

THE TEACHINGS OF EPICURUS

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*Madam, no god helps one man at another's prayer.
If man, by clashing cymbals, can deflect a god
To his own will, this makes him greater than the god.
Such theories are invented by unscrupulous men
To brazen out a living; fabrications which
Make human life a mockery.*

Menander, a Greek playwright, from ***The Priestess***, about 300 B.C.

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1. INTRODUCTION

What do most educated people know about Epicurus? The answer is, not very much, and most of what they think they know is incorrect. I recently looked at a high school world history textbook: there was one short paragraph on the Hellenistic philosophers, which included the Stoics and the Epicureans. (The Hellenistic period is the time immediately following the golden age of ancient Greece, which was the time of Pericles, Plato, etc.) It said only that Epicureanism is often considered to be similar to hedonism, in which pleasure is the major goal of life, but that this is not really correct. And that was all. What everyone should know about Epicurus, which should be taught in the schools, is something like this: Epicurus, like the other ancient Greek philosophers, applied rational, analytical thinking to practical philosophical questions. He concluded that there is no afterlife of the human spirit (after the death of the body), and that there are no gods that control human affairs. He recognized that nature operates by consistent mechanisms, even though he did not understand what most of the mechanisms were, and that there were no miracles. His advice for living was simple and practical: live a simple life, strive for wisdom, avoid pain, and treat other people with respect. These rules were derived mainly from practical considerations: the goal was to keep society stable, and individual human lives happy and secure. He founded a school of philosophy in Athens that persisted for about 800 years, and had widespread adherents throughout the Greek and Roman world. During this long period of history, he was indisputably one of the most influential philosophers. However, his disbelief of superstition and miracles was not compatible with Christianity, and his school, as well as all of the other Greek philosophical schools, was closed by the Eastern Roman emperor Justinian in 529, because they were considered to be (and were) antagonistic to Christianity. Despite the fact that Epicureans were tortured and killed for hundreds of years by the Christians, his ideas persisted, often secretly, and played a direct, recognized role in the Renaissance and in the Enlightenment.

Actually, there is one word that should eventually be changed in the above paragraph: the word “concluded” should be changed to “realized”. However, this change cannot be made until the majority of readers agree with Epicurus. That time will come, but it is not here yet.

If a description such as this was included in high school world history textbooks, how many students would agree with this philosophy? How many would suddenly realize that there is a realm of rational thought that they had not previously been exposed to? The writing of history is the prerogative of the victors, but who the victors are can change with the centuries. A particular faction may appear to have complete control of their culture for 100 years, or 1,000 years, but ultimately may be replaced by critics/enemies. In my days in school, we learned that Christian monks kept the learning of the ancient Greeks and Romans alive during the Middle Ages, which is basically true. But we did not learn that the Christians closed the

Greek schools because they were considered to be in conflict with Christianity, destroyed books for the same reason, and murdered anyone who called himself an Epicurean or supported Epicurean ideas.

Although no one would disagree with the statement that earlier human cultures were filled with erroneous ideas, almost all of us tend to give some credence to traditional beliefs: we tend to think that if an idea is 2,000 years old, and has been accepted by millions of people, and was accepted by our own ancestors as far back as records or memories exist, then it must have some validity. The tendency towards this way of thinking was one of the motivations for writing this book, since atheism too has an ancient history, which is not widely recognized. Although atheism is often considered to be a new idea, arising from the scientific revolution, in fact it is older than Christianity and Islam, and almost as old as any of the other current world religions. Thus, many of our ancestors were atheists, 2,000 years ago. Moreover, this philosophy would certainly have continued, in a visible and prominent form, if it had not been violently attacked by the early Christians. Despite this attack, it is likely (although difficult to prove) that Epicureanism actually never died out, but was always known and appreciated by intelligent people, over the centuries, although they often had to be secretive about their beliefs. In the Renaissance Epicurean ideas started to bloom again, but even then, and for at least 300 years longer, Epicureans were frequently subject to torture and death for the alleged crime of heresy. More recently these ideas have become increasingly widespread, although their connection with Epicurus is often not realized, partly because of the fact that any man can reach the same conclusions by independent rational thinking.

This book is an attempt to provide some of the history that is commonly overlooked, to correct some misinterpretations, and to discuss some related controversies. A correct understanding of the past is required in order to understand the present, and to plan rationally for the future. The truth may be neglected and suppressed for a thousand years, but ultimately it will arise and prevail.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY

Epicurus was born in approximately 341 B.C., on the Greek island of Samos. This island was also the birthplace, about 30 years later, of the astronomer Aristarchus of Samos, who first realized that the sun is the center of the solar system, and that the earth rotates, which causes the apparent motion of the sun and the stars. After a good Greek education of the time, he started his own school, believing that his ideas could contribute to human culture. The school was started on the island of Lesbos, moved to Asia Minor (currently Turkey), then in 306 B.C., with many teachers and disciples, moved to Athens, the center of civilization at the time.

Several schools had previously been established in Athens, including the schools of Plato and Aristotle (who had studied with Plato but then started his own school). These schools taught the knowledge of the time, which would have included Greek literature, history, science, mathematics and geometry, logic and rhetoric. In addition to these academic subjects, the ancient Greek schools each had a distinct philosophy of life which was imparted to the students. It was common for students to move from one school to another if their personal philosophies changed. The first person who used the word “philosopher” (lover of wisdom), incidentally, is considered to be Pythagoras, also born in Samos, in approximately 570 B.C. The ancient Greek philosophies were different from the current subject of philosophy, in that they included ideas about politics, economics, science, psychology, and many other subjects, in contrast to focusing on abstract subjects such as the meaning of life, the meaning of meaning, etc. The Greek schools devoted much attention to this most basic and most practical question: what should one do with his life?

Operating a school was then, as it is now, in some respects a business. It provided an income for Epicurus and the other teachers, which was paid by the students. Epicurus’ school was successful, and continued for many generations after his death, approximately 800 years, until it was closed by the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian in 529. Epicurus wrote extensively (only a small fragment of which exists today), and his books were widely read for many centuries after his death. His philosophy seems to have been taught with little change over the centuries, which can be attributed in part to the excellence of his ideas. There were many disciples, but our knowledge of the spread of Epicureanism is severely impaired by the fact that the early Christians not only closed the school, but seriously attempted to destroy all records of Epicureanism, as well as destroying the people who believed in it. In approximately 55 B.C. Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus) wrote the famous poem “On the Nature of Things”, in Latin, which describes Epicurean philosophy, and pays explicit tribute to Epicurus, who had died about 200 years before, referring to him reverentially as the “master”. This poem, considered a brilliant work of poetry as well as philosophy, was widely read in the Roman world, and the Epicurean philosophy described was widely accepted. In approximately 250 A.D., Diogenes Laertius wrote *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, in Greek. The place in which Diogenes lived is unknown. This book is a summary of Greek philosophy, from the earliest recorded material, and is the best and most complete source of such information. He gives a very prominent position to Epicurus. All of book 10, which is the last book, is devoted to Epicurus, and only one other philosopher, Plato, has an entire book devoted to his work. Aristotle is given much less space. The style of this work is to provide extensive quotations from original writing, so this book provides most of the extant writings of Epicurus. Diogenes Laertius did not say which philosophy he personally agreed with, probably because the nature of his book is an objective summary of multiple philosophical schools, but it is impossible to

read his book without feeling that he was an Epicurean. It is probably fortunate that he did not identify himself as such: if he had, his book likely would have been destroyed by the early Christians. The fact that this book was written approximately 500 years after the death of Epicurus is a testament to the influence of his philosophy.

Diogenes Laertius listed the characteristics which Epicurus is remembered for:

*....the school itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues forever without interruption through numberless reigns of one scholarch after another; his gratitude to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the School....; and in general, his benevolence to all mankind. His piety towards the gods and his affection for his country no words can describe. He carried deference to others to such excess that he did not even enter public life ... Diocles in the third book of his **Epitome** speaks of them [the Epicurean community] as living a very simple and frugal life; at all events they were content with half a pint of thin wine and were, for the rest, thorough-going water drinkers.*

This paragraph includes a number of statements that may seem surprising. First, the reference to Epicurus' piety towards the gods should be mentioned, since I have described Epicurus as an atheist. The definition of "god" is basically rather vague, and Epicurus did not believe in the type of god who observes and regulates human affairs. Thus, as further discussed below, Epicurus' "gods" are a synonym for Nature, and people who believe in such gods have been correctly considered to be atheists, in that there is no god to be prayed to, obeyed, placated or praised. This comment from Diogenes Laertius probably reflects the fact that, in his time (and in the time of Epicurus), a good man and a respectable citizen was expected to display piety towards the gods. The simplicity and frugality of the life of the Epicureans may also seem surprising; this is discussed in the next section.

Epicureanism was frequently referred to favorably by Roman writers, although they were more likely to be Stoics rather than Epicureans. Stoicism was another school of Greek philosophy, also centered in Athens, also closed by Justinian in 529 for being anti-Christian. The differences between the Greek schools will be discussed in a later section. While these schools were inherently competitive, they had much in common and could appreciate each other. Thus, the Roman Stoic writer Seneca frequently quoted Epicurus favorably.

3. WHAT EPICUREANISM IS NOT

In the dictionary, there are two definitions of Epicureanism, one with a capital “E” and one with a lower-case “e”. With the capital “E”, the word means simply a follower of Epicurus. With the lower-case “e”. it means a connoisseur of food, especially food prepared in an elaborate way. This is (unfortunately) the most commonly accepted meaning of the word in the United States and elsewhere at the current time. There is a magazine on fine dining called *Epicure*, “a monthly gourmet lifestyle magazine designed for bon vivants who share the belief that food is the ultimate universal language.” Although this suggests that Epicurus himself believed that elegant and delicious foods were an important part of life, in reality this is the opposite of what he believed. Like nearly all of the prominent ancient Greek philosophers, Epicurus believed in a simple life, with simple food and clothing, and moderation in all things. He wrote:

We may have but few enjoyments in the genuine conviction that they take the sweetest pleasure in luxury who have the least need of it, and that everything easy to procure is natural while everything difficult to obtain is superfluous. Plain dishes offer the same pleasure as a luxurious table, when the pain that comes from want is taken away. Bread and water offer the greatest pleasure when someone in need partakes of them. Becoming accustomed, therefore, to simple and not luxurious fare is productive of health and makes humankind resolved to perform the necessary business of life. When we approach luxuries after long intervals, it makes us better disposed towards them and renders us fearless of fortune. [letter to Monoecus]

Clearly, Epicurus was not an epicurean. How can this misunderstanding be explained? What Epicurus did write was that the goal of human life is to obtain pleasure. The meaning of this statement will be discussed in considerable detail in a later section, but it is, in fact, quite misleading, and it definitely does not mean that we should focus our lives on eating gourmet foods. Still, it can be imagined that someone who quickly read only a few sentences of Epicurus might reach a mistaken conclusion regarding Epicurus’ opinion on this subject. Some of the ancient Greeks did believe in hedonism (although none of the established philosophical schools espoused this belief), but Epicurus was not one of them. Why has this erroneous idea about Epicureanism persisted over the centuries? It was corrected many times, notably in 1647 in a book by the Frenchman Pierre Gassendi, **The Life and Manners of Epicurus**, written in Latin. Gassendi, a prominent scientist, mathematician and philosopher, correctly described Epicurean philosophy, although he attempted to reconcile it with Christianity, an impossible task. Gassendi’s book was widely read in England and other parts of Europe, and played a major role in the modern spread of Epicureanism. However, mistaken ideas have a life of their own, and this is especially true if the mistake is somehow advantageous to an influential organization. Epicurianism has long been perceived, correctly, to be a major threat to organized religions, and

this misconception of his doctrines may have been useful as a means to discredit them. It seems likely that this factor played some role in the misconception of Epicureanism, although it is impossible to prove or disprove this idea. In any case, our problem now is that there are two inconsistent meanings of the same word. What can we do except continue using the correct one, continue using the capital “E”, and hope that the incorrect use of “epicurean” will gradually disappear?

It would be interesting to know if other languages (French, Italian, German) have a similar misunderstanding of the word “epicurean”. In Hebrew, “epicurean” has another, quite different, meaning, which is accurate in its way: the word means “unbeliever”, or “heretic”. Indeed, Epicureanism is heretical to both Christianity and Judaism (and Islam). This use of the word in Hebrew dates back to the early interaction of the Jewish and Greek cultures, in the time just after the territory of Israel was conquered by Alexander the Great. At that time, many educated Jews were attracted to the intellectualism of the Greeks. In fact, one book of the Jewish bible, Ecclesiastes, focuses on ideas that are more Epicurean than they are conventionally Jewish. “I therefore praised enjoyment. For the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself.” (The fact that this book was included in the Jewish bible demonstrates the non-dogmatic intelligence of the Jews who compiled it.) However, Epicurus valued philosophical inquiry more highly than did the author of Ecclesiastes. One important similarity between the Judaism of that time and Epicureanism is the disbelief in a human afterlife. However, this tenet of Judaism changed to its opposite shortly afterwards, as an outcome of the dispute between the Sadducees (the Jewish priestly class) and the Pharisees (the more popular sect of the “common people”). The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, but the Pharisees did, and they convinced the majority of the people (or, at least, the majority of the socially dominant people) of this belief. The Sadducees died off, and since that time Judaism has officially believed in an afterlife, despite the lack of support for this idea in the Jewish bible, and the fact that the book of Ecclesiastes is starkly inconsistent with this belief. In any case, the major reason that Epicurus was considered to be a heretic by the Jews is not his lack of belief in an afterlife, but rather his lack of belief in a god who monitors and manipulates human affairs. The fact that Jews used this word of course demonstrates that ancient Jews knew of the ideas of Epicurus, and considered them a threat to their religion.

