HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Epicurus 341 B.C.-270 B.C.

Epicurus was born in Anatolia, taken to Athens as a youth, then moved to Lesbos, and ultimately returned to Athens, after maturing a philosophy and a set of pupils; he established his own school, The Garden, near the Stoa in the center of the city. There he became an influential, though quiet and withdrawn, leader of thought.

The thought of Epicurus derives in part from that of Democritus, and before him Leucippus, strict materialists for whom the structure of reality is determined by the movement of atoms in the void, and who believed in absolute determinism. For Epicurus, too, material atoms constitute reality, assuming both the gross forms visible in the familiar features of landscape, and the infinitely fine forms constituting the soul. Unlike his predecessors, Epicurus believed that the movement of these atoms was random, prone to 'swerve' and thus the foundation of our free will, which derives from the unpredictability of our mental environment. Though our sensations are accurate guides to the way things are, they cannot penetrate to the further realms of ontology; the gods, for example, should be treated with respect, but no deep relation to them is possible; what is possible, and this is the ground of Epicurus' renowned ethic, is to remain apart from pain, suffering, and exuberance, to live with modest pleasures and above all with friends, friendship *(philia*) being the highest of our pleasures. The other side to this corollary is that we should avoid the turmoils of the marketplace, and especially of politics, striving rather to retain a spirit of *ataraxia*, unshakenness, to the end, an end which is itself not fearful, for there is nothing after death except dissolution. The following, from a letter written by Epicurus to a friend on the last day of Epicurus' life, sums it up:

I have written this letter to you on a happy day to me, which is also the last day of my life. For I have been attacked by a painful inability to urinate, and also dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which comes from the recollection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions.