

# THE SPEECH OF PAUL

A Summary and Evaluation of David Hume's  
"The Speech of Epicurus"

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## INTRODUCTION

In David Hume's "The Speech of Epicurus," Hume uses Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher, as his mouthpiece. Through Epicurus, an atomist, Hume expresses his views of natural theology and religion. There are probably many reasons why Hume chose Epicurus to be his spokesman. The two philosophers have similar worldviews in many respects. Epicurus was a qualitative hedonist. Hume reduced ethics to a matter of taste, sentiment, or feeling, based on past experience. This approach to ethics could be conceived of as a form of hedonism, since man will make "virtue" whatever he desires or has found to be a pleasurable way of life in the past. Epicurus was essentially an empiricist, claiming we know what we know by observation and experience. Hume was perhaps the most consistent empiricist in the history of philosophy, relentlessly pursuing this form of knowing to its logical (and skeptical) conclusion. Both Epicurus and Hume left room for a god of some sort but neither could be considered theists in the traditional sense. Hume uses Epicurus to attack the cosmological argument. If the cause must be proportioned to the effect, then natural theologians have no right to ascribe to their gods any attributes that are not seen in nature. To go one step further, if we have no impression of causality -- if it is only something psychological, supplied by our minds -- how can there be a 'first cause' at all? If causality is simply an unperceived and unperceivable inference from experience, then it is only a matter of custom, not of rationality. Therefore, belief in whatever "god" is proven by causality is a matter of mere custom as well, not an absolute certainty.

Hume will also use Epicurus to show he has not undermined the foundation of morality, a charge that was often brought against him. He essentially claims that both Epicurus and the Athenians, despite differences in theology, share the same ethical theory: Morals are based on "the course of events" (Beck, p. 129) and "experience of past events" (Beck, p. 130), regardless of a providential governor or future life. Because the Athenian theology is based on observation of nature, Athenian morality must be as well. Both Epicurus and the Athenians are left advocating some kind of natural morality. This raises some interesting questions: Can moral norms be found *within* man's experience? Can a valid ethical system be wholly immanent, or does it require transcendence? Does experience itself really teach that ethics should be based on experience? Because man's experience is limited, how can he ever derive universals or absolutes of any kind? How can "experience" adjudicate claims about good and evil when experiences vary?

In the following monologue, I will use the Apostle Paul, the great Christian apologist, as my spokesman. Though separated by a few centuries, from a philosophical standpoint, it should not seem at all strange that Paul would engage Epicurus in a debate. In fact, Acts 17 in the biblical record records Paul's speech in the Aeropagus in Athens, where many Epicureans were present (Acts 17:18). Acts 17:22-32 provides a brief but comprehensive overview of Paul's consistent theism, in contrast with the empiricism of some of his hearers. The Apostle Paul did not base his theology on a study of nature but on God's verbal revelation, which served as the foundation not only for faith, but also a proper understanding of the creation, using reason and the senses as divinely given tools. Because God is the Creator of all, nothing can be properly grasped (rationally or empirically) without reference to him. In Paul's view, the Athenians not only need to be

told about God, but also about nature, the origin of man and the universe, the meaning and outcome of history, the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and so on. Submission to God (faith) is the starting point for Paul's epistemology and ethic. Paul claims the Athenians' study of nature has not led them to the true God; indeed, almost every line in his sermon contradicts the theology of the Athenians (in this case, Epicureans and Stoics) at some point. Implicit in Paul's approach is the view that there are ultimately only two philosophical choices for man: Revealed religion, as proclaimed by the Apostle, or unmitigated skepticism. But of course, not even Hume wanted to be an unmitigated skeptic; he knew that such a position would be hopelessly self-refuting and destructive.

In my hypothetical speech of Paul, I will summarize and analyze Hume's main arguments in the "Speech of Epicurus." Throughout the speech, I will be basing Paul's statements on the discourse as recorded in Acts 17, as well as his other writings. Likewise, I will simply assume that the statements of Epicurus are identical to Hume's thoughts and I will refer to Hume's other writings (in Beck) to fill out his position.

## THE SPEECH OF PAUL

The Athenians were stunned. They sat in silence as Epicurus took his seat in the Aeropagus. The citizens of Athens who were present knew their idols had just been smashed by this clever thinker. They had railed at Epicurus, but now it appeared he would have the last word. And yet, this man who had just unraveled all that their previous philosophers and theologians had worked to accomplish had also made the extraordinary claim that he could save morality and bring good to society.

Suddenly a man stood up to speak to the hushed and bewildered audience. The man's name was Paul, a little known itinerant preacher who was just passing through town. Paul walked to the middle of the Aeropagus floor, cleared his throat, and began to speak:

“Men of Athens! You should be thankful to Epicurus, for he has done you a great service. All of you who wanted to argue empirically for the existence of your ‘gods’ and base religion on reason alone should now know what folly it is. Perhaps you should beg the forgiveness of Epicurus for having antagonized him for so long.

“Epicurus, I must say that I admire your courage! You have pointed out that the Emperor has no clothes. You have been ruthlessly consistent with the Athenians, and as someone who tries to be a consistent thinker, I can appreciate that. However, since you have been so viciously consistent with the Athenians, perhaps you will not mind if I am viciously consistent with you for a few moments.