Epicureanism sometimes is also considered to focus on another form of pleasure, namely sexual pleasure and sexual liberty. It is true that Lucretius devoted a considerable amount of his poem to extolling the pleasure of sex (or love). Epicurus himself would be in favor of enjoying sexual pleasure, yet, possibly would not emphasize it so much as done by Lucretius. We do not have enough of Epicurus’ writings on the subject to make a definite comparison, but one of the few Epicurean statements on this subject that we do have is the following except from a letter:

I hear from you that carnal appetites make you too eager for sexual pleasures. If you do not break the laws, disturb well-established customs, upset any of your neighbors, do bodily harm to yourself, or waste your resources, give in to your inclinations as you please. However, you cannot avoid being impeded by one of these barriers. For sexual pleasure has never done anybody any good. One must be content if it has not done actual harm. [Vatican Sayings #51]

Hardly the sentiments of a hedonist, but insightful. The ancient Greeks, and many other of the ancient peoples who first appreciated the possibilities of the human intellect, felt that the part of human life that was most important was the intellectual part, since that is the part that makes us unique; i.e., different from animals. Similarly, the traits that we share with lower animals, such as sexual desire, are of lesser importance, and even distract us from the development of our higher abilities. This attitude very likely explains the origin of circumcision, both male and female, which was probably intended to reduce sexual pleasure (although not entirely successfully), according to the Jewish scholar Maimonides.

4. WHAT EPICUREANISM IS

Epicurus, like most of the ancient Greek philosophers, felt obligated to explain everything, including all of natural science, human nature and politics, and also to provide guidance on how to live. According to Diogenes Laertius, *“Epicurus was a most prolific author and eclipsed all before him [which included Aristotle] in the number of his writings: for they amount to about 300 rolls [of papyrus]”*. The great majority of what he wrote is lost. The most important source is the book by Diogenes Laertius which was described above. The second most important source, although not written by Epicurus himself, is the book by Lucretius, also mentioned above, since this is explicitly a description of Epicurean doctrines. Other material written by Epicurus is in the form of fragments, or has a somewhat uncertain authorship, as described by Bailey in **Epicurus: The Extant Remains**.

Epicurus attempted to explain in considerable detail all the phenomena of physics, chemistry and biology, including the nature of light and sound, the nature of the stars and planets, the cause of thunder, lightning and rainbows, and atomic theory. Of course, most of these subjects he did not understand at all. In both of the main original texts cited above, there are lengthy sections devoted to incorrect scientific explanations. His approach is interesting in many ways. For example, he often said that, although there is a rational explanation for a particular phenomenon, we do not know what it is. He then proceeded to list several possible explanations. He sometimes stated that it doesn't matter what the correct explanation is, which we would not agree with today, but the point he was making is that there is a rational explanation for all that we see and observe, even if we do not understand it. This belief led to

the conclusion that there are no miracles, and that the world and all of the objects in it behave in a consistent, predictable way. This is an important conclusion, and is part of the reason for the conflict between Epicureanism and religion. But the details of Epicurus' scientific ideas are not enlightening, and constitute an obstacle and a distraction for most readers. Therefore, even though the scientific ideas of Epicurus comprise the majority of what remains of his own writings, and of the writings of Lucretius, I am not going to discuss them further in this book. Instead, I will focus on ideas that relate to religion and human behavior.

The two major tenets of Epicureanism regarding religion are: 1) There is no afterlife; and, 2) There are no gods. (This second statement is slightly complicated, since Epicurus did talk about a kind of god, but this apparent discrepancy will be explained below.). It might be useful to more explicitly define these ideas. To say that there is no afterlife is to say that when a human or other animal is dead, there is no spiritual or any other part of the being that remains alive. To say that there is no god means that there is no intelligent force that controls human affairs, that listens to prayers, that likes some people more than others. Epicurus cannot be considered to be the first person to have these ideas, and in fact probably many people had them before him, since they are evident to any rational observer. In particular, Diogenes Laertius described another philosopher, Theodorus, who lived before Epicurus: *"Theodorus was a man who utterly rejected the current belief in the gods. And I have come across a book of his entitled "Of the Gods" which is not contemptible. From that book, they say, Epicurus borrowed most of what he wrote on the subject."* Also, the prologue to this book, from the Athenian playwright Menander, displays an Epicurean attitude towards religion and superstition. Menander was born in possibly the same year as Epicurus, and was in Athens when Epicurus moved there to establish his school. Menander would never have considered himself an Epicurean, since his beliefs were developed before Epicurus appeared in Athens, and his example demonstrates that similar ideas were widespread at the time. However, to our knowledge, Epicurus did establish the first major school that propounded these ideas. His ideas cannot be considered a discovery, like the discovery of a new theory in science, but he did popularize them

His disbelief in an afterlife is argued in his Letter to Herodotus. Epicurus did believe in what he called a soul, but (to give a taste of his scientific theories) he defined the soul *"as a body of fine particles dispersed throughout the entire organism and most resembling a wind that contains a certain mixture of heat, in some ways resembling this (the wind) and in others this (the heat)"*. [But] *"it is not possible to imagine the soul existing and having sensation without the body."* Later, *"Those who claim that the soul is incorporeal are talking rubbish"*. He defines "incorporeal" as *"most commonly applied to what may be thought of as existing by itself"*.

Belief or disbelief in an afterlife is related to the fear of death, since clearly it is the fear of death which, in an irrational way, leads men to believe that there is an afterlife. Epicurus' view of death, and his argument that we should not fear death, is further explained in the document referred to as the Principal Doctrines:

Death is nothing to us. For what has been dispersed has not sensation. And what has not sensation is nothing to us.

That is, after death we are in the same state we were in before we were born. Thus, death is nothing to fear, when it is correctly understood. This is an important component of Epicurus' philosophy, since he believed that fear of death is a major cause of a man's mental pain.

Regarding belief in gods, the slight complication is that Epicurus stated explicitly that he did believe in them. But his gods are not "respectable" gods, in that they have no interest in or interaction with humans. His gods also cannot be described in any way. Since for Epicurus there is no god who listens to prayers, controls human affairs, or rewards the good, it has been recognized from his own time until the present that he was actually an atheist. This type of god ignores us, and the only rational behavior for humans is to ignore the gods in return. What he wrote was:

First of all, regard the god as an immortal and blessed being, as the concept of deity is commonly presented, but do not apply to him anything foreign to his immortality or out of keeping with his blessedness.....For the gods exist; of them we have distinct knowledge. But they are not such as the majority think them to beFor the assertions of the many concerning the gods are conceptions grounded not in experience but in false assumptions, according to which the greatest misfortunes are brought upon the evil by the gods and the greatest benefits upon the good. [letter to Menoeceus]

This passage has several complications that need to be addressed. First, there is a discrepancy between different translations: not really an error of translation, but an ambiguity that could be misinterpreted. It seems likely that the original Greek is somewhat ambiguous in its language (although the meaning is clear). As translated above (by O'Connor), it is clear that it is a false assumption that the gods reward the good and punish the evil. But here is the widely read translation of Diogenes Laertius by Hicks: *For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions; hence it is that the greatest evil happens to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods...*

At first glance, this translation seems to be saying that, due to the actions of the gods, wicked people are punished with misfortunes and good people are rewarded with good fortune, but in fact it is saying that this is not the case.

Secondly, we must analyze Epicurus' statement that "*the gods exist; of them we have distinct knowledge*". This does not appear initially to be the statement of an atheist, but in fact it is. As mentioned above, Epicurus' gods are totally uninvolved in human affairs, neither listening to our requests, nor planning the course of events on either a micro or macro scale, and hence are irrelevant. For most people, such gods are not real gods, so a belief in these types of gods is atheism. These are basically the same type of god(s) believed in by the Deists of the 17th and 18th century. In Deism, God could equally well be called Nature. It has been widely accepted that the Deists were really atheists, who perhaps used the word "Deist" as a fig leaf to cover up their true beliefs. The nomenclature on this subject can get confusing, and part of the confusion is probably intentional. Thus, Theists and Deists are sometimes considered to be essentially the same, but, in reality, they are very different, since the Theists believed in a god concerned with humans, and the Deists did not. So, what is the "distinct knowledge" that proves to Epicurus that gods exist? It is the fact that people everywhere believe in them - not a convincing argument. For Epicurus there was also a functional requirement for gods, since he could not otherwise explain the creation of the world and the impressive symbiosis of all living things. We can now attribute the order of the biological world to Nature and evolution, and can also attribute the properties of the physical world since the Big Bang to Nature. We still cannot explain why all of this exists, so, despite our scientific knowledge, we are still fundamentally in the same situation that Epicurus was in. Thus, we can, if we like, attribute the existence of the world to Nature, or God, or the Prime Mover or whatever proper noun we prefer, but this concept is unrelated to the type of religious god to whom people pray and make sacrifices, or whom we can rely on to control our lives. It is also possible that Epicurus' comments about the gods were based on "political" considerations. About a hundred years before, Socrates had been executed by the government after being convicted of impiety (not believing in the gods) and corrupting the minds of the youth. Possibly Epicurus might have similarly incurred some difficulties if he had stated that there are no gods. In any case, it is correct to consider Epicurus an atheist and he has always been considered an atheist, as described further below.

Regarding the nature of the gods, Epicurus said in the document referred to as the Principal Doctrines,

The blessed and immortal is itself free from trouble nor does it cause trouble for anyone else; therefore, it is not constrained either by anger or by favor. For such sentiments exist only in the weak.

Here he is saying that the gods do not get angry or possessive, do not have favorites, and do not punish and reward: very different from the concept of god in the Western religions. Thus, God does not favor and support the United States, or any of the Islamic Republics.

Epicurus makes one other reference to the gods that is psychologically interesting: he says that enlightened humans are able to live like the gods. Thus, at the conclusion of his Letter to Monoecus, after summarizing his philosophy, he says;

Take thought, then, for these and kindred matters day and night, on your own or in the company of someone like yourself. You shall be disturbed neither waking nor sleeping, and you shall live as a god among men. For the man who dwells among immortal blessings is not like a mortal being.

There are many interesting aspects of this short statement. First, we see the emphasis on philosophy as leading to mental contentment, to happiness. What does he mean by “immortal blessings”? These are the gifts which nature and the earth give to us, and are immortal in the sense that they will last a long time, essentially forever. To be able to “live like a god” is, certainly, an inducement for someone to follow Epicurus’ teachings. Is this overstated? Was Epicurus mainly attempting to recruit new students by statements such as this, since their tuition paid his salary and living expenses? Maybe, but it is also true that a dedicated follower of Epicurus will have peace of mind, and will be able to endure the vicissitudes of fate with tranquility. So, what exactly does Epicurus mean by living like the gods? He does not explain this in any detail (as far as we know), and certainly it should not be taken too literally or seriously, but it presumably means living comfortably, and spending much of our time sitting in the sun (or shade, according to individual preference), discussing philosophy, current events, or anything else of interest. Or writing books.

Is there possibly anyone who is not convinced that Epicurus was an atheist, considering that he did say that gods certainly exist? In that case, I will cite the opinions of some authorities, from the book **Epicurus in England**:

1) John Tillotson, a Fellow of the Royal Society, wrote in a sermon in about 1671: [Epicurus is] “the first who did oppose those great foundations of religion, the providence of God and the immortality of the soul.” (page 135)

2) Robert Boyle, the famous chemist (discoverer of Boyle’s Law of gasses), fellow of the Royal Society, wrote in about 1665 that scientific studies, which he called natural philosophy, had a critical role to play in religious arguments, since “by natural philosophy alone, the immortality of the soul may be proved against its usual enemies Atheists and Epicureans.” Boyle also wrote that Epicurus “has nowadays so numerous a sect of naturalists to follow him.” (page 136)

3) Sir Richard Blackmore, a man of letters, wrote in 1712, in his book called *Creation; a philosophical Poem demonstrating the Existence and Providence of God*: “But among all the ancient obdurate atheists and inveterate enemies of religion, no one seems more sincere, or more implacable, than Epicurus.” (page 207)

Further evidence on this point, come from the Roman Cicero, writing in about 50 B.C. (as cited by Hecht):

Then comes Epicurus and uproots religion entirely from the minds of men by taking away all grace and favor from the gods....It is obviously true, as our mutual friend Posidonius argued in the fifth book of his work on the nature of the gods, that Epicurus did not believe the gods existed at all and that what he said about them was said merely to avoid the odium of atheism. [Epicurus' gods] could not even exist, and Epicurus knew this, so that he merely paid lip-service to gods whom he had in fact destroyed. And finally, if this is all that a god is, a being untouched by care or love of human kind, then I wave him good-bye.

It's interesting that there was an “odium of atheism” in Rome before the coming of Christianity. Admittedly, the fact that someone is accused of atheism does not mean that it is true, but these comments support the statement that Epicurus was an atheist.

Finally, Maimonides, the Jewish philosopher of the 12th century, wrote the following, as cited by Hecht:

[Maimonides recognized that there were] “those who do not recognize the existence of God [and instead] believe that the existing state of things is the result of accidental combination and separation of the elements, and that the Universe has no Ruler or Governor”. [These people are] “Epicurus and his school, and similar philosophers”.

Although I am focusing on Epicurus' ideas regarding superstition/religion, he commented upon many other aspects of human behavior and society. Some of his ideas I will describe very briefly, to demonstrate his intelligence and wisdom. In the letter to Monoecus there is a section on Prudence:

Prudence is more valuable even than philosophy: from it derives all the other virtues. Prudence teaches us how impossible it is to live pleasantly without living wisely, virtuously, and justly, just as we cannot live wisely, virtuously, and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues arrive naturally with the pleasant life; indeed, the pleasant life cannot be separated from them.

Epicurus believed in man's free will, since this is what allows our decisions to have significance. This is in contrast to the Stoics, who believed in an immutable destiny. Which of these beliefs is correct is a moot point, but Epicurus realized that in order for virtue and justice

to mean anything, man must feel that he has free will. He says, in the same Letter to Monoecus,

What lies in our control is subject to no master; it naturally follows, then, that blame or praise attend our decisions. Indeed, it would be better to accept the myths about the gods than to be a slave to the “destiny” of the physical philosophers [the Stoics]. The myths present the hope of appeasing the gods through worship, while the other is full of unappeasable necessity.

Also from the Letter to Monoecus:

Who, do you think, is better than the man who keeps a reverent opinion about the gods, and is altogether fearless of death and has reasoned out the end of nature; who understands that the limit of good things is easy to attain and easy to procure, while the limit of evils is but brief in duration and small in pain; who laughs at fate, which is painted by some [the Stoics] as the mistress over all things?

This brief quotation contains a number of ideas which require discussion. 1) The comment regarding the “reverent opinion about the gods” is similar to other statements mentioned above. Since Epicurus did not believe in any gods that regulate or are concerned with human affairs, the purpose of the reverent opinion may be just to be respectful of the opinions of other individuals and of society, since he did accept the idea that all humans believed in gods. 2) Fearlessness of death was discussed above. 3) Good things are easy to obtain, which, in context, means that necessities such as simple food and water and shelter are easy to obtain, while the luxuries that are more difficult to obtain are not necessary. This is a statement that a simple life is best. 4) Pain is usually of short duration, so is not important. He is referring here basically to a person who is near death, who will have some pain as his body stops functioning properly, and is saying that the pain is of a relatively brief duration, compared to the pleasure of the life that has been lived. Although it is probably true that, compared to a human lifespan, the duration of physical pain is relatively short, I can’t entirely agree with this.

In regard to political activity, the views of Epicurus seem somewhat disappointing from the contemporary point of view. We like to think that civilization is improving as a result of human efforts, and in fact Epicurean ideas have led to some of that improvement, but Epicurus was in favor of withdrawing from the world:

The most perfect means of securing safety from men, which arises, to some extent, from a certain power to expel, is the assurance that comes from quietude and withdrawal from the world [Principal Doctrines].

This seems to be the type of statement that arises from painful experience. Epicurus knew, as we still know, that it does not require much of a cause for another man to kill you, and

that justice for that crime, even if it is administered, will not reverse the consequences. Government in his time was controlled by the militarily powerful, the army and the police. Three years after Epicurus was born, in 338 B.C., Athens and most of Greece was conquered by the Macedonians, under Phillip II. About 3 years later, the great Greek city of Thebes was almost entirely destroyed, and the residents killed or sold into slavery, by Alexander the Great (Philip's son) because of its rebellion. Athens, where Epicurus lived for most of this life, was a prize for competing armies, all of whom accepted and venerated much of Greek culture, but there was no chance that the people of Athens could be self-governing. With this background, we can understand why Epicurus did not encourage political activity. Still, it must be admitted that the Stoic school, at the same time, encouraged its followers to engage in practical and ethical political pursuits, which is an attitude that most of us today find more appealing.

In regard to criminal justice, Epicurus had a utilitarian attitude, also probably partly a consequence of the often-lawless time in which he lived. Many of us now believe that goodness and righteousness should be our goals for their own sake. This was the attitude of the ancient Jews, and also of Plato. But Epicurus took a more pragmatic approach:

Natural justice is a pledge guaranteeing mutual advantage, to prevent one from harming others and to keep oneself from being harmed. Also, Injustice is not evil in itself but in the fear and apprehension that one will not escape from those appointed to punish such actions . [both from Principal Doctrines]

I can't agree with this. Plato used the same argument, that a strong reason for not acting unjustly is that others, as a consequence, will treat you in the same way, but Plato also maintained that there are other, ethical reason for acting justly. Epicurus, in contrast, reduced every question about ethical behavior to its practical consequences. Perhaps, in a more primitive society, with a weak justice system, this attitude is more acceptable. Another expression of Epicurus' utilitarian view of justice:

You ought to do nothing in your life that will make you afraid if it becomes known to your neighbor [Vatican Sayings].

Some additional quotations on miscellaneous subjects:

Of all the things that wisdom provides for living one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship. [Principal Doctrines]

Happiness and blessedness do not belong to abundance of riches or exalted position of office or power, but to freedom from pain and gentleness of feeling and a state of mind that sets limits that are in accordance with nature [Fragment from Uncertain Source].

In other occupations, the reward comes with difficulty after their completion, but in philosophy delight coincides with knowledge. For enjoyment does not come after learning, but learning and enjoyment come together. [Vatican Sayings]

That is, one source of pleasure is the study of philosophy itself.

Lucretius, in **The Nature of Things**, restates most of these ideas, in poetry that is considered among the finest in Roman literature. His book is much longer and more detailed than the shorter writings and fragments that we have left from Epicurus. I have decided not to quote much from Lucretius, but you should read him yourself. (However, you may find more description of physics, astronomy and other sciences than you might prefer.) I will, however, quote some of the lines in which Lucretius praised Epicurus, who lived approximately 250 years earlier. From the beginning of Book VI, in the translation by C.H. Sisson:

*[Athens] gave birth to the man of genius so extraordinary
That everything came from a mouth devoted to truth
So that, even now he is dead, his divine discoveries
Spread abroad, carrying his glory to the sky.*

*For when he saw that whatever men's needs demanded
So far as may be, to keep their lives in safety,
Was there at hand already for their use,
That men had all they could want in the way of wealth
And honor and praise, and pride in successful children
Yet still at home were perpetually disquieted
And that the mind was enslaved by all its bitter complaints,
He understood that the trouble was in the container
And because of some flaw in it everything would go bad
Whatever excellent things were put into it:
Partly because there were holes and things flowed through them
And there was no possibility of filling it up;
And partly because what did get in was spoiled
So to speak by the nauseous taste there was inside.*

*The truth was what he used to purify hearts with
And he set a limit to fear as to desire;
He explained what it is that all of us really want
And showed us the way along a little path
Which makes it possible for us to go straight there;
He showed what evils there are in human affairs
And how they were brought about by the force of nature,
Popping up by chance or because nature worked that way;
And he showed how best to encounter each of these difficulties*

*And proved that the human race was generally vain
In the way it ruminated its gloomy thoughts.
For just as children are afraid of the dark
Their elders are as often as not afraid in the light
Of things which there is as little cause to fear
As those which children imagine to frighten themselves.
These grown-up terrors are also no more than shadows
And yet they are nothing that the sunlight can dissipate:
What is needed is the rational study of nature....*

A prose translation of the same section by R.E. Latham is probably slightly more faithful to the original:

It was Athens.....that first gave to life a message of good cheer through the birth of that man, gifted with no ordinary mind, whose unerring lips gave utterance to the whole of truth. Even now, when he is no more, the widespread and long-established fame of his divine discoveries is exalted to the very skies. He saw that, practically speaking, all that was wanted to meet men's vital needs was already at their disposal, and, so far as could be managed, their livelihood was assured. He saw some men in the full enjoyment of riches and reputation, dignity and authority, and happy in the fair fame of their children. Yet, for all that, he found aching hearts in every home, racked incessantly by pangs the mind was powerless to assuage and forced to vent themselves in recalcitrant repining. He concluded that the source of this illness was the container itself, which infected with its own malady everything that was collected outside and brought into it, however beneficial. He arrived at this conclusion partly because he perceived that the container was cracked and leaky, so that it could never by any possibility be filled; partly because he saw it taint whatever it took in with the taste of its own foulness. Therefore he purged men's breasts with words of truth. He set bounds to desire and fear. He demonstrated what is the highest good, after which we all strive, and pointed the way by which we can win to it, keeping straight ahead along a narrow track. He revealed the element of evil inherent in the life of mortals generally, resulting whether casually or determinately from the operations of nature and prowling round in various forms. He showed by what gate it is best to sally out against each particular form. And he made it clear that, more often than not, it was quite needlessly that mankind stirred up stormy waves of disquietude within their breasts.

As children in blank darkness tremble and start at everything, so we in broad daylight are oppressed at times by fears as baseless as those horrors which children imagine coming upon them in the dark. This dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature.

Lucretius implies that Epicureanism was a major social force at that time, and widely recognized as such, and certainly not a philosophy that was held by isolated outsiders. This is not to suggest that the majority of people were Epicureans, but that many prominent Romans were, at that time, a time in which the Roman Empire was approaching its peak in both control of territory and intellectual achievement. One idea that is new here is the description of the

cause of evil in human culture, the contaminated vessel, the evils of the past, which contaminate even healthy things that are put into it. Whether this image is from Epicurus or original to Lucretius is not certain, but it is likely that it is from Epicurus, in a writing that no longer exists. It reminds me of the lines of James Joyce, spoken by Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." In both of these cases, the situation seems almost hopeless, yet Joyce clearly suggests the possibility of awakening, and Epicurus abolishes the obstacles so simply: "he purged men's breasts with words of truth".

English versions of Lucretius raise an interesting issue regarding translation. Lucretius very frequently used the word "religion" (*religio* in Latin), always in a derogatory sense, meaning "superstition". In most of the English translations, this word is translated as "superstition". However, there are translations, such as the one by William Ellery Leonard, in which the word "religion" is used. Some Latin-English dictionaries give "superstition" as one of the distinct definitions of "religio", with the primary definition being "religion". Indeed, religion is superstition, but this difference in terminology fundamentally changes our attitude about the meaning of the words and the meaning of the sentences. As we increasingly refer to religion as superstition, and as we similarly refer to atheism as rationalism, our civilization continues to advance.

5. THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF PLEASURE

The role of pleasure in Epicurean philosophy is certainly exaggerated. Epicurus states that pleasure is the proper goal of human life, but what is meant is not what may seem to be meant at first glance. What Epicurus said:

We have need of pleasure at that time when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure. When we do not feel pain, it is because we no longer have need of pleasure. Therefore, we declare that pleasure is the beginning and the goal of a happy life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good and as inborn; it is from this that we begin every choice and every avoidance.

Everything we do is for the sake of this, namely to avoid pain and fear. Once this is achieved, all the soul's trouble is dispelled, as the living being does not have to go in search of something missing or to seek something else, by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled.

When we say that pleasure is the goal, we are not talking about the pleasures of profligates or that which lies in sensuality, as some ignorant persons think, or else those who do not agree with us or have followed our argument badly; rather, it is freedom from bodily pain and mental anguish, For it is not continuous drinking and revels, not the enjoyment of women and young boys, not of fish and other viands that a luxurious table holds, which make for a

pleasant life, but sober reasoning, which examines the motives for every choice and avoidance, and which drives away those opinions resulting in the greatest disturbances to the soul. [all from Letter to Monoecus]

In other words, pleasure is defined as the absence of pain, and the means by which pleasure is obtained is sober reasoning. Hardly a statement of hedonism. In fact, Epicurus was a man of moderation, like most of the respectable ancient Greek philosophers. There were true philosophical hedonists in ancient Greece just before the time of Epicurus, namely the Cyrenaics. They did believe that active pleasure was the goal of life, including physical pleasures of all kinds, namely food, drink, sex, etc. There was never an established, functioning institution that taught hedonism (setting up a school was not one of their goals), and the group is considered to have died out within 100 years. The similar vocabulary naturally led to some confusion between hedonism and Epicureanism, but the basic philosophical ideas are very different. It might be argued that Epicurus made a strategic error in his choice of vocabulary: he could have used the words “contentment” or “happiness” instead of “pleasure”.

A related statement is:

We must not resist nature but obey her. We shall obey her by fulfilling the necessary desires and the physical ones if they do not harm us, but harshly rejecting the harmful ones. [Vatican Sayings]

Here Epicurus is simply stating that bodily needs must and should be satisfied, for food, sex, refuge from the cold, etc. Such actions are similar to that of a baby sucking at his mother’s breast. That is, such actions are what we, as animals, are designed to do in order to survive and reproduce. Such statements do not represent a philosophical choice, or a recommendation for living a virtuous life, but are simply a description of natural and inevitable human behavior.

Epicurus discussed happiness as well as pleasure, writing in the letter to Monoecus:

We must, therefore, pursue the things that make for happiness, seeing that when happiness is present, we have everything; but when it is absent, we do everything to possess it.

The phrase in the United States Declaration of Independence, the “pursuit of happiness” is apparently derived from Epicurean ideas, as described by Greenblatt in **The Swerve**. Thomas Jefferson considered himself an Epicurean.

6. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE GREEK SCHOOLS, FROM THE CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW

In many respects, the major Greek schools of philosophy are more similar than they are different. They all are based on rational analysis, they all believe that a man should be respectful of others, and lead a simple life. They all believe in the power of man's intellect to create and maintain a good and just society. They are certainly much more similar to each other than any of them is to Christianity. However, from the point of view of the early Christians, there were fundamental differences between them that affected their acceptance, in a modified or even distorted form, into the Christian world. Epicurus, with his disbelief in the gods or in an afterlife, was a great enemy of Christianity that could not be reconciled, or at least not readily (although some reconciliation was attempted in the 17th century). In contrast, Plato and his school believed that man had an immortal soul. This immediately made him palatable to Christians, and some of the early Christians, especially St. Augustine, made extensive use of Platonic ideas, in their attempt to provide an intellectual framework for Christianity. Fundamentally there was and there is no way for Christianity to refute the charge that it is a religion of superstition, but this was attempted by the application of Platonic ideas, and was partially successful in that it provided a patina of rationality, although not the substance.

The Stoics did not emphasize much the immortality of the soul, but they did believe in a omnipotent being that controlled human affairs. This, similarly, made Stoicism palatable to the Christians, and Stoic beliefs were similarly adopted by Christian pseudo-intellectuals. In addition, Aristotle's idea of the Prime Mover, the omnipotent force that controls everything, was interpreted by the Christians as his description of the Christian god. Needless to say, the Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics would have been dismayed by the distortions of their ideas by the Christians. Based on the respect of the Christians for these pre-Christian philosophers, Dante (writing in about 1300) placed them in the first circle of hell, also called Limbo, which was not a place of torture or other punishment, except for the fact that the inhabitants were excluded from heaven. Later Roman writers and philosophers, including Cicero, Virgil and Ovid were also placed in this circle, as well as some of the Moslem scholars and philosophers who had studied and commented on the work of Aristotle. It's interesting that these Moslem scholars, who lived long after the rise of Christianity, were placed in Limbo; presumably it was because they lived in a country in which Christianity was not available to them. Epicurus, in contrast, was placed in the 6th circle of Hell, in which punishment was severe, as described below.

7. THE ROLE OF ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIETY

The subject of Epicurus and his ideas is considered to fit into the category of “philosophy” today, but the meaning of this word has changed considerably over the years. In modern usage, it seems to be a specialized subject dealing with truth, logic, meaning, and the meaning of meaning. This partially facetious description will not be accepted by many philosophers, but most would probably accept that statement that philosophy is the academic study of a specific field of knowledge, just as biology is the study of living things, and chemistry is the study of interactions between atoms. However, “philosophy”, to Epicurus and the ancient Greeks in general, had not only a different meaning, but also a different purpose. First, it included all investigation and knowledge of the world. Secondly, it was not only a collection of facts, but also a framework for how to live. Philosophy was explicitly intended to solve the problems of the mind, to bring peace of mind. A philosopher treated mental/psychological problems in the same way that a doctor treated medical problems, thus playing somewhat the role of a psychiatrist or psychologist today. But, most importantly, this “treatment” was not intended only for those who had some identified mental illness, but rather for all humans, who all have to decide what to do, what to say, and how to live.

Vain is the word of a philosopher, by which no mortal suffering is healed. Just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away bodily disease, so is philosophy useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind [Fragment from an Uncertain Source].

Furthermore, Epicurus took the rather extreme view that the purpose of not only philosophy, but all areas of scientific inquiry, was mainly to provide peace of mind. In a section of a letter entitled “The Reason for Study”, Epicurus begins,

First of all, we must not think that there is any other aim of knowledge about the heavens, whether treated in connection with other doctrines or separately, than peace of mind and unshakable confidence, just as it is our aim in all other pursuits. [letter to Pythocles].

This attitude is explained by the fact that ignorance often leads to fear. When we hear thunder, we may leave an open outdoor area, but we are not afraid, because we basically know what thunder is. In contrast, many animals are terrified of thunder, and will frantically search for an object to hide under. Many of the ancient gods, including the most powerful god of the Greeks and other peoples, delivered lightning bolts and thunder. Understanding natural processes lessens the fear of them, and leads to greater tranquility. In a similar way, understanding human psychology and behavior will lead (according to Epicurus) to greater individual tranquility and also to a stable, secure social structure. All of the ancient Greek philosophers had this objective. Consider Socrates famous, enigmatic, maxim, “Know thyself”.

This adage is intended to encourage increased understanding of human life and human culture, for the purpose of improving human society.

The practical application of philosophy is also emphasized in Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus:

Let no one put off studying philosophy when he is young, nor when old grow weary of its study. For no one is too young or too far past his prime to achieve the health of his soul. The man who alleges that he is not yet ready for philosophy or that the time for it has passed him by, is like the man who says that he is either too young or too old for happiness.

Fear of death was considered by Epicurus to be one of the major fears of humans, and he focused on counteracting this fear. His approach to alleviate the fear of death was not a wishful and untrue fantasy, as it is with most religions, but rather an answer based on reality. It may be appealing to think that our spirits go to heaven after death, and this idea has been a key part of most religions, and has been effective at recruiting converts. However, this belief does not really solve the problem because it is manifestly untrue. Epicurus argued from reality in saying that after death we are in the same state we were in before birth, we feel nothing and are aware of nothing. Therefore, it is nothing to fear.

8. THE HISTORICAL CONTINUITY OF EPICUREAN THOUGHT

According to the scholars, Epicureanism died out when the school in Athens was closed in 529 A.D. The ideas were rediscovered in the Renaissance, which can be considered to have begun in the year 1345 in Florence, when Petrarch discovered ancient writings of Cicero. This discovery led to an appreciation of classical culture, and stimulated the search for other Roman and Greek manuscripts. Many were discovered and widely read, and these increasingly opened the minds of the readers to a world of rationality. One of the important discoveries was a complete manuscript of Lucretius' **On the Nature of Things**, which was found in 1417 by the Italian Bracciolini in a monastery. As described above, this book was a poetic exposition of Epicurean philosophy. This work was initially copied by hand, then printed on the newly-invented printing press with movable type, which had been invented by Gutenberg in Germany in about 1440. **On the Nature of Things** was first printed in 1473 in Brescia (in northern Italy), then in 1486 in Verona and in 1495 in Venice, demonstrating that it was well-known and popular. It was subsequently reprinted many times, was widely read, and had a significant impact on both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Since that time, much of the impact of Epicurean ideas came through Lucretius, and most readers of Epicurus first read Lucretius. One important feature of **On the Nature of Things** is that it has always been considered among the finest Roman poetry. Therefore, in the Renaissance and later, when all educated people

studied the Greek and Roman writers, Lucretius' work could have been read for its poetical quality, independent of its ideas. This may have been an important factor in the popularity of the book, since, at that time, anyone who said that they agreed with Epicurus about religion would have been tortured and killed by the theocracy. While supposedly reading it for its poetry, the real purpose of some readers might have been to gain understanding about the nature of the world. This is the type of subterfuge that was necessary at that time

But were there Epicureans before the rediscovery of Lucretius, in the time from 529 to 1417? I will argue that there were, although usually secretly. Because there is little documentary proof of Epicureanism in this time period, scholars find it difficult or impossible to accept this statement. However, it must be considered that, if anything had been written, it would have been incinerated together with the person who wrote it. This threat by the Christian authorities, and the fact that it was carried out many times, would have prevented any sane person from writing anything. Does it matter whether Epicureanism persisted throughout this period, or was forgotten and rediscovered? In a way, it doesn't. However, writing in 2014, I feel, and like to feel, an unbroken chain between the ancient Epicureans and the humanists today, and that the ideas were passed down not only in forgotten manuscripts, but also through living people, from parent to child; that Epicureanism has probably had a continuous, unbroken philosophical lineage for 2300 years, from before the time at which Christianity was invented.

The strongest argument for the continuity of Epicureanism is theoretical, but persuasive. Imagine that you were an Epicurean living in 529. You would have been told by the Christian authorities, who were then in absolute control of the society, that Jesus was the son of God (who impregnated a mortal woman), that followers of his teachings of brotherly love would go to a heavenly afterlife, and moreover that if you did not believe this, and practice the religion properly, then you would be tortured until death. What would you do? Certainly, most people in that unfortunate situation would have lied and said that they had been reborn, and were now devout Christians. Their children would have gone to church to be indoctrinated, but still some skepticism would have been maintained and passed down. History demonstrates that even in periods of the cruelest totalitarian persecution, in which the authorities do not allow even a trace of freedom of speech, they still cannot control what people think. We have seen this, for example, in the Cultural Revolution of Mao's China, and in other places in which communism took the form of murderous totalitarianism. Mao tried relentlessly to eliminate all capitalist thinking in China, by killing and persecuting thousands who resisted, yet now it is clear that capitalist ideas remained within people's minds, and surfaced when the opportunity arose. Admittedly, this communist persecution was for only a few decades, while Christianity was in control of its society for over 1,000 years, and was often crueler than the communists, with death made as painful as possible, routinely preceded by torture. But thoughts can still persist,

secretly, and be transmitted subtly to the next generation. Moreover, if we accept the fact that humans have an instinctive inquisitive intelligence, we have to assume that some people would have realized (though not openly) that there was no God controlling human affairs, that it was absurd to think that a demi-god like Jesus ever existed, and that they were living in a time of barbaric superstition.

A good contemporary analogy is North Korea. Run by a totalitarian family and their clique, the government attempts to regulate everything in the country: every business, every social program, every bit of information, and for an individual to protest means imprisonment and death. If you were to ask a North Korean, in North Korea, what he thinks about their country and their government, every single one would say that they have a glorious leader, who makes only the right decision for the good of the people of the county. Now, even though these people have been subject to what is referred to as “brainwashing”, and even though they have no or few sources of accurate information about their own country or the rest of the world, the question is, do they really believe this? The answer is, there is no way for us to know for sure. However, based on our understanding of human nature and human intelligence, it seems unlikely that they all do. Some of them probably do, but many do not. Another similarity between the Christian Church and the North Korean ruling clique is the control of the wealth of the country. Although most people in North Korea are impoverished, the ruling clique lives in luxury. In the same way, the Church in Medieval Europe had unimaginable wealth in a poor society. This economic situation is another factor that makes it impossible to determine what individuals really believed, in that virtually all of the leaders of the society, including the writers and the artists, received their income from the authorities.

It is (or has been) maintained by some academics that in the Middle Ages it was impossible for anyone not to believe in god, because this idea was so embedded in the culture in which they grew up and lived (discussed in Hunter and Wootton, editors, **Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment**). To question the existence of god would be to question all of the authorities. But this is precisely the type of thinking that humans are prone to. Despite the lack of documentary evidence, it is probable that some people in those days did not believe in god, simply because they had never seen evidence that god had done anything, and because they realized that all they had seen in their world could be explained by consistent natural forces. Of course, they had also seen the intolerance and cruelty of man, and had learned to keep their opinions to themselves.

It is perhaps unnecessary to argue that people can have secret ideas which they do not state publically, for fear of punishment. One memorable quote on this subject is from Thomas Hobbes in **Leviathan**, Penguin edition, page 478: “A private man has always the liberty (because thought is free) to believe or not believe in his heart, those acts that have been given

out for miracles....” Hobbes is a good example, because he stated explicitly that he believed in the Christian religion, yet it is widely believed that he was really an atheist, on the basis of his more general arguments. In **The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence**, Alison Brown describes a statement by a Florentine historian, Bartolomeo Cerretani. This was written in 1536, so doesn’t really apply to the presence of Epicureans in Florence before the rediscovery of Lucretius, but nevertheless is likely to apply equally well to the situation 200 years earlier, since the common people who are described would not have read Lucretius. Cerretani said that most people went to church out of shame and fear, but neither they, nor the prelates who ministered to them, believed in God and in the incarnation of his son, but instead “that the world has always existed, exists, and will exist....and that once dead, everything is over for man.”

In addition to this conjectural argument, there is some documentary evidence for the presence of Epicurean thought throughout this period of Christian superstition. Much of this evidence is in the archives of the Inquisition, which began officially in 1231 (although there were trials for heresy, and the resulting executions, from the time at which the Christians rose to dominance in the Roman empire). Some of this evidence was summarized by Hecht. If people were accused of atheism, and tortured and executed for being atheists, this is quite good evidence that atheism existed (though admittedly some of the accusations could have been false statements arising from personal disputes, since an accusation of atheism could be an effective way to have someone executed legally). Secondly, the Jewish theologian Maimonides, in the 12th century, born in Spain, wrote about Epicureanism as if it were well known. A quotation was provided above. Although he did not cite specific Epicureans by name, it seems likely that he could have. Thirdly, Dante, living mostly in Florence in the early 1300s, wrote about Epicureanism in the **Divine Comedy**, again as if it were widely known. This is most evident in the translation by John Ciardi, since Ciardi includes footnotes describing exactly who the Epicureans were and what they believed. The Epicureans were placed by Dante in the 6th circle of Hell (the Inferno), where the punishments are severe. The Inferno was written probably between 1310 and 1314, so the Renaissance officially began in Florence a short time later. It is ironic that Dante, a fervent if not fanatical Christian, who somehow felt qualified to describe in great detail Heaven and Hell (as well as Purgatory), provided the best evidence for the presence of Epicureanism in the late Middle Ages.

Dante generally made the punishment fit the crime, in a literal sense. Because the Epicureans did not believe in an afterlife, they were tortured by being roasted in open metal coffins. This would occur until the second coming of Christ, at which time the lids would be put on the coffins. The occupants would continue being roasted, but now without a view of the sky. In Canto 9, Dante wrote, *These are the arch-heretics of all cults, / with all their followers...Far more than you would think lie stuffed into these vaults.* In his Introduction to

Canto 9, Ciardi explained, “By Heretic, Dante means specifically those who did violence to God by denying immortality.” How Ciardi himself felt about these things I don’t know, but consider the strangeness of this comment. Do we do violence to God by denying immortality? This is an example of the type of unintelligent thinking that we must get beyond. In Canto 10, Dante wrote, *In this dark corner of the morgue of wrath / lie Epicurus and his followers, / who make the soul share in the body’s death.* Ciardi explained in his footnotes: “Many prominent Florentines were Epicureans” (note 17); “Cavalcanti was a famous Epicurean” (note 52), and “Emperor Frederick II....was commonly reputed to be an Epicurean” (note 119). Frederick II (1194-1250) was emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The encyclopedia says that he was one of the most brilliant rulers of the Middle Ages, an excellent administrator, soldier, and scientist. He encouraged the development of poetry and sculpture. He established the University of Naples and made the University of Salerno the best school of medicine in Europe. He was called Stupor Mundi, the Amazement of the World. In the same level of Hell as the Epicureans was “the Cardinal of Ubaldini”, so he also presumably was an Epicurean heretic. In footnote 114, Ciardi stated that “The Heretics denied His (God’s) existence....In Dante’s system, to deny God is the beginning of Violence, Bestiality and Fraud.” Incidentally, the 9th circle of Hell, for the worst sinners, was occupied by Brutus and Cassius, for the murder of the emperor Julius Caesar in an attempt to restore Roman republican democracy.

Thus, there were many Epicureans in Florence in Dante’s time, which was before the start of the Renaissance, and before Lucretius’ manuscript was re-discovered. That is, educated people, including many specific prominent Florentines, knew both the name and the teachings of Epicurus, and agreed with them. Where did this knowledge come from? Scholars argue that knowledge of the Greek philosophers moved into Arabic lands after the closing of the schools in Athens. After being centered in Babylonia for many years (modern Iraq), this knowledge moved to Moslem Spain, and then eventually into Christian Spain and other Christian countries, including Italy. It is true that the Arabs in those centuries were students of the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, and that their commentaries and manuscripts, written in Arabic, did influence the Renaissance. But was knowledge of Epicurus transmitted via this route? Hecht named the classical Greek and Roman books translated into Arabic and studied by the Arabs. Books by Epicurus, Lucretius, Diogenes Laertius, or other Epicurean philosophers are not among them. She described Arabic philosophers who did not believe in god or an afterlife: in their writings, there apparently was no reference to Epicurus, even though the ideas were Epicurean. Therefore, there is no support for the idea that the Epicureans in Florence in Dante’s time, or shortly before Dante’s time, learned about his philosophy via the Arabs. It is more likely that Epicureanism persisted, secretively, for the 800 years from 529 until the Divine Comedy was written. That is, the Epicureans in Florence in 1310 probably learned these ideas from their parents, who learned them from their ancestors going back hundreds of years. Finally, it is evident that, in Dante’s time, Epicureans were not so secretive in their

beliefs. This must mean that a considerable number of politically important people believed in these ideas. In conclusion, we learn from Dante that there were prominent Epicureans in Florence before the Renaissance officially began, and throughout the totalitarian Age of Christianity.

9. THE EPICUREAN VIEW OF HISTORY

From the point of view of Epicurus and his followers, the history of human civilization is very different from that which is described in school books, and this is true for all schools, from elementary to college, in this country and in other countries. However, the Epicurean view, which is described below, is the correct one. Eventually, the textbooks will have to be revised.

The progress of human civilization is not smooth, but rather has peaks and valleys. Still, the overall progress seems unmistakable, in human knowledge, manipulation of nature to our benefit, and partial control of the environment. Many of the major steps in human progress are lost in the distant past, with little or no knowledge of who was responsible. First, language had to be invented, and then written language. For the first modern, phonetic type of written language in the Western hemisphere, we credit the Phoenicians, or a related Semitic group near the Eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in approximately 1100 B.C. Other written languages were developed in other parts of the world, including India and China. Although we do not know exactly who these creators were, we can imagine a person, or a small group of people, deciding how many letters should be in the alphabet, how they should be written, and what sounds they have. With a written language, and long-lasting books or scrolls, there suddenly was no limitation on the amount of information that could be transmitted to later generations. All discoveries could, at least potentially, be preserved forever. Once written language was invented, civilization began to advance much more rapidly, for those groups of people who had it.

With the new written language, people began to write enthusiastically, and to try to preserve what they had written. The greatest of these early writers, at least from a Western perspective, were the ancient Greeks, especially the Athenians. Everyone in their own time and forever afterward was in awe of what they accomplished. When they were conquered by the Romans, whose armies the Greeks could not match, the Romans adopted large portions of Greek culture, including the Greek gods, and the language of scientists and intellectuals continued to be Greek for hundreds of years. Thousands of years later, nations that have made great progress in science have considered themselves, explicitly, to be cultural descendants of the ancient Greeks. This includes the Europeans of the Renaissance, and the British of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

What exactly did the Athenians invent? They were great builders and architects. They invented geometry. They were great artists, especially in sculpture and drama. They modified some weapons to make them more effective, which was important in their military history, which was closely linked to their cultural dominance. They invented democracy, which did not work so well for them, and did not last for very long, but was an idea that slowly spread and became dominant in the world. But, most fundamentally, they developed a rational, analytical way of looking at the world. They tried to analyze things, to understand how they worked, and to classify them. They didn't actually understand very much, but it was their attitude that was so important.

On the other hand, it can be argued persuasively that, despite the intellectual brilliance of the Athenians, their political and social life had major, fundamental deficiencies, from our current perspective. They had a slave society, in which slaves did most of the work. All men were soldiers, and fighting was primarily hand-to-hand, and brutal. Slaughtering their opponents after battle was common, a strategic decision that was intended to encourage the next town to capitulate without a battle. Wars with neighboring tribes, or other groups of people, were constant. Of course, much of this was not by the choice of the Athenians. If the Athenians had been less warlike, they would simply have been destroyed by their enemies. Whatever political freedom and democracy they had was constantly under attack by other groups. For example, the Spartans, also ancient Greeks, were opposed to democracy, and also opposed to education and learning unless it was useful for warfare. The Spartans were usually (but not always) the enemies of the Athenians. In addition, despite the rationality of their philosophers, Athenian culture as a whole was imbued with superstition, including a pervasive belief in augury. Plato said that philosophers should be kings, but this was never actually the case. Still, considering the time in which they lived, we must give the Athenians credit for at least thinking about how human intellect and human culture could be developed, and for proposing that this should follow a rational path.

Therefore, 900 years after the Age of Pericles, in 529 A.D., Athens was still probably the center of the intellectual world, or at least one of the major centers, and Greek remained a major language of science and culture. What changed this was the rise of Christianity, since, as mentioned above, in that year the schools in Athens, including the Epicurean school, the Academy started initially by Plato (which had been defunct for almost five hundred year after 83 B.C., but was revived in 410), and the Stoic school, were closed by the Roman Emperor Justinian, because he considered them to be promoting paganism. This event was a calamity for the intellectual world, which moved from a state of progress to a state of decline, like an intellectual recession.

The great historian and scholar Montesquieu, who had a major influence on the authors of the American constitution, writing in the middle of the 18th century in **The Spirit of Laws**, made this somewhat enigmatic comment on the destruction of the Greek schools by the Romans: “if I could for a moment cease to think that I am a Christian, I should not be able to hinder myself from ranking the destruction of the sect of Zeno [the founder of the Stoic school] among the misfortunes that have befallen the human race” (from Book 24, chapter 10). Montesquieu admired most the Stoics, and did not mention the Epicureans, but this destruction is one thing, among others, that the Stoics and the Epicureans have in common.

A recent book by Stephen Greenblatt, **The Swerve**, recounts the rediscovery of Lucretius’ 1st century B.C. poem, in 1417, and its subsequent impact. This poem, as described above, was widely read and became influential in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The title, **The Swerve**, is derived from a term used by Epicurus to explain the movement of atoms. Epicurus employed this term in an attempt to scientifically explain the existence of human free will (not very successfully), but it is used by Greenblatt to describe the swerve of civilization from the superstition of the Middle Ages to the rationality of the Renaissance, which has persisted (more or less) since then. But one could say that he overlooked the original swerve, which was from the rationality of the Greek and Roman intellectuals to the superstition and enforced ignorance of the Age of Christianity. This swerve can reasonably be dated to 529, and thus the swerve in 1417 was a swerve back into the path of rationality, the path in which humans belong.

The closing of the schools itself had practical consequences, but in a sense was primarily symbolic, as long as people were free to discuss ideas openly, and to associate with like-minded individuals. But this was also severely restricted. As the Christians gained increasing control over every aspect of life in the Roman Empire, any discussion of Epicurean ideas was forbidden, on penalty of death, usually preceded by torture. The Christian regime made it a capital crime for someone to say what he thought, if it was in conflict with the ideas of the authorities. Everyone had to become a Christian, if he was to be allowed to live. The only exceptions were the Jews, who were permitted to live, although with severe discrimination, because of the fact that Jesus was a Jew, and Christianity, as an off-shoot of Judaism, still revered the Jewish Bible as a holy book. This Age of Christianity can be described as a totalitarian theocracy.

As rational people, we try to understand in some sense the attitudes and behavior of the early Christians, but can only explain it as superstition enveloped by tribal behavior that distinguishes “us” from “them”. This is not the subject of this book, and I do not claim to have any understanding of it. But it is clearly opposed to the rational investigation of life that the Greeks espoused. It is a force of ignorance, superstition and cruelty, in contrast to the freedom of thought and expression that was characteristic of Greek culture. If Christians were the

chosen people of God, and were selected for a heavenly afterlife, their attitude towards non-Christians should, logically, have been one of pity and sympathy. However, logic does not get very far in understanding Christian attitudes and behavior. Instead they developed a totalitarian system that did not allow free speech, made every attempt to prevent free thought, and became, for approximately 1,000 years, the most evil, cruel system of governance known to man. Although Christians today are not the same as those early Christians, why would anyone want to be associated with an organization responsible for so much barbaric cruelty?

The role of the “unscrupulous men”, mentioned by Menander in the prologue to this book, also should be considered. For every religion there are men who are the self-proclaimed intermediaries between god and the common people. These priests reveal the word of god, provide guidance in the punishments meted out to men, supposedly on the orders of god, and, perhaps most importantly, are financially supported by donations from the population, which are intended to purchase some influence with god. It can reasonably be suggested that religions were developed by clever charlatans who realized that the uneducated masses can be fooled into not only supporting them financially, but also honoring them as messengers of god. This idea is described by the satirist Lucian, in writings I will quote below. The use of religion to control and manipulate the masses has been recognized since before the days of Epicurus, although it is always difficult to prove this motivation, partly because the charlatans are always mixed in with delusional true believers.

Did the Christians invent this type of totalitarianism that restricted speech and even thinking, as much as possible? I will leave it to the historians to answer this question. Certainly, earlier men killed each other for various reasons, basically because they belonged to different tribes. But Christianity was different in that one could save himself simply by stating that he believed in the Christian mythology, and then by following the religious observances, including financial contributions. The Greeks and the Jews and other earlier religious groups seemed to accept the fact that different tribes had different gods. Many of these groups thought of themselves as genetically distinct tribes, albeit with a large number of members: outsiders could not become members, or do so only with difficulty under rare circumstances, and in general these groups really did not want outsiders to join their religion and their culture. In this context, it might be maintained that it was “generous” of the Christians to allow outsiders to join their organization, but why were they so insistent that everyone else agree with them? Unfortunately, the Moslems, who ridiculed most of the specifically Christian beliefs, adopted their policy that everybody had to become a Moslem, on penalty of death (with a few exceptions).

As an example of intellectual intolerance predating Christianity, Diogenes Laertius writes the following about Protagoras, who knew Plato and was a speaker in some of the Dialogues:

In another work he begins thus: "As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life." For this introduction to his book the Athenians expelled him; and they burnt his works in the market-place, after sending round a herald to collect them from all who had copies in their possession.

And this was during the Golden Age of Ancient Greece! But, at least, Protagoras was not executed. Some scholars question whether this punishment of Protagoras actually occurred, but, in any case, the description supports the idea that freedom of speech was limited at that time, especially speech about the gods.

There have been many times in history (and in the present) in which people were killed only because of their ideas. Relatively recently, Marxist governments killed millions for this reason. But the Christians were different in the irrationality of the alleged crimes. The Marxists, at least, killed people on the basis of their political ideas, which did in fact have an impact on the way people behaved. The Christians, in contrast, killed people who did not believe in their farfetched mythology of virgin birth, resurrection and immortality of souls. A group in our own day that is similar in many respects to the early Christians, and which provides a useful analogy, is the Taliban in Afghanistan. They also claim that they are carrying out the will of God, and in his name can justify any evil and any cruelty. While murder and torture are the greatest crimes of such organizations, they also have a basic disrespect for human knowledge and civilization, and have an explicit commitment to keep the population in a state of ignorance. Like the early Christians, the Taliban tightly control education. They close schools for girls and use schools for boys mainly for the purpose of indoctrination. The Taliban destroyed an ancient, unique Buddhist temple in Afghanistan, because it was considered sacrilegious, much as the Christians closed schools and burned books, attempting to destroy every trace of the great civilizations that preceded them. When a man was killed by the Christians for what he had written, it was routine to burn his writings together with the person who wrote them. To appreciate the effect of such social totalitarianism on the writing of history, imagine the Taliban writing the history of Afghanistan, and doing so after they have been in complete control of the country for 500 years (just a hypothetical example, which hopefully will not become true). That history would be very different from the history that we would write.

From another point of view, however, the murder by Christians of anyone who was not of their tribe is a dominant theme of human culture. One does not have to look hard or far into the past to see abundant examples of such activity. The greatest accomplishment of the United States (although there are many) is probably the demonstration that we can accept, cooperate with, and live together with people of other tribes, other races, other beliefs.

How should we interpret the acceptance, during the Age of Christianity, of capital punishment for the charge of heresy? Three possible explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, are the following. 1) This was certainly used to intimidate and control the population. For a child living in the year 1,000 in Europe, for example, how many public executions did he see, how many instances of torture and burnings at the stake? We don't know the answer to this, it was probably not every weekend, but it was frequent enough, and memorable enough, so that it would influence his behavior and his speech. He knew that anyone could be accused at any time, and that it was extremely dangerous to dispute in any way the opinions of the religious authorities. 2) Considering that the Christians were great borrowers and adapters of the customs of previous cultures, the best example being the pre-Christian holidays that became Christmas and Easter, religious torture and execution may have been derived from the bloody shows at the Roman coliseum. This was among the most popular entertainments in Roman days, and in the early-Christian times the Christians themselves were often the victims of the entertainment. The original Christian proselytizers, who spread the religion so successfully, may have felt that such light-hearted shows were not consistent with their religion, yet still recognized that the public loved and demanded this type of spectacle. Therefore, they incorporated this barbarity into their religion, just as they did Yuletide, by providing public torture and executions of heretics. By making this a "serious" ritual, with the purpose of saving a soul, as opposed to the frivolous murders in the coliseum, and by making it clear that this punishment could potentially be meted out to anyone in the community, the impact of these spectacles on the observer would have been profound. 3) From a broader perspective, the execution of heretics was a human sacrifice to the gods. Although human sacrifice was considered to be barbaric by the Christians, this is exactly what they were doing. Supposedly the execution was for the crime of heresy, but what exactly is the crime, and who is the victim of the crime? No, these were really human sacrifices, done for god, by the instruction of god. Heresy and blasphemy were considered crimes for such a long time that it is almost accepted as "normal". But the definition of such crimes is inherently in conflict with one of the most basic human rights and human liberties, the right of free speech. By interpreting religious executions as human sacrifices, the disparate pieces of European history begin to fit into a coherent pattern, in which the Christian authorities of the Middle Ages, and extending into the Renaissance, were similar to the bloodthirsty Mayan priests.

It may be useful to describe a few specific victims of Christian barbarity, because descriptions of specific people may have more impact than the above generalizations. Here are 3 examples out of many, many that could be cited, all described in greater detail by Jennifer Hecht in **Doubt** (and by others). 1) The execution of Thomas Aikenhead is memorable because it was so recent, in 1697, and in a northern European country that must be considered relatively civilized, Scotland. Twenty-year old Thomas Aikenhead was executed for doubting the truth of Christianity. The legal charge was blasphemy, and the punishment of hanging was

prescribed by the Scottish court, which was following the explicit instructions of the law. Incidentally, the last person burned at the stake in England for heresy was in 1612, namely Edward Wightman. So apparently such killings were a relatively rare event in 17th century England and Scotland. This was not the case in 16th century Italy and Spain. 2) Giordano Bruno was executed in Rome for heresy, by burning at the stake, in 1600, in a very well-known case. Bruno was a prominent astronomer, mathematician and philosopher, who is considered to be the first person to have realized that the stars are basically the same as our sun.

This raises the issue of the fierce, cruel opposition of Christianity to scientific progress. It was opposed to many key scientific discoveries, and ready to kill anyone who disagreed with biblical accounts, or the accepted interpretation of biblical accounts. The idea that the earth revolves around the sun was initially a heretical idea, and Copernicus wisely decided to publish his results only after his death. The idea of human evolution was also heretical. Since it came relatively recently, when the Christian authorities had lost much of their power, perhaps no one was killed for this belief, but certainly the opposition of Christianity to evolution has caused much disturbance over the years, and still does today in areas where education is not as good as it should be. Darwin, also, waited until his old age to publish his results, partly because he knew it would cause some personal trouble for him. The Christian resistance to scientific progress probably reflects their correct understanding that there were deeper (for them) issues under attack. Christians slowly, grudgingly accepted the fact that the earth circles the sun. Most of them are gradually becoming accustomed to the fact that humans evolved from lower animals. But the central, visceral question is whether Jesus was the son of god and was resurrected after death. Scientifically speaking, this cannot be true. What type of DNA came from god? How could it be compatible with Mary's human DNA? These facts Christians cannot accept without giving up their religious mythology, which in the end they will have to do, if they are going to be a part of the rational world.

3) A third specific example of a Christian killing is that of Hypatia, in Alexandria. This was long ago, in 415, and she was killed by a mob, not by the civil authorities, but the killing was incited by the Christian authorities, who had recently become the dominant cultural faction in the city. Alexandria was one of the major intellectual centers of the world at that time. Hypatia was a woman scientist and intellectual, quite unusual at the time, which marked her out as an enemy of Christianity. She was denounced as a witch, and was executed after being tortured. For the grisly details, please see other sources (Hecht or Greenblatt). Her murder, about 100 years before the closing of the Athenian schools, provides another marker of the swerve of human culture from rationality to barbaric superstition.

While these individual cases are poignant, it is equally important to appreciate the scale of religious executions. As cited by Hecht, the German philosopher Schopenhauer calculated

that, as part of the Spanish Inquisition, in Madrid alone, “The inquisition in 300 years put three hundred thousand human beings to a painful death at the stake, on account of matters of faith.” So an average of about 3 people per day, for 300 years.

Under the Christian theocracy, the arts were controlled, as well as all other aspects of culture. What would be left in art museums if Christian art was removed (which I am not advocating in any way)? What literature would we have from the Middle Ages if we did not have Christian-oriented literature? These questions are intended simply to point out that the Christian authorities controlled with a heavy hand all artistic production in much of the world for over 1,000 years. The situation was similar in many respects to that in the Soviet Union or Communist China during the early days of communism: all art had to conform to the ideas and intentions of the authorities. But the Christian dominance lasted for so long that it is difficult to even imagine what history would have been like without it. Regarding the arts, it should also be noted that Christians destroyed most of the Greek and Roman artwork that preceded them. As they came into political dominance, their first target was the Roman temples. We would undoubtedly have much more Greek and Roman sculpture than we have, if it were not for this religious fanaticism.

For the painters and sculptors, there was probably little compulsion, because it was not necessary. Painters and sculptors typically did what they were paid to do, and the Christian church was by far the dominant financial player at the time. It was largely this financial dominance, which Jesus would not have supported, that made the Christian authorities so powerful. Their ingenious business strategy was to sell something that had no production costs for large amounts of money. Thus, regular contributions to the church would lead to the salvation of your soul for eternity, and additional payments would expunge the record of any sins you might have committed. For writers, as opposed to painters and sculptors, the situation was more complicated. First, if you wrote anything that the Church did not like, you were a dead man, and your writings would be destroyed. Therefore, all that we have from those centuries are writings that were approved by the Church, which cannot be assumed to reflect what most people were thinking at the time (which we will never know). Consider the case of Dante, since he is especially relevant to this book. Poetry scholars consider him to be probably the best late medieval Italian poet. In addition to his technical poetical skill, we can admire his appreciation for friendship, his concern for the well-being of Florence, and of course his love for Beatrice (although this seems somewhat excessive). But his masterwork is basically ridiculous, a description in great detail of the three domains of the afterlife, including a description of the scenery, the specific people, and the tortures or rewards which they were receiving. Where did he get his information? Did he have dreams or schizophrenic delusions? Are we supposed to believe this? As excellent as his poetry is, shouldn't we judge a writer mainly by the truth of what he says? Christianity had such thorough control over the writers of the period that we

cannot imagine what would have been written if their society had been free. Many of the great writers and philosophers were priests, because that was the only profession open to intellectuals for hundreds of years. One feels, with many of the writers from 1400 to 1700, that in spite of their active, questioning minds, there was a line which they could not cross, there were questions about Christianity they could not ask, since to do so would be effective suicide. Consider the example of Erasmus, who was a priest. His book, **Praise of Folly**, written in 1511, shows an open, clever, brilliant mind. Everyone should read this book. I have included some quotations in Section 13. He ridicules practically everyone, including the church and the academics. But, of course, he could not ridicule the beliefs of Christianity, because that would have led to his torture and death. I don't see how he could have believed in the Christian faith, but he could never even hint that he did not. Thus, the Big Brother of Christianity affected everything we know about those dark ages.

In summary, for a period of approximately 800 years, before the imposition of Christian totalitarianism in about 529, the Epicurean school was successful and its philosophy was accepted by a large number of people. While the majority of the population never adopted Epicureanism, this could hardly have been expected, since most of the population was illiterate and uneducated. However, a high percentage of educated people were Epicureans. While there were educated Christians, early Christianity was primarily a movement of the uneducated, and the Christian leaders considered education to be not only unnecessary, but, in fact, harmful and dangerous. The age of early Christianity was long referred to as the "Dark Ages"; this term is no longer widely accepted, since there was progress in certain areas of culture during that time, but it does accurately reflect the neglect and suppression of intellectual knowledge and progress. Probably a better name for this period of civilization, from which we have not yet completely emerged, is the Age of Christianity.

I have criticized Christianity more than the other Western religions, and perhaps I should be more evenhanded. However, it is true that the Christians closed the Greek schools, and that the Christians persecuted or killed the thousands of Epicureans living at the time of the Christian takeover of the Roman Empire. Also, the Christians do believe in a particularly absurd mythology. But, on the other hand, this absurdity was derived directly from the Jews, with their idea that God is up there watching everyone and everything, punishing the bad, talking directly to Abraham and Moses. And the Jewish god is frighteningly murderous, in that he allegedly killed not only the enemies of the Jews, but also innocent Egyptian children. The Moslems are basically similar to the Jews in their beliefs, but they adopted from the Christians the concept that all people had to convert to their religion or die. Where is this policy stated in any of the scriptures? It is interesting that, as described by Hecht, there were nominally Moslem writers in Babylonia in the Middle Ages who were non-religious and non-superstitious; most were eventually killed for heresy.

The Hindus have plenty of Gods, their elephant gods and their multi-armed gods, and their ideas of reincarnation are as nonsensical as other ideas of an afterlife. However, Buddhism, despite being an off-shoot of Hinduism, seems to have a notable lack of gods and superstition, with a focus on man. Its religious symbol is the meditating Buddha, who was a teacher, not a god. Chinese Confucianism is not really a religion at all, but rather guidance for living. Many of the basic teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism are compatible with Epicureanism.

History has sometimes been interpreted as a conflict between 2 opposing forces. The Zoroastrians, for example, believe that these forces are good and evil. While this interpretation seems to accurately describe much of human history, we Epicureans (and also followers of Confucius) believe that man is basically good, unless his life experiences have made him otherwise. Marx saw the battle as between the wealthy exploiters and the proletariat. We see some truth in this, but do not agree with the Marxists that the solution is for one side to suppress the other side. Men will continue to compete for the prizes available in the world, but Epicurus teaches that conspicuous consumption should be considered to be childish, and that all men can have the necessities of life, can live comfortably, and can be generally contented with their lives (most of which Marx would agree with). The racists believe that the struggle is, for example, between the Caucasians and the other races, and the religious fanatics believe that the struggle is between the true believers and the infidels. However, the basic competition within human culture is between the rationalists (including the Epicureans) and the superstitious. In some ways, the battle is not fair: the superstitious will kill without mercy, while the rationalists do not fight in this way. For them to kill their opponents would be to destroy the values which they believe in.

Different cultural groups also differ in their expectations for the ultimate outcome of the battle, and these expectations color their view of history. The followers of the Western religions believe that God will sooner or later come down and straighten everything out. Zoroastrians and Hindus believe that history is cyclical, that good and evil will dominate by turns. This is also the view expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Jewish Bible. Epicureans believe that the ignorant and the superstitious can be taught to understand the world and to behave rationally. As stated by Lucretius, Epicurus “purged men’s breasts with words of truth”.

10. THE EPICUREAN VIEW OF THE PRESENT

For most people, the culture around them seems to be the only possible culture. This may be less true now than it was in the past, due to our increased knowledge of other parts of the world, and our increased knowledge of history, but still it is hard for most people to

recognize changes that occur in their own cultures over centuries or millennia. Our culture, in the United States and Europe, is commonly referred to as Judeo-Christian, but what does this mean, and is it true? The true Christian culture began to fade as the Renaissance arose, since the Renaissance was explicitly a re-awakening of classical knowledge and classical beliefs that pre-dated Christianity. Since that time, we have been moving away from religion, and we have come far from the days in which people were routinely killed for the crime of heresy. So we are living in a transitional time, although it seems to us to be a long one, and it is long relative to a human lifespan. The present might be considered to be still a part of the Age of Christianity, in the Western hemisphere, but it is the trailing part of that age.

An increase in human knowledge and abilities has occurred continuously since the evolution of the species, but in some respects it has recently increased dramatically. In the past, and still today, all men who contemplate the world are awed by the work of nature, the diversity and the beauty and the functionality (the last of which we can now attribute to evolution). But in addition to the works of nature, which I do not mean to diminish in any way, we now should also be in awe of the works of man. Earlier civilizations had learned many things: they could farm, and hunt, and build houses, and keep them warm, and store food for the winter. But now we have progressed so much farther. We understand chemistry, we know the elements and the compounds, and how to make an endless number of new compounds that were never made by nature. We know where the elements came from, and how our universe originated, and where the sun's energy comes from. We know how life developed, we know how the molecules in living things function, we know the structure of genes and the genetic code. We understand electricity and magnetism and electromagnetic radiation, and have harnessed these to do many useful things. None of this knowledge was given to us. Humans have figured it all out. It was not simple, and we should be proud. If we can do these things, can't we also create a culture which we can be proud of?

Despite our accomplishments, there remain many sources of embarrassment for our species as a whole (much like the embarrassment of having a close family member in a prison or a mental institution). There are few if any species that kill other members in such quantity, and so frequently. Maybe ants. There is no other species in which torture-to-death of other members is a prominent feature of its culture. It was not so long ago when torture before execution was an accepted part of judicial punishment; it was intended to encourage obedience to the laws, supposedly being more effective than a quick and painless death. I can't help thinking that public torture played some other psychological role, which is outside the scope of this book. While some humans, in parts of the world, still engage in torture-to-death, for little purpose except for the "sport", there are now virtually no governments that explicitly support torture as a means of punishment. This change must be considered a sign of human progress. However, in regard to the organized killing of one group of humans by another, namely war, it

is difficult to even imagine human culture without wars. Many of our most famous heroes were soldiers. Even if the frequency of large wars is reduced, the time at which we will dismantle our “defense” departments, and reduce our huge expenditures on armaments, is far, far in the future. Despite our attempts at developing a fair and generous society, we still basically do not trust other people very much (especially people far away), and at the current time this is certainly justified, to some extent.

