideology of predatory individualism and its eternal search for growth (Czech 2013, Cohen 2020). The main focus of this growth mania is on money or wealth, believed to be the source of human happiness. But this also affects all other aspects of our existence on earth, including especially now that the natural environment, and also human psychology, must be made compatible with the growth mania. This is true of free market societies as well as centrally controlled ones, often under the name of socialism or communism, irrespective of whether they conform to the original meanings of these terms or not.

Epicurus was opposed to this growth mania and he created a small scale “Garden” outside of Athens in which life was to be lived in simplicity and frugality, with an emphasis on love

and friendship. These ideals have been sought and often realized in many so-called utopian communities throughout the western hemisphere and beyond, including now in experiments by “cultural creatives”. These cultural creatives were discovered quite by chance during survey and other types of research by Ray and Anderson (2000) during the 1990s and earlier. This research included over 100,000 interviews, 500 focus groups and 60 in-depth interviews. It has found that there were now, according to a more recent estimate, 200 million adults in North America, Europe and Japan, who were seeking a different type of culture similar to what Epicurus had imagined over 2000 years earlier. This is not to say that they are necessarily withdrawing to a separate “Garden”, but that simply wherever they are they are seeking a more simple and friendly life style. One might imagine that these experiments are a natural evolution of the counter cultural movement (Roszak 1995 [1968]) that began in the 1960s all over the world, from China to Czechoslovakia, to France, the United States and Mexico and other locations, as well.

As a philosopher, Epicurus was also a psychologist. Even his interest in natural science was motivated by his concern to alleviate superstition, which could cause so much torment among human beings. This is unlike so much modern science and engineering which are financed by the military as a means to dominate and control both nature and fellow humans in the interest of economic growth and the accumulation of wealth. In fact, the original utopian inspiration by Epicurus included, among other things, his insistence that people abandon the need for domination and control and come to terms with their own death, as stated above, if they were to enjoy the benefits of his Garden.

We may not be absolutely certain as to how this fitted into his overall philosophy, since most of his writings were destroyed in the subsequent evolution of Greek and European society under the influence of deterministic religion with its own interpretation of death. In other words, different cultures throughout history have created religions, mythologies and other forms of folklore to help account for death, including especially the possible continuation of life after death, such as in reincarnation, or in an eternity of heaven or hell, to help conscious human beings to deal with this unfortunate, but real phenomenon.

### 3. Research Findings

Recent research (Becker 1973; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski 2015) now suggests that the problem of dealing with death may lead to extreme forms of behavior amongst certain males—though not only—in the form of *a search for power and control over everyone and everything in their social and natural environment*. This may explain Epicurus’ insistence that people stay away from political life, filled as it is with conflict among power-hungry males. Males, of course, have always had a closer relationship with death: they were the hunters, as well as the warriors who protected their families and tribes from potential invaders. Women have always had a closer relationship with life: they gave birth and offered the love and nurturing that were and are so important to the survival of the species.

It is also important to realize that men also suffer the exploitation and humiliation of these few power-hungry males (and sometimes females) as much as, if not more than females; it is not exclusively a gender-based pathology. Nor is this to imply that all leaders are sociopaths. Many leaders seek to improve the lot of the people they serve. In fact, those with the need

for power often prefer to remain in the background, like the mafia bosses, for example, or the bankers, or the various secret service agents around the world. This is an existential problem throughout society, glorified by the prevailing ideology of predatory individualism so common in today's world.

Did Epicurus anticipate the findings of current research? Did he realize that the inability to deal with death would lead to sociopathic behavior by certain individuals? He must have, or why else did he insist on dealing with death as an important element related to membership in his Garden? Otherwise, this insistence would simply appear as a quirk or eccentricity in his philosophy.

Could this give us an opportunity to imagine a better world society without all the murder and violence that have characterized human history? Yes, but we will have to deal with the various ideologies that actually condone this violence, either directly or indirectly. An example of the latter is the role of, especially, mainstream economic science. It is based on the assumption, first articulated by Adam Smith, that each individual pursuing his own personal interests would produce the best overall social result. As with so many authors, I do not think that Adam Smith would agree with the many immoral interpretations of this assumption that have followed his original pronouncement. In this sense it would appear that he was not at all like Milton Friedman, who had announced publicly that "he was a moral person but that morality was a personal matter"!

This idea of morality as a *personal* matter flies in the face of everything that anthropologists and other social scientists have discovered through years of research about how culture is created. But it appears to fit nicely with the atomistic philosophy of Democritus, implemented in the physics of Isaac Newton, the prototype of good science, at least until the appearance of quantum physics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also fits nicely with the mathematics of neoclassical economic theory, which, as an economist friend of mine once explained, is "a normative, not an empirical science". In other words, it is a science that tells you what would result if you behaved in a certain way. This can be very useful *so long as it is not confused with empirical findings*, such as those discovered by ordinary science. This contradiction is also something which more and more economists themselves are discovering, as they, like Marx before them, seek to make their science more reality based (Fullbrook, 2004; Magnuson, 2007; Raworth 2017).

Atomism also fits nicely with the reality of capitalism as a system, which values individual initiative, ignoring the sociopathic forms that this might have taken in the evolution of this system of beliefs and behaviors over time (Bakan 2004). Especially now with the dominance of financial capitalism, we see individual behavior directed to the search for wealth through any means possible, unrelated to the production of goods and services, as was its original purpose (Foster, et al, 2021). If this, as now seems likely, actually were an illusionary search for immortality, this awareness could help us evolve into a more humane system, as the neo-Epicureans or cultural creatives seek to do.

All of this points to a deeper problem within current society. We are enamored with natural science; not without reason, of course, since natural science has vastly improved our understanding of nature and society, in a related way. However, it is foolish to believe that there can be a science of society in the same manner as there is for nature. Humans

are, of course, limited by their location in nature, as are other creatures. But it is culture in a dialectical relation with nature, and biology in particular, that ultimately determines our behavior, not nature by itself. Once a natural science discovery becomes known it enters human consciousness and becomes a part of culture. Culture then determines how this discovery is to be used (or abused), with possible feedback on our biology, to say nothing of nature in general, as current scientific research is uncovering (Laland 2017). In the prevalent predatory culture that has evolved since the Renaissance during the rise of mercantilism, industrialism and the technological society generally, these discoveries are often used to extend the exploitation and domination over both nature and fellow human beings in the search for “development”, in both free enterprise and centrally planned societies alike. This, at the same time, is not to belittle the important advances in human wellbeing that the welfare states have accomplished through central planning.

Culture varies considerably over time and space, as anthropologists have discovered. Culture is an intersubjective set of rules and roles that govern our thoughts and behavior as human beings. It is not deterministic in the same sense as science refers to nature, simply because the elements of nature do not have consciousness of the sort that has evolved in human beings. Human behavior can be predicted in the short run because of the durable effects of culture on human thought and behavior, and sometimes mathematical models can be developed that illustrate this durability. But subsequent knowledge of these findings by the people themselves can and does actually alter human behavior. This is the Heisenberg principle writ large. It is also the reason why those who dominate society at any given time will attempt to block knowledge about how society is actually functioning, as this would threaten their control. They do this by controlling the information available to people in society through the many channels, especially the institutions of education and communication, that are necessary to reinvent society over time.

#### 4. Economic Theory

Neoclassical economic theory is especially important in this respect. It is based on the mistaken belief that it can explain and predict human behavior as natural science has done for nature. It has developed elaborate mathematical models that seek to explain human behavior in relation to economic needs. Its models, however, are hypothetical, not empirical, and thus their predictive reliability is quite limited, as we have seen over the past century and more.

Currently, there are two schools of thought in economic theory, one that emphasizes the role of the individual and the other that emphasizes the role of the overall system. This reflects a long-term problem in human societies that addresses the question of the individual versus the group. How can you protect the need for individuals to express themselves psychologically and existentially while protecting the survival of the larger group? In small scale, more primitive societies, this was much easier to resolve than in the much larger scale societies that followed the evolution of urbanization resulting from increments in technology (Boehm, 2012). In short, our ability as tool-making animals has obviously at some point outstripped our ability as social animals to adjust to the new forms required to use these tools. In addition, the size and scale of the huge transnational corporations and banks does not fit well with the idea of individual initiative, since any successful actual *individual* idea is likely to be bought out or destroyed by these giant “individuals” with their inordinate wealth and power.

In a recent book by John Rapley (2017), this problem is described in a most comprehensive way, as it occurred in the history of western economic thought, in relation to the societies it was meant to serve. Rapley sees the science of economics in an anthropological sense more as a religion than a science. He also describes the two schools of thought as one that theoretically emphasizes the individual versus one that emphasizes the group, i.e., the so-called “free market system” versus the planned economy. Questioning the belief by some that science could replace the need for morality with scientific truth, he describes the conflict between these two schools which theorize economic systems in a deterministic scientific manner rather than in an anthropological way. The title of his book, as well as the contents, suggests that the religion of neoclassical economics has reached a dead end, as Marx and Engels had well understood over a hundred years ago, and that some new system of thought must replace it (*Monthly Review*, 1949 to present; *PAE Review*, 2009).

