# Epicureans & Stoics on Temporality

1. Who were the Epicureans?
    a. The Epicureans trace their lineage back (unsurprisingly) to Epicurus, a Greek thinker (can we say 'philosopher?') of the fourth and third centuries BCE. He seems to have died around 270 BCE, which would make him substantially younger than Aristotle.
    b. Like Plato, Aristotle, and others, Epicurus founded his own place of learning in Athens. His was known as the Garden (*Kēpos*). Much of what he taught has to be reconstructed via what was said of him by both his followers and his opponents. The Epicurean school can reductively be looked at in two of its subdisciplines:
        i. Epicurean ethics: The good life, for an Epicurean, would be *ataraxia*: the absence (or at least minimization) of fear and disturbance, especially agitation arising from the thought of one's own death. This emphasis has often been mistaken for a wanton hedonism, which places pleasure-chasing at the summit of human life. But that's not quite right. The Epicureans were still rationalists. The goal was to rationally parcel out one's pleasures, so as to avoid pain and distress as much as possible, while also avoiding self-destruction via pleasure overload at any one moment. The Epicurean focus on pleasure was thus more therapeutic than libertine.
        ii. Epicurean physics: Far from remaining mere hedonists, the Epicureans developed their own robust view of the natural world. In that way, they did not blush at natural science as had Socrates. For the Epicureans, the universe was made up of only two things, as we'll see: atoms and void. There were minimal, un-cuttable particles which made up the ultimate stuff of matter, and then also a great emptiness (*kenon*; inane) into which those atoms could plunge and collide with one another. This intermingling of atoms within the void was what constituted the baseline existence of all things. The basis for this atomic theory of the universe, while in many ways rationally formulated, ultimately rested on an empirical sense that there is always a smallest 'something,' beyond which human experience cannot pass.
        iii. The founding question here is then: how to relate Epicurus' ethics with his physics? Does quasi-hedonistic pursuit of *ataraxia* go hand in hand with spatiotemporal atomism? Must it? Is the atomic worldview, with its naturalistic eschewing of divine intervention, meant to thrust us back upon our dire situation, wherein we are finite mortals caught up in a world beyond our imagining? Does Epicurean physics put us in the proper existential pose to appreciate their ethical, therapeutic teachings?
2. Who were the Stoics?
    a. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, find their origins in late fourth-century BCE Athens. Their purported founder, Zeno of Citium (not to be confused with the Eleatic Zeno!), can be seen as combining the Cynics' view of ethics with a broader natural-scientific worldview. Here we are giving the Cynics (like Diogenes) credit for taking to its logical extreme the insight that virtue ('being good') is by far the most important thing in life. For the Cynics, this meant that it was morally laudable to give up all of the trappings of 'civilized' life in order to get at the purity of a virtuous existence. If that meant walking around the *agora* naked, so be it!

b. The Stoics modified this Cynical rigor in order to make it more accessible to a wider audience. They maintained the utter devotion to reason and nature—especially practical reason—while also including a broader application of theoretical reason. Stoic physics even equated the force of reason with that of a primordial fire, which gave birth to the universe as we know it and will later burn it all up again. Such conflagrations serve as the punctual nodes of cyclical history. The eternal return revolves and passes through the walls of eternal flame. These are the doctrines that would be passed down via later Greek Stoics like Chrysippus to the revived Roman Stoicism of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.
c. In competition with the Academy, the Lyceum, and the Garden, there was now also the *Stoa Poikile*—a covered, painted walkway that gave its name to Zeno's movement. There, he taught his doctrines of rational fire and encouraged his students to pursue *apatheia*. Often caricatured as a cold-hearted form of unfeeling ('apathy'), *apatheia* could more generously be described as allowing the power of reason to properly frame and contextualize the worldly events that affect us. A mind endowed with *apatheia* could rationally digest even the apparent 'worst' that life could throw at a person.
d. As with the Epicureans, then, we see a sometimes curious blend of ethical and physical insights. Perhaps this can be profitably compared with Plato, whose Timaeus was a strangely cosmological sequel to his politics. The border between Nature and the Polis was rather fuzzy for these traditions. That seems less true of Aristotle, whose disciplinary boundaries usually remained firmer. (One exception to that might be the passage in the Physics where Aristotle allows his eyes to grow misty over the inevitability of *phthora*…)

3. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*
   a. Lucretius was a Roman poet and philosopher who flourished in the first half of the first century BCE. We don't know as much about his life as we'd like, but we do know he remains by far the most famous exponent of Epicureanism during the late Republic. His only extant work is a long-form poem 'on the nature of things,' addressed to his patron Memmius. The goal, it seems, is to cure Memmius of the *timor mortis* by introducing him to the tenets of Epicureanism and *ataraxia*. Lucretius' work were influential in the development of classical poetry, although perhaps less so in natural philosophy. Epicurean atomism did not become dominant, as Sorabji convincingly attests. Nevertheless, some continue to hold (tenuously) that the rediscovery of Lucretius in fifteenth-century Italy played a role in bringing scientific atomism back into the realm of plausibility.
   b. Book I
      i. Time
         1. Sense-experience (*sensus*) is the bedrock standard of truth. Only on this empirical basis can reasoning (*ratio*) about non-perceptible things occur.
         2. The testimony of both sense and reason is that there are only two 'things' in the universe: bodies (ultimately, atoms) and the inane void.
         3. Nothing else gets to be a *tertium genus*—not even Time.
         4. Time actually doesn't even exist in its own right.
         5. Time itself is an accident (*eventum*).
         6. It is neither a substance nor even a property (*coniunctum*).
         7. Time is the accident of what happens within it.

8. Temporal experience, too, is really only experience of movement.
9. There's no such thing as a pure experience of time, sans movement-rest.
10. In conclusion: *tempus per se non est*.
    a. Contrast this with Aristotle, for whom the continuum (*suneches*) appears to be primary. Riffing peripatetically, we could posit that the continuum 'is,' whereas the segments of the continuum (P-P-F) are the proper 'accidents' here.

ii. History
1. This has immediate consequences for history.
2. Properly speaking, historical happenings "are" not.
3. They are merely the accidents of long-past generations (*saecla*).
4. That is: they are 'events' (*eventa*) in a very special sense.
5. All of this is a reduction of being (what really is).
6. It reduces being to what is present (*instet*: what stands-in).
7. It depends on an experientially present moment.
8. Because only that moment can be the bedrock for being.
9. All accidents of time merely accrue to that bedrock.

iii. Atomism
1. Lucretius concedes that experience seems fluid.
2. Experience suggests that Heraclitean flux rules the world.
3. All is ceaseless change without solidity.
4. However—reason steps in to tell us this is not the case.
5. (This is an interesting move for an Epicurean to make.)
6. (He allows reason to correct experience quite sternly here.)
7. Reason tells us that only small, solid, everlasting atoms allow us to divide up the universe and explain how its variety arises.
8. These atoms are the primordial seeds of all composite things.
9. There is no ex nihilo here. Nothing comes from nothing.
10. Instead, there must be an everlasting pool of atoms in the void.
11. They provide the raw material for the universe of things.

iv. Infinity
1. Time, which is merely an accident, is somehow also infinite.
2. But within infinite time, nature sets many limits.
3. Nature sets a limit for the dissolution of bodies. (*finis frangendi*)
4. Nature also sets a limit for the temporal duration of composites.
5. The *finis frangendi* ensures that atoms exist as primordial seeds.
6. The *finita tempora* ensure that the pool of atoms is ever refilled.
7. These limits also ensure the predictability of the universe.
8. If there were no everlasting pool of the same atoms underlying everything, than anything could change into anything else at any time.
9. We'd no longer have certainty about future possibilities.
10. The generations (*saecla*) would stop being so repetitive.
11. Atomism, then, provides a regularization and a routine to the world.
12. It limits future potentiality and changeability.
13. Indeed: "nothing changes," really, from an atomic perspective.

v. Subatomic Particles
1. Atoms: un-cuttables. Can't get smaller than that, right?

2. Wrong! There are minima: the smallest subatoms.
3. Atoms: smallest perceivable bodies; literally unbreakable.
4. Minima: smallest thinkable bodies; meaning atoms are theoretically splittable.
5. The minima cohere to make an atom.
6. But somehow an atom is not a composite.
7. The mode of minimal coherence is different from atomic composition.
8. Here, as elsewhere, the particles almost become divine.
9. They are everlasting, absolutely simple, have miraculous abilities to join without compounding, etc.
10. We can see atomism fraying apart before our very eyes.
11. Lucretius throws in one more pro-atomistic argument.
12. If everything were infinitely divisible (because no atoms), then everything would be the same as anything else. All would be infinity, and you can't differ between infinities…
13. (Except you can, thanks to the thinkability of transfinite numbers; cf. the history of mathematics from Newton through Cantor…)

vi. Book IV

1. Book I doesn't answer the question of how atomism applies to time.
2. Is there a smallest perceptible time, a time-atom?
3. Is there a smallest thinkable time, a time-minimum?
4. How do experience and reason adjudicate in this case?
5. Late in Book IV, time comes up again in the context of dreams.
6. It turns out that 'one time' does contain many hidden times.
7. Tempus = many *tempora*.
8. So what's 'one time?' the length of one 'word' (*vox*)…
9. *Vox*: word? Sound? Phoneme?
10. This seems like an arbitrary standard.
11. So: we experientially perceive one unit of vocal time.
12. But within that time, our reason can discern many micro-timespans.
13. Of course, a similar move could be a critique of atomism.
14. Namely: if there are many times within one time, then why not infinitely many times within one time?
15. And so we are thrown back upon infinite divisibility.
16. (This is all meant to explain how our mind can 'isolate' one image for a dream, when it has so many flickering around within it; the answer is that there are many images hidden in that same dream-moment, even if they're not the explicit object of mental focus.)

vii. Book V

1. Later, Lucretius adds that the world must be finite.
2. Since it is made up of things that are born and die, it itself must also have a beginning and an end.
3. Question: how to square a finite world with infinite time?
4. Yes, there may be periodic cataclysms.
5. But these are less nodes of historical cycles, more symptoms of a sick world that will eventually die of its ailments.
6. Only atoms qua atoms and void are truly everlasting.