Inasmuch as human culture and ideas are a product of human invention, not imposed by any higher force, it is natural to be always thinking about what we can do to hasten the coming of a better world. There is a long way to go, even in the most intellectually advanced countries, and even more so in the parts of the world in which superstition and ignorance are more entrenched. Working to improve the world was not emphasized by Epicurus, but this was after all the purpose of his school and his teachings. He emphasized living a quiet life, withdrawn from politics, but this was probably partly a consequence of the dangerous, lawless time in which he lived. On the other hand, he also emphasized the importance of an individual’s decisions. From the letter to Monoecus, cited above: *“What lies in our control is subject to no master; it naturally follows, then, that blame or praise attend our decisions.”* That is, our decisions should be chosen to earn praise. Note the difference from the Stoic position: the Stoics encouraged people to enter political life, and to act with wisdom and justice, but at the same time believed that fate was inexorable. This Stoic attitude was derived from the ancient Greek emphasis on fate, as displayed in classical Greek drama. Epicurus’ simple statement, *“What lies in our control is subject to no master,”* changes the basic attitude towards the world outside ourselves, and encourages us to try to make improvements in our societies.

In the last century, one of the major cultural trends has been the gradual acceptance of various groups of people into the mainstream. More specifically, we have seen the women’s political movement, which earned for women the same political rights as men (in many but not all countries). We have seen the civil rights movements which earned for all races the same political rights. We have seen the movement which has led to the acceptance of homosexuality as a normal variant of human behavior. Each of these movements is unique, and different from the acceptance of atheism, yet some similarity in the general processes is evident. In all cases, we see the emergence and acceptance of a group that was for many years (or hundreds of years) persecuted, belittled, and discriminated against. Atheism is different because it represents an intellectual group; it is not based on easily identified characteristics like sex or skin color, or on behavior. But, as in some of the other cases, specifically homosexuality, the first thing that must happen is that people must openly acknowledge that they are atheists.

Currently, in the United States, it is “important” news when a well-known person states openly that they are homosexual. We need the same process in the acceptance of atheism. However, I make this comparison reluctantly, and want to emphasize the difference between the two cases. Homosexuality is a matter of individual sexual preference. In contrast, atheism exists in the realm of ideas, and acceptance of atheism is an intellectual decision.

Although there apparently are relatively few atheists now, the number is not insignificant, and there may be many more than commonly thought. Opinion polls show that the percentage of atheists is high in many European countries, especially in Scandinavia, where it may reach 50%, but considerably lower in the United States. The Scandinavians (Vikings) adopted Christianity much later than the other Europeans, in approximately 1000-1100, and this was at least partly for political reasons. Perhaps this explains why they are less attached to Christianity than others. In any case, the results of such polls depend strongly on exactly how the questions are asked. If you ask, “Do you believe in God?”, many people will say yes almost reflexively, considering that the definition of God is inherently vague. Similarly, people may say that they are Christian because their parents and ancestors were Christians. But if you ask, “Was Mary impregnated by God, and did she subsequently deliver the demi-god Jesus, who was resurrected after his death?”, how many people would agree with that? Many people who are not philosophers and not highly educated have enough sense to recognize that this could not be true (even though they might not want to admit it to their mothers). In China there may not be opinion polls on this (or any) subject, but, except for the Chinese Christians, most Chinese do not emphasize religious mythology, and should probably be considered to be atheists.

Evidence that the number of atheists is increasing, and that atheism is becoming more respectable, is provided by the popularity of books on the subject. These books were all recently best-sellers on the New York Times list: **The God Delusion** by Richard Dawkins; **God is Not Great – How Religion Poisons Everything** by Christopher Hitchens; and **The Swerve** by Stephen Greenblatt, which is his history of Lucretius’ poem on Epicureanism, **On the Nature of Things**. As a result of the popularity of Greenblatt’s book, Lucretius’ ancient poem itself became a best-seller on the poetry list. In addition, there are many eminent intellectuals and scientists who were or are atheists. Still, it seems to me that, in the popular culture in the United States, atheism lacks visibility and respectability. There remains in our culture an attitude that atheism is in some ways disreputable, although this is changing. I suspect that there are millions of atheists who hesitate to reveal it. Most people don’t like to talk about religion, and a typical response of an atheist, when asked about religion, is something like: “Well, I was raised Methodist, but.....” The reason for this reticence is probably partly due to the fact that atheists were vilified, persecuted and killed for more than 1,000 years. Also, perhaps atheists, being reflective people, are being considerate of other people’s beliefs. It

might be considered impolite to tell someone that their beliefs are ridiculous. On the other hand, if in fact their beliefs are ridiculous, maybe they should be told. Considering that atheism is older than most of the current world religions, and probably has had a continuous following for over 2,000 years, albeit often secretly, it is now time, or past the time, when atheists should openly state their opinions, atheism should be accepted as a distinct, respectable cultural movement, and atheists should openly have a place at the table at which political decisions are made.

Our world is a world which depends on knowledge, technology and experience. A relatively small number of people design and build the machines, the products, the computers, the roads, that we depend on to live. Civilization depends more than ever on the scientists and engineers, as well as on the economists who at least make an effort to maintain a functional banking system. How many of these critical people are atheists? Probably a high percentage. And if it is recognized that many of these people are atheists, what effect would that have on the common people who utilize and enjoy the products of the intellectual elite? They would at least be induced to think more carefully about what they believe and why they believe it. Thus, it is time for the intellectual elite in the United States, the scientists, academics, and others, to state openly what they believe. One can imagine an organized social movement in which hundreds of millions of people finally admit to themselves and to others that they do not believe in religion. It will still be part of their heritage, but it will be a part that has changed. Some of these people will call themselves atheists. Some who are attracted to the idea of a long philosophical lineage will call themselves Epicureans. Some will call themselves humanists; it's all the same.

The rise of Epicureanism/atheism would be a significant advance in human culture, because religious beliefs can and do affect people's behavior. If you believe in a god who is supervising and arranging everything that occurs on earth, then humans do not have that responsibility. In reality, it is up to us, collectively, to operate this world in a successful way, and we must recognize this, or it will not be done well. Similarly, if you believe that this life is just a "testing ground", and that life after death, in either of several locations, is eternal, then what happens in this life becomes much less important. That is, a life of deprivation and pain is not such a problem if eternal heavenly bliss awaits. From this perspective, dying in a suicide attack against some evil enemy is a great accomplishment not only because of the people you have killed, but also because you thereby enter heaven sooner. In contrast, if we realize that this life is all that we have, we will logically try harder to make it as good as possible.

An interesting question is whether a man's intelligence, or more specifically the functioning of his intelligence, is reduced by a belief in religion/superstition. It seems to me likely that this is the case. Although certainly many religious people have been inquisitive and

bright, a religious belief, if held sincerely, would seem to create an intellectual barrier which limits one's understanding. The cliché is that the workings and plans of God are beyond human understanding. Doesn't this imply that there is a point at which our questioning and investigation should stop, because our knowledge cannot go any farther. When it is stated that tragic, accidental deaths of young people reflect the mysterious purpose of God, doesn't this imply that we are limited in our ability to understand the world, and also perhaps in our ability to make the world a safer and better place in which to live? I am not suggesting that humans can ever understand everything, or that we can create a perfect world, but, still, a belief in a higher, transcendent authority would seem to limit the range of our own analysis and understanding. To renounce religion would be to expand the range of human investigation. It would lift a weight that is holding down human intellectual efforts, so that questions could be asked which could not previously have been asked. Furthermore, consider the amount of time and effort devoted by intelligent people in attempting to answer religious questions. How many of our best (or, at least, most famous) philosophers have focused on proving or disproving the existence of God or of the afterlife. Wouldn't this effort have been better directed at more practical tasks? And consider also all of the potential philosophers, perhaps the most brilliant of all, who were inclined to disprove the existence of God, but decided not to do so because it would have resulted in their execution. The scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had to affirm their religious beliefs in order to obtain and keep their academic positions. Wouldn't this factor lead to the ascendancy of either intellectual mediocrity or hypocrisy, or both? Thus, the widespread acceptance of atheism would likely increase the rate of intellectual and social improvement.

It is critical now, as democracy attempts to spread, that the importance of the separation between church and state is recognized. This separation was carefully established by the founders of our country, who were much wiser than most of our current leaders. They were not believing Christians, and most should probably be considered Deists, who basically have the same beliefs as Epicureans regarding religion. Thomas Jefferson was probably the most outspokenly anti-religious of the founders of the United States (although Thomas Paine is another prominent example). As cited by Greenblatt:

I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. [from a letter of 1819]

Mr. Jefferson said that the Epicurean philosophy came nearest to the truth, in his opinion, of any ancient system of philosophy. He wished the work of Gassendi concerning it had been translated. It was the only accurate account of it extant. I mentioned Lucretius. He said that was only a part – only the natural philosophy. But the moral philosophy was only to be found in Gassendi. [From the memoirs of John Quincy Adams, after a dinner with Jefferson]

(Incidentally, I would second the suggestion of Jefferson that Gassendi's writings on Epicurus should, finally, be translated from their original Latin into English).

The separation between church and state means that we do not believe that God is supervising or judging the progress of our country. The importance of this separation for the successful functioning of a democracy is often not sufficiently appreciated, as demonstrated by the current struggles of Arab countries to establish Islamic democracies. As long as one group of the population believes that they are following the instructions of god, and that other people are not, democracy cannot function properly, because minority rights will not be protected. Tyranny by the majority is not better, and perhaps worse, than any other form of tyranny. Even in the United States, the separation of church and state is not as complete as it should be. "In God we trust" is printed on all of our money (although this was established only recently, in 1955). God has also become entwined in most political speeches, with the ubiquitous ending, "May God bless the United States of America." Invoking God in political debates has been and continues to be an approach that leads to disastrous, bloody conclusions. This is the cry of the Islamist extremists who fly airplanes into skyscrapers. To claim that God likes the U.S. better than any other country is a tragic joke, and the people who invoke God are seriously diminishing the stature of the country. Politicians should be made to recognize that when they invoke God in their speeches, while it may gain them support from some groups, it will also cost them support and contributions from other groups.

None of the above should be interpreted to suggest that atheists are not and will not be tolerant of other people's beliefs, even when they are in the majority. Freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of religion are values we can never abandon. But, at the same time, people must be educated so that they can make rational choices. Education does not mean indoctrination; it means being exposed to various opinions, so that each person can make his own decision.

11. THE EPICUREAN VIEW OF THE FUTURE

The ideas of Epicurus have been increasing in acceptance over the past 500 years, and will continue to do so, until most humans are Epicureans (at least in their beliefs regarding religion), and the current religions of superstition have become historical artifacts. This will inevitably happen, but we don't know how long it will take; maybe 1,000 years or so. In that distant time, people may or may not know who Epicurus was. It should be emphasized that, even if Epicurus had never lived, or even if the Christians had been successful in entirely destroying all trace and remembrance of his writings, the ideas stated by Epicurus would be increasingly popular, because after all they represent simply an accurate view of man and

nature. However, humans like to trace their ideas to the past, so Epicurus and the ancient Greek civilization in which he lived will probably still be appreciated.

Living in the Age of Christianity, albeit near the end of it, it is perhaps hard to imagine the future without it. But at some point, people will go into a museum, and the pictures of Jesus will be, to them, like the statues of the gods of the Incas or the Hindus or the Africans are to us. They will wonder how anyone could believe that this was a god, and be thankful that they live in a rational time. They will look at the huge churches that are still standing, in the center of most of the large Western cities, and wonder about them like we wonder about the pyramids: why were they built, why was so much money and labor devoted to such useless constructions, when it could have been utilized for other more productive purposes. (Admittedly, churches are more useful than pyramids; they can be used for concerts, plays, meetings of various organizations, etc.)

Life without Christianity will not be as different as you might expect, due to the fact that the early Christians were highly eclectic, and derived almost all of their holidays and religious observances from earlier, pre-Christian traditions. Thus, we can readily return to the original holidays. We will continue to celebrate the astronomical events of the year: the winter solstice at the end of December, complete with candles, decorated pine trees, parties and gifts; the Spring solstice, complete with flowers and eggs; and the Autumn solstice, as a harvest festival. One basic problem will be the yearly calendar. Having been hijacked by the Christians, it is difficult to rectify. Although not impossible, it would be very difficult to change the date which we call year 0. It could be done; after all, most of the world converted to the metric system. But then we would have to agree on what the new Year 0 would be, which would be difficult if not impossible. I would vote to leave it alone, with the definition of Year 0 as the birth date of an imaginary god being an eternal reminder of the ignorance of the human past. We live already with many such reminders: many of the names of the days of the week and the months of the year are derived from the names of various gods.

The end of religious superstition has been predicted many times in the past. It is happening, but it is a slow process. Here is a quote from an academic, Richard Tuck, which is an example of premature celebration (from **Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment**, by Hunter and Wootton, editors). In a discussion of the rise of atheism in the 17th century, Tuck wrote in 1992, "Apparently small shifts in ecclesiology could thus start an avalanche, beneath which Christianity itself was ultimately buried." Well, we are not there yet, but it is true that we no longer live in a totalitarian Christian theocracy.

Religious enlightenment can be seen as an indicator of the general state of human rationality. There are real problems on earth that are difficult to address: where should the boundaries be between various countries, who is entitled to the water of a river that runs

between countries, what type of energy should be developed for the future? All of these problems can be solved, but doing so requires both intelligence and good will. Religious issues are basically much easier to solve, because it is clear that there is one correct conclusion: that religious superstitions are just that. Once this is accepted by the majority of men, this will be a sign that we are functioning rationally, and finding solutions to the other, real problems will be straightforward. Whether or not these predictions are accurate, or an entirely unrealistic vision like Dante's vision of paradise, remains to be seen.