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Another book (Atbashian 2016) discusses this question from the standpoint of the centrally planned economies, those labeled as communist or socialist for symbolic reasons. He lived under and describes the many known failures of the centrally planned regime in the Soviet Union. At some point he moved to the United States, where he now believes that the original inspiration of free market capitalism is being eroded by attempts to achieve equality, especially through the efforts of labor unions. He is generally uninformed about the conditions that led to the economic successes of the capitalist system—the enormous opportunities offered by the abundance of land and natural resources in an apparently unlimited American frontier, the economic benefits of slavery, the enhanced situation of the United States which suffered little or no destruction from the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, etc., to say nothing of the benefits of imperialism to the American, European and Japanese economies for the last several hundred years. He also ignores the corruption that characterizes late capitalism (Ruppert & Fitts 2020, Marshall 2021, forthcoming), much, as he claims, also marks the centrally planned economies. Thus, in the current situation of monopoly capitalism his discussion is as idealistic as that propagated by centrally planned economies, which is a distortion of the Marxism that has inspired those systems, in any case.

Not that we can avoid the questions that economics raises, i.e., the need for the production, distribution and consumption of necessary goods, especially food. But rather than that now, besides the questions raised above, we will also have to face the necessity of designing a culture that will not endanger our existence on the planet. The belief in unending growth, the

mantra of both of the current perceptions that dominate our thoughts, will probably not allow us to survive, at least not in any form similar to that to which we have become accustomed. In so far as the religion of economics is presented as objective science, with all of the symbolic importance of that word, it will be very hard to understand this. We will first have to recognize the difference between society and nature and the resulting difference between culture and science, and the manner in which truth is established in each of these domains.

Within this current culture, the idea of unending growth serves at least two purposes. First, it allows one to imagine that growth could ultimately erase the enormous inequalities and human suffering that have been created in accomplishing this growth throughout recent human history. This is known as the “trickle-down theory”, which to some degree has worked in the first world countries and for a small minority in the Third World, usually at the expense of the poor in both those settings. Growth is therefore sacred in this conceptual framework. Secondly, growth increases steadily the power and wealth of the power-hungry individuals who are seeking immortality through this process. Only an earth-shaking change in the conception of happiness could alter this idea. Moving away from the consumerist society towards a more Epicurean idea of a life based on simple pleasures surrounded by love and friendship could accomplish this. But this would undermine the whole ethos of growth, as well as the belief that amassing possessions could bring happiness.

## **5. Epicurean Solutions**

It is in this sense that Epicurus had amazing insight into human psychology over 2000 years ago, without any of the research that has explored this phenomenon in recent years. He realized that the inability to confront death could lead to sociopathic behavior, as described in the books by Becker and Solomon, et al. The anxiety that this behavior would likely produce could keep people from enjoying their life on earth. But his thought, generally, has been so misunderstood and misrepresented that many people simply dismiss him. For example, the Greek word “*idoni*” (ἡδονή) has been mistranslated and distorted as “hedonism”, with a meaning that is the complete opposite of what the word meant to Epicurus. “*Idoni*” refers to happiness or well-being, not pleasure sought in debauchery and orgies, or in the endless acquisition of possessions as required by a materialist economic ideology. “*Idoni*” must then be understood in relation to Epicurus’ dictum to live a simple life (Λάτρε Βιώσαζ), with a minimum of possessions, luxuries and public attention. Most utopian communities have followed this dictum rather than hedonism, as is also implied by their need to separate themselves from the larger society.

Furthermore, Epicurus emphasized the need to live in such a way as to not harm other people. The anxiety produced by such behavior, concerning the possibility that justice could ultimately be implemented, would never allow people to enjoy happiness. An article in the American periodical, *The Atlantic* (Wood 2011), speaks about research on the wealthy in America and the fears that they have. As Wood (p1) says: “Money cannot buy happiness”, and, “The respondents turn out to be a generally dissatisfied lot, whose money has contributed to deep anxieties involving love, work, and family.” (p. 2) If you follow the dictates of predatory individualism preached by the religion of neoclassical economics you are not likely to be free of the anxiety that accompanies such behavior.

The Christian religion also embodies this principle in the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. In other words, not harming others helps one to achieve happiness since it relieves them of the anxiety that the others will seek justice. The need for power cannot live together with happiness. As the poet Longfellow said:

If you knew the secret history of those you would wish to punish, you  
would find a sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all your hostility.

This is also why war is so glorified, where the possibility of revenge is so immediate and obvious. The religion of neoclassical economics violates even its own Christian heritage in this sense, all in the name of social science. All this while natural science is now questioning the devotion of economics to unlimited growth, which will likely destroy the very natural environment that would allow human society even to survive on the planet, let alone grow indefinitely.

It would seem to be an excellent opportunity to return to an *unadulterated* examination of Epicurean philosophy, as Marx did in the research for his doctoral dissertation, which he then embodied in his subsequent analysis of the predatory culture of the capitalist system, especially in his early writings. It also inspired his belief that a true communal culture built upon Epicurean principles could bring a vast improvement in human existence. But this, of course, would require that communism be recognized not only as a system but as a culture with human values, and where human consciousness would not be depreciated by confusing culture with science. This would also require a system where efficiency would not be measured only in money terms, but rather as a system where efficiency would also be measured in terms of happiness, health, education and general wellbeing.

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