

Covid-19 and Greek Philosophy

*Martin Ferguson Smith on confronting Covid-19
with guidance from Epicurus*

At this time when the Covid-19 pandemic is killing hundreds of thousands, disrupting the economies of prosperous nations and the lives of billions, and generating much fear, it may be of interest to look back to Greek and Roman antiquity and see what moral guidance is offered by the school of the philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC).

Plagues and pestilences were not uncommon in the ancient world. The best known one afflicted Athens in 430 BC, the second year of the Peloponnesian War, fought by the city and its allies against Sparta and its allies. It is graphically documented by the historian Thucydides, who not only witnessed it, but caught it and recovered. Although he describes it in detail in the hope that his description will be useful in the event of the same disease ever recurring in the future, modern authorities have been unable to agree in identifying it.

In its behaviour, symptoms, and effects, it had some similarities to Covid-19. It was said to have originated in a distant country, somewhere south of Egypt, and to have affected other areas before reaching Athens, wreaking most havoc where people were crowded together. Athens was particularly vulnerable because the war had compelled many country people to seek shelter in the

city. The disease was highly contagious. Doctors, not having encountered it before, did not know how to treat it, and their exposure to it meant that they suffered the highest rate of mortality. Other high-risk members of the population were those with pre-existing health problems. Symptoms of the disease included fever, coughing, vomiting, and diarrhoea. If the sick were not visited because others feared being infected, they died of neglect; and those whose altruism prompted them to visit were all too likely to pay with their lives. Those who caught the disease but recovered were immune to a further attack, at least to one that was fatal.

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The plague of Athens occurred nearly a century before Epicurus was born. Most of his extensive writings have perished, and we do not know whether he himself wrote about it. But his most famous follower did. That is the Roman poet Lucretius, who, writing in

the middle of the first century BC, concludes the sixth and last book of his brilliant epic of the universe, *On the Nature of Things*, with an account that for the most part closely follows that of Thucydides, but represents the Athenians, living at a time when Epicurus' teachings were not yet available, as being morally, as well as medically, ill-equipped to deal with the calamity. Although Lucretius does not say so explicitly, it is likely that he saw the physical condition of the plague's victims as symbolic of the moral condition of unenlightened humanity.

The idea that the unenlightened are "diseased" and require the "medicine" of Epicureanism is found both elsewhere in Lucretius and in other Epicurean sources. Epicurus himself declares: "Vain is the word of a philosopher by whom no human suffering is cured; for just as medicine is of no use if it fails to banish the diseases of the body, so philosophy is of no use if it fails to banish the diseases of the mind."

Four maxims in which Epicurus summarises the basic principles of his moral system were known to his followers as the *tetrapharmakos* (fourfold drug therapy).

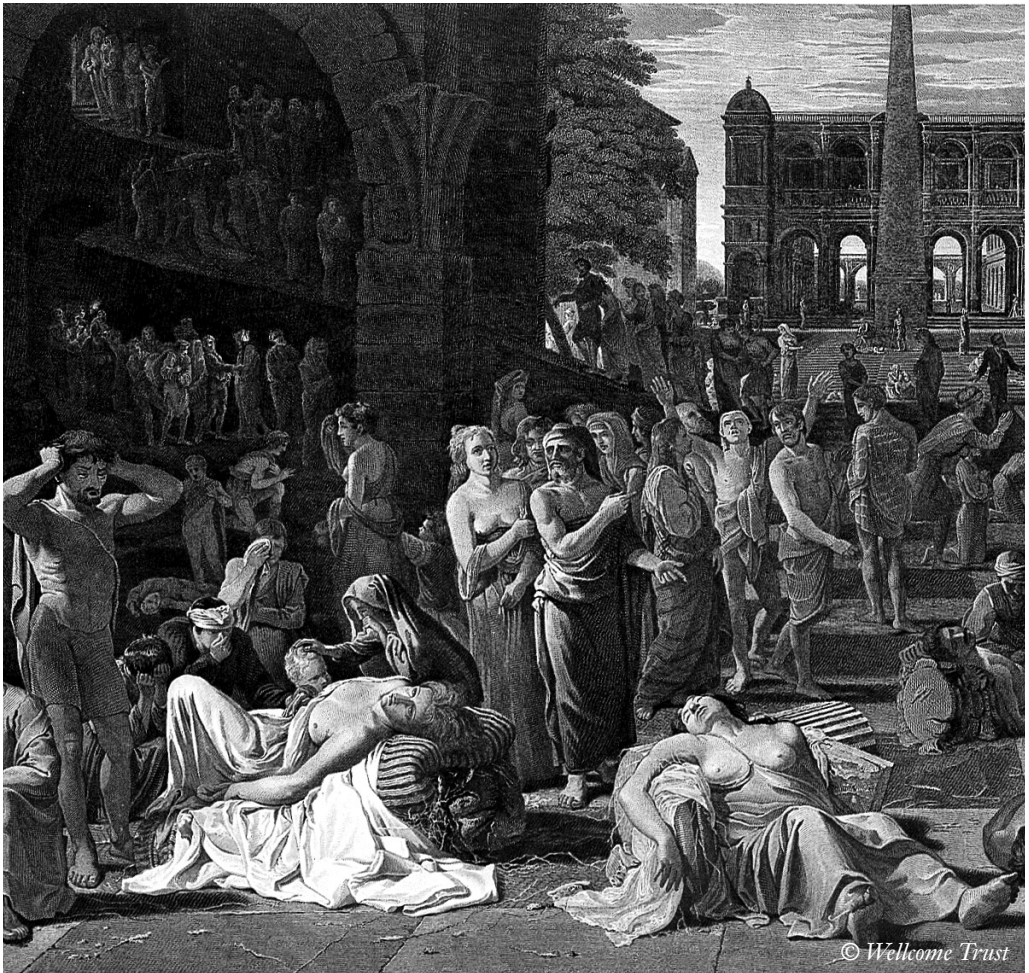
According to the Epicurean spokesman in Cicero's treatise *On the Ends of Goods and Evils*, diseases of the mind are more disruptive of happiness than diseases of the body. Such diseases include unlimited and empty desires for wealth, fame, power, and sensual pleasures. In the second century AD, the Epicurean philosopher Diogenes of Oinoanda, a small city in the mountains of Asia Minor (Turkey), explaining his philanthropic and cosmopolitan mission to the place's citizens and visitors in the largest Greek inscription known from the ancient world, asserts: "The majority of people suffer from a common

disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing, for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep."

He calls the Epicurean doctrines he is propounding "the drugs (*pharmaka*) that bring salvation".

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Epicurus, who founded his school in Athens in 307/306 BC, was seen and revered by his followers, both in his own time and centuries after his death, as the discoverer of the way to achieve moral health and true happiness. Teaching that pleasure is the highest good, he identified pleasure in its purest form as *aponia* (freedom from pain) in the body and, most importantly, *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) in the mind. *Ataraxia* is a metaphor from calm water and weather, the idea and ideal being to make your mind as tranquil as the water of a harbour undisturbed by currents, tides, and winds. Physical illnesses and pains cannot always be avoided. If they are mild, they are tolerable and can still permit a preponderance of physical pleasure over pain. The



The plague of Athens. Line engraving by J. Fittler after M. Sweerts.

same is often true of chronic complaints. Severe pain naturally prevents physical pleasure, but is often of short duration, being relieved by recovery or death. A very important doctrine is that mental pleasure is more important than physical pleasure. When the body is in pain, the mind can still experience pleasure and mitigate present pain by the recollection of past pleasures and the anticipation of pleasures to come.

The mind's ability to look back and forward is exploited by the wise to their advantage, but ruins the lives of those whose attitude to past events is bitter, and whose attitude to the future is dominated by unnecessary fears, especially of the gods and death, and unnecessary desires, especially those for wealth and power.

The key to the removal of these disturbances and the attainment of tranquility of

mind is a scientific study of the universe. Adopting and adapting the atomic theory of Democritus, Epicurus showed that in a birthless and deathless universe composed of an infinite number of atoms and an infinite extent of void (and containing an infinite number of worlds) there is no place for gods in the creation or governance of our world, which is in any case far too imperfect to have been made by providential gods for human benefit: witness, for example, the hostile climate in many areas, destructive phenomena such as violent storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and of course diseases and plagues. There is no possibility of there being a place where souls survive and can be punished after death. The human soul and mind, like the body, are material, and when the body, of which indeed they are part, dies, they perish too. Death is nothing to fear: so long as we exist, it is not with us; and when it comes, we do not exist. Hell only exists in the sense that fools make a hell of their lives on earth. At the same time those who live wisely can enjoy a godlike happiness.

Such happiness is experienced by those who live a simple life, satisfying those desires that are natural and necessary, such as those for essential food, drink, clothing, and shelter, and eliminating those, like the desires for wealth, status, and sensual pleasures, that are unnecessary and, because they are impossible to satisfy, certain to involve pain.

Epicurus would have hoped that, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, his teachings would help the sick to bear their illness with equanimity and the rest of us to keep our worries, fears, frustrations, and disappointments in perspective, to be as calm

and positive as possible, rejoicing in our good health if we are lucky enough to retain it, and in general to count our blessings, including those of love and friendship, possession of which was very important to him and his school. Probably he would have hoped also that his teachings would help us to review the way many of us have been living our lives and to reassess our priorities and values.

That the pandemic is going to do a huge amount of economic damage is certain, but for Epicurus material prosperity and wealth are far less important than moral well-being. Indeed the pursuit of wealth, status, and power is incompatible with the peace of mind in which true pleasure and happiness consist. As he wrote to a friend concerning a youthful disciple: "If you wish to make Pythocles rich, do not increase his means, but diminish his desire."

If the Covid-19 pandemic has the result of persuading some of those "plague-stricken" with false opinions to change their ways, some significant good will have come out of it.

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