12. THE "RABBLE", AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

At the current time, and at all times in the past, some humans have had a higher level of knowledge and understanding than others. For most of history, the great majority of people have been uneducated and illiterate. They still knew many things, and might have been excellent farmers and craftsman, and might have been ethical, yet they could not have had a comprehensive understanding of nature due to their lack of education. Partly for this reason, virtually all early philosophers, including Epicurus, spoke disparagingly about the masses.

I never desired to please the rabble. What pleased them, I did not learn; and what I knew was far removed from their understanding [Fragments from letters].

This statement is not acceptable to most people today, but it was not inaccurate to say that most people at that time were illiterate and uneducated, and did not act in a way in which a "civilized" person would be expected to act. Plato/Socrates expressed a similar idea in the famous cave allegory, although without the contemptuous attitude towards the masses: in their crude understanding of the true nature of goodness and righteousness, most people see only a blurry shadow of reality, like someone who sees only shadows in a cave. But when a person is able to leave the cave and see the sunlight, while blinded at first by the brightness, he will gradually begin to appreciate reality. It is not a question of being rational or irrational, but rather a question of education and experience. So we should not be too harsh in our judgment of Epicurus' view of the masses, especially considering that there are still daily occurrences that would support his point of view. Despite his low opinion of the masses, Epicurus did start a school, so he knew that people could be educated, and he is known for having women and slaves as equal members of his school. He knew that people could learn if they wanted to learn. He would have accepted the possibility that all men could follow his philosophy, but, from his personal experience, could not have been optimistic that this would happen. Based on increased education, and also on increased economic productivity, 2300 years later, we can possibly, and tentatively, imagine that such a day may come.

What is certain is that people's ideas are malleable. If people can be taught to believe that the Christian mythology is true, then they can certainly be taught almost anything. I am not advocating the "brainwashing" of people, but rather, that people should be exposed to all sides of an argument, and then be free to decide for themselves which ideas to accept. Teachings that are consistent with reality will have an advantage in this competition of ideas, simply because they are true and real. In a democracy, the basic question is, is the majority of the population wise enough to appreciate philosophical truth? Without being Panglossian about human nature, it seems possible. It is not conceivable that 100% of the people will agree, but that is not required.

It is useful to keep in mind that the creators of the most long-lived democracies, including the United States and England, were very much aware of the harmful, anti-social side of human nature, and the ubiquity of human greed and selfishness. Epicurus also recognized this factor, but, like the founders of the United States, Epicurus felt that human weaknesses could be controlled and channeled. He realized that charlatans, hypocrites and thieves will always be among us, attempting to take advantage of gullible people for their own benefit. The solution is two-fold: good education, and the establishment of governmental institutions that are explicitly designed to control the destructive tendencies of human nature, to provide a balance of power, so that political decisions will be rational and mature. The governments that were set up based on an idealized view of human goodness all failed quickly, completely and disastrously.

13. THE ROLE OF LUCIAN

In the history of religious mythology, Lucian of Samosata had an interesting role which may be able to guide us on the road ahead. He lived in the second century, born in approximately 125 in Samosata in modern Turkey, and became what is now called a satirist. He made his living as a public speaker, and also wrote extensively, and much of his writing has been preserved. Incidentally, he wrote in ancient Greek, still at that time the language of intellectuals. He satirized people for many reasons, but basically for their stupidity and selfishness. His most popular targets were religious superstition (which was Roman mythology at that time), augury and astrology. His attack on the Roman gods was good-natured but devastating. It is hard to estimate how many people at that time actually believed in the Roman gods; probably not many did. But there was widespread belief in fortune telling, augury, astrology, and other such nonsense. A typical story from Lucian is a dialogue between 2 gods, say Zeus and Mercury, in which they complain to each other about how few sacrifices humans are sending to them, and reminisce nostalgically about the days when sacrifices were abundant, rich and fragrant.

It is Lucian's attitude that we need to emulate: the exposure of absurdity in a manner which is sharp and biting but still good-natured. This attitude was achieved again by Erasmus in **Praise of Folly**, written in 1511, which was mentioned above. Erasmus knew Lucian's writings well, translated some books by Lucian, and was consciously attempting to use Lucian's approach. Here are a few lines from **Praise of Folly**, partly to encourage you to read this book:

Mother Nature has made sure that the human race shall never lack its seasoning of folly. According to the definitions of the Stoics, wisdom is no other than to be governed by reason, while folly is to be swayed by the power of the passions. Now in order that man's life should not be altogether sad and grim, is it not evident that Jupiter put in more passion than reason, say about one pound to half an ounce? Furthermore, he relegated reason to a narrow corner of the head, and left all the rest of the body for the passions. Then he set up in opposition to reason two most violent tyrants: anger, that occupies the region of the heart, or the very source of life; and lust, that rules a broad empire, even down to the private parts. What reason can do against these two powers is clearly enough shown by experience. She succeeds only in shouting herself hoarse and in dictating formulas of virtue, while the passions bid their ruler go hang herself and angrily shout her down, until being worn out she gives in willingly.

Erasmus methodically ridicules virtually everyone: lawyers, merchants, monks, academics, etc. Here are his comments on theologians:

. . . Perhaps it would be wise to pass over the theologians in silence. That short-tempered and supercilious crew is unpleasant to deal with. . . They will proclaim me a heretic. With this thunderbolt they terrify the people they don't like. Their opinion of themselves is so great that they behave as if they were already in heaven; they look down pityingly on other men as so many worms. A wall of imposing definitions, conclusions, corollaries, and explicit and implicit propositions protects them. They are full of big words and newly-invented terms. . .

What Erasmus teaches us, by his example, is that there have always been some perceptive and rational people, although not as many as we might prefer.

Since Lucian lived in the second century, he overlapped with the rise of Christianity, and in fact he wrote one story that is partly about the early Christians. This was the story called The Death of Peregrine, which is in Lucian volume 4. He probably did not know much about Christian beliefs, and therefore did not write much about them. This is probably very fortunate: if he had known about them, he would have ridiculed them mercilessly. This would have been amusing, but we would not be able to read it, because it would have put Lucian on the anti-Christian list, and all of his books would have been destroyed. One thing Lucian knew about Christianity was that newly converted Christians gave all their money to the church, since they were focused on saving their souls, and therefore money was not important to them. Lucian

realized that this arrangement would attract clever charlatans who would live off of the donations. Indeed, in the succeeding centuries, this became perhaps the most impressive accomplishment of the Christian hierarchy. In this story, the early history of Peregrine (who also used the name Proteus) is narrated by an unidentified man to Lucian:

*It was now that he came across the priests and scribes of the Christians, in Palestine, and picked up their queer creed. I can tell you, he pretty soon convinced them of his superiority; prophet, elder, ruler of the Synagogue – he was everything at once; expounded their books, commented on them, wrote books himself. They took him for a God, accepted his laws, and declared him their president. The Christians, you know, worship a **man** to this day, - the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. Well, the end of it was that Proteus was arrested and thrown into prison. This was the very thing to lend an air to his favourite arts of clap-trap and wonder-working; he was now a made man. The Christians took it all very seriously: he was no sooner in prison, than they began trying every means to get him out again, - but without success.....Peregrine, all this time, was making quite an income on the strength of his bondage; money came pouring in. You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on trust, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property. Now an adroit, unscrupulous fellow, who has seen the world, has only to get among these simple souls, and his fortune is pretty soon made; he plays with them.*

He eventually was released from prison. Then,

The Christians were meat and drink to him; under their protection he lacked nothing, and this luxurious state of things went on for some time. At last he got into trouble even with them; I suppose they caught him partaking of some of their forbidden meats. They would have nothing more to do with him,

Peregrine's subsequent story does not involve Christianity directly, but seems to have distinct parallels with Christian mythology. This story, incidentally, is generally true. After leaving the Christians, Peregrine studied with Cynic philosophers, and he became (or attempted to become) a teacher in Rome and then in Greece. Ultimately he decided to commit suicide by burning himself to death in a public spectacle at the Olympic games, at Olympia in Greece, which he did in 165. According to Lucian's narrator,

The passion for fame must wholly possess him, body and soul. He says, of course, that it is all for the benefit of the human race, - to teach them to scorn death, and to show fortitude in trying circumstances...; Do you want your sons to conceive of an ambition of this sort? Of course not; ...He wants to set an example of fortitude, like the Brahmins, to whom Theagenes thought it necessary to compare him. Well, I suppose there may be fools and empty-headed enthusiasts in India as elsewhere.

Lucian then mockingly quotes a poem recited by an admirer of Peregrine:

*What time the noblest of the Cynic host
Within the Thunderer's court shall light a fire,
And leap into its midst, and thence ascend
To great Olympus – then shall all mankind,
Who eat the furrow's fruit, give honor due
To the Night-wanderer. His seat shall be
Hard by Hephaestus and lord Heracles.*

That is, after being incinerated, the soul of Peregrine (called here the Night-wanderer, and also the “noblest of the Cynic host”) will go to Olympus, where the gods reside, and sit between the two gods (or demi-gods) Hephaestus and Heracles (the Greek names for Vulcan and Hercules). Hercules also died by burning. Lucian himself observed the spectacle of Peregrine's suicide at the Olympic games, and quotes Peregrine's last words before leaping into the fire:

'Gods of my mother, Gods of my father, receive me with favor'

So there is some similarity to the story of Jesus, although Peregrine did not consider himself a Christian in the last phase of his life. Lucian's final comments:

Such was the end of this misguided man; one who, to give his character in a word, never to his last day suffered his gaze to rest on Truth; whose words, whose actions had but one aim: notoriety and vulgar applause.

The following story, *The Runaways*, begins with a reference to the Death of Peregrine. This is a conversation between Apollo and Zeus:

Apollo: Father, is this true, about a man's publicly throwing himself upon a pyre at the Olympian Games. He was quite an old man, it seems, and rather a good hand at anything in the sensational line. Selene told us about it: she says she actually saw him burning.

Zeus: Quite true, my boy; only too true!

Apollo: Oh? The old gentleman deserved a better fate?

Zeus: Why, as to that, I dare say he did. But I was alluding to the smell, which incommoded me extremely; the odour of roast man, I need hardly tell you, is far from pleasant. I made the best of my way to Arabia at once, or, upon my word, those awful fumes would have been the death of me. Even in that fragrant land of frankincense and spices I could scarcely get the villainous stench out of my nostrils;

Evidently the Christian god has the opposite reaction to the odor of roast man.

I hope I have quoted enough of the sparkling insight of this story to encourage you to read it entirely, as well as Lucian's other tales. I have definitely left out many of the best lines, because they were not as relevant to this book.

14. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Human beings try to understand the universe and their place in it. They like to connect themselves intellectually to others, both the living and their ancestors. Philosophies and religions are frameworks people use to make these connections. Although original ideas do appear occasionally, usually based on new scientific discoveries or inventions, most of our basic ideas about life come from others, and have developed over hundreds or thousands of years. The ideas of Epicurus are not novel, and were probably not novel at the time they were written, but they were and still are ideas that have contributed and can continue to contribute to the well-being of humanity. From the time of their origin through the present, they appear to have been held by a minority of men. However, in ancient Greek and Roman times they were widely known and widely accepted. After the establishment of Christianity as the dominant political and social force in the West, Epicurean ideas could not be openly stated, upon penalty of death, but there are reasons to think that they persisted secretly, as described above. From the Renaissance up to the present, with increased freedom of thought and speech, they seem to be increasingly accepted.

The main purpose of this book is simply to point out that atheism is not new, but has an ancient and distinguished history. It is frequently stated or implied that it is a product of modern science. Admittedly, advances in science have made these ideas more self-evident, especially the discoveries in astronomy and biology that prove that the earth is not unique, and that living organisms evolved from earlier organisms. But the writings of Epicurus demonstrate that atheism pre-dates modern science by millennia. In fact, Epicureanism is older than Christianity by hundreds of years, and comparable in age to all of the major religions. Since the

longevity of ideas is often considered to support their validity (although this is not logically true), the long and distinguished history of Epicureanism will help to support the acceptance of these ideas.

I have focused mainly on Epicurus' ideas about religion/superstition, but his ideas on many other subjects, which were briefly mentioned above, are also relevant to us. One is that, what is necessary for a man's life is easy to obtain, and what is hard to obtain is not necessary, meaning basically that a simple life is best, and is available to us all. And he wrote this before the invention of cars, electricity, plastics, cell phones and indoor plumbing. This idea has become more widespread as the earth's population has increased, and our planet has been increasingly despoiled. People are now forced to think about how we can live while maintaining the quality of our environment. This is certainly possible, but it depends, to a large extent, on whether we can live with more simplicity, without continually making everything bigger and more elaborate. To economists, life without growth is impossible: their equations no longer work. But it is possible, and it is necessary for us to think seriously about creating a stable, sustainable future. A related statement by Epicurus is that man can live like the gods. It is not clear exactly what this enigmatic statement means, and logically it doesn't mean very much, but it hints at an idea which is useful and important. This suggests, once again, that we should live a relatively simple, relaxed life, a life in which our needs are met and in which we do not have to continually strive for more of everything. In which we enjoy ourselves, talking about history or philosophy or sports, without creating conflicts. Although this book is intended to dispel the idea of gods, this unusual usage of the word may be useful: Epicurus said we could live like gods; maybe instead we are the gods.

The great lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was completed in approximately 280 B.C., a few years before Epicurus' death in 270 B.C. This was one of the tallest buildings in the world at the time, second only to the Great Pyramids at Giza. Unlike most of the so-called Seven Wonders, this had a functional purpose. Commercial products, armies, and ideas traveled long distances by sea, and the soaring lighthouse enabled seafarers to escape from the dangerous sea to the safety of land. The lighthouse stood for more than 1,000 years, but it is now destroyed entirely, primarily by earthquakes. The ideas of Epicurus, then, have lasted much longer than the lighthouse, and I think of them like a lighthouse, leading us from the ignorance and superstition of the past and the present to true knowledge of the earth and the animals that live on it.

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