4. Marcus Aurelius, *Hypomnēmatia*
    a. Though far from the only Roman Stoic in either the Republic or the Principate, Marcus Aurelius was the only full-on Stoic who also happened to serve as Emperor. Ruling from 161-180 CE, he waged wars on both the Parthian and Germanic fronts. While campaigning in east-central Europe, he composed a series of philosophical notes, perhaps at first meant only for his own consumption and edification. It is unclear what we should call this diary, although 'meditations' and 'memoranda' have been suggested. Whatever we call it, the text clearly stands as an excellent example of someone trying to apply Stoic philosophical principles to the vicissitudes of their own life. This leads to insights ranging from the quotidian to the divine. While often remembered as the closest thing we've ever had to a philosopher-king, Marcus was not without his enemies. Two camps come in for extra attack in his work, philosophically speaking: the Epicureans and the Christians. The former err by allowing the pursuit of pleasure to overwhelm the sober duties dictated by reason, while also replacing the rational plan of divine providence with the lifeless bumping of atoms in the void. The Christians, meanwhile, are irrational atheists of the worst sort. Their main goal in life seems to be holding orgies, as far as Marcus can tell.
    b. The Present
        i. Stoic goal is to preserve the sovereignty of hegemonic reason.
        ii. The seat of hegemonic reason within each of us is our Daimon.
        iii. You must make desire and passivity serve the Daimon's spontaneity.
        iv. Its hegemonic reason allows you to classify external stimuli how you want.
        v. Thereby avoiding paralyzing anxiety and going about your duty.
        vi. Death offers the most anxiety.
        vii. But why fear dying sooner rather than later?
        viii. In fact, when we die, we only lose the present moment.
        ix. Because the present moment is all we have.
        x. The reality of our lives resides purely in this moment, this now.
        xi. To die now or later is to lose the same thing: the now.
        xii. For the present (*paron*) is the same (*ison*) for all.
        xiii. It is momentary: *akariaion*—uncuttable! (but from *keirein*, not *temnein*)
        xiv. The time of a human life is like a point (*stigmē*) that flows away.
        xv. So simply keep your Daimon focused on the Instant.
            1. Q: Why is an *akariaion* not an atom?
            2. Q: Can a point flow away? What does that mean?
        xvi. And yet, Marcus doesn't seem that atomistic.
        xvii. In fact, he's downright Heraclitean!
        xviii. It's all about the flux: all changes into all.
        xix. Present-mindedness is somehow an embrace of flux, not atoms.
            1. Q: is that a rationally defensible position?
    c. Happiness
        i. Two main pieces of advice have to do with time:
            1. We only 'possess' the present. (see above)
            2. Everything happens in cycles. (eternal return)
        ii. One must bring one's Daimon to accept those two facts.
        iii. Doing so will allow you to embrace the Providence of Nature.
        iv. Remember: Either Providence or Atoms! (IV) Make your choice.
        v. Nature runs the universe like a state (polis).

vi. A good citizen of the universe obeys the politics of Nature.
vii. That means welcoming everything that happens.
viii. Because everything arrives at its proper time.
ix. Nature is never late. The natural-minded Daimon should never be late.
x. "Nothing that is in due time for thee is too early or too late for me!" (IV)
xi. Rather than worrying about past or future, simply seize the day.
xii. Or better: make profit out of the present!
xiii. Therein lies happiness in this very life.
xiv. Yes, we remain caught up in the river of time.
xv. But we are neither crushed by the past nor in fear of the future.
xvi. That is Hadot's favourite Aurelian insight.

5. Pierre Hadot
    a. Hadot (1922-2010) was both a historian of philosophy and a philosopher in his own right. Teaching for many decades at the Collège de France, he pioneered many aspects of the study of intellectual life in the ancient and late ancient worlds. His expertise on the Epicureans, Stoics, and Neoplatonists is seemingly beyond doubt. Spurned early on by Catholic anti-modernism, he nevertheless was able to find ways to speak profoundly about the lessons of ancient thought, even beyond the inheritance of early Christianity. His influence is still felt both on the Continent and in the Americas, often thanks to references in the work of Michel Foucault.
6. Questions
    a. Can we have present-mindedness without time-atoms?
    b. Is a fuzzy living present a spurious concept?
    c. If there is no present, how should we position ourselves in time?
    d. Can the Stoics get away with being anti-atomist presentists?