“The way I see it, your position boils down to something like the following. You want to humble the dogmatic Athenians and destroy their natural theology by undermining any certain arguments for a supreme being based on causality and design. The Athenians claim to perceive order in the world and then insist that such harmony and beauty could not be the result of chance. Surely there is some Master Craftsman behind it all! But you have wisely pointed that, ‘when we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect’ (Beck, p. 127). Since in the case of the world, the Athenians hold that the cause (‘god’) is known only from the effect (‘the world’), we can grant only those attributes to god that are displayed in the world. In other words, whatever gods exist can only have ‘the precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence which appears in their workmanship; but nothing farther can ever be proved, except we call in the assistance of exaggeration and flattery to supply the defects of argument and reasoning. So far as the traces of any attributes, at present, appear, so far may we conclude these attributes to exist. The supposition of further attributes is mere hypothesis’ (Beck, p. 127). On a strictly empirical basis, reasoning from nature to nature’s god, I think you are exactly right, Epicurus. The Athenians have greatly exaggerated the perfections of their gods. They have most ‘certainly added something to the attributes of the cause, beyond what appears in the effect’ (Beck, p.129).

Where is this benevolent ruler, with his supposed providential control of the universe, when the weak are oppressed and the wicked prosper? Where is he when the righteous suffer at the hands of cruel men? Where is his goodness when natural disaster strikes? If ‘what you see is what you get,’ I do not think their gods are all that they claim. Where

can they turn to find an adequate theodicy? Certainly not to experience.

“Similarly, I can sympathize with your astonishment when these Athenians make grand claims about a future state with no apparent empirical evidence. What ground is there for this hope? What is there in our present experience that would lead us to believe in such a wonderful afterlife? If only the Athenians would consistently confine their theology to their present experience, perhaps they would curb their wild dreams of bliss.

“I do not think that the Athenians should be offended when you call their religion merely a ‘religious hypothesis’ (Beck, p. 129) for it seems that they think no more of their gods than that anyway. Their theology appears to be just a hypothesis, subject to testing by the facts of experience. Athenian theology is not rooted in God’s self-revelation in Scripture but in their autonomous observation of the world. If experience is indeed their ultimate authority, it seems they would be much better off to merely suspend judgment as you do, Epicurus. After all, who has universal experience? Who has experienced all the attributes of all the gods? Who has experienced death, and come back to life, that he might tell us with certainty what kind of future awaits us? I agree with you: the Athenians need to mark the consequences of their concessions to empiricism (Beck, p. 126). Their philosophers ‘neglect authority’ in order to ‘cultivate reason’ and they need to face squarely the skeptical conclusions that follow from this (Beck, p.128). If the Athenians were consistent with their empirical procedures, they would see that much of their theology is derived from their own ‘imagination’ and the most they can claim for their deity is that he ‘possibly’ has attributes we have not yet seen exerted (Beck, p. 130).

If we look solely at the world, through the lens of an empirical epistemology, it is very hard to see how the Athenians are not guilty of fallacious reasoning when they make extravagant claims for their gods.

“But at this point, you and I must part ways Epicurus. Your critique of the Athenians is wonderful. You have shown them that the god they dogmatically claim to know is actually an ‘unknown god’ (Acts 17:23). The God that you do not know, and the God the Athenians claim to know but do not, I will proclaim to you shortly. But first, I think it might be helpful if I turned the tables and analyzed your own position. You have pushed Athenian natural theology to the breaking point, dragging them down to your level. But what happens when we cross-examine *your* philosophy? Perhaps the *new* Emperor is also naked!

“I will not deal with your metaphysics or epistemology right now, only your ethics. It is true, the natural theology of the Athenians provides no better foundation for morality than your agnosticism does. But that does not make your experience-based ethic acceptable. Rather than proving that your philosophy does *not* remove the basis for a moral society, I think you have only shown that the Athenians themselves have *already* lost that basis. You say that, whether or not the universe is the product of divine design, morality remains the same because it is determined by the ‘experience of past events’ (Beck, p. 130), not laws revealed by an absolute and personal Creator. A god whose existence is proven merely from order and intelligence seen in nature is not only ‘uncertain’ but ‘useless,’ unable to ‘establish any new principles of conduct and behavior’ (Beck p. 131). I agree, but I would add that your appeal to past experience is no better, for past experience cannot establish any binding ethical principles for the future any more than natural theology. You claim, ‘The experienced train of events is the great standard, by which we all regulate our conduct’ (Beck, p. 131). But if that is so, ethics is emptied

of its content. If all ethical reasoning is based on experience, moral philosophy is reduced to a descriptive task; it loses any prescriptive force. All ethics can do is tell us what *is* the case, but it cannot tell us what *ought* to be the case. On your approach, Epicurus, all ethical categories simply become a matter of personal taste and feeling, relative to each person's subjective desires (Beck, p. 125). One person's virtue may be another's vice. There is no normative or absolute standard. We all have our own experience to which we can appeal and we all interpret the facts of nature differently. In your system, how could ethical disputes ever be resolved? We can not project our own past experience into the future, we cannot derive moral absolutes from our own limited experience, and we cannot judge others for interpreting their experience differently or choosing to "experiment" with various ethical actions or practices that may turn out to be destructive to society.

"But more to the point, Epicurus, on your basis, *nothing* could be considered truly evil at all. If you were to object and claim that evil is indeed a reality, I would ask: *By what standard? Who are you to impose your personal, private standards of morality, derived from your own experience, on someone else? How can you call anyone else's actions 'evil'?* Good and evil cannot be derived from our impressions of events. We do not experience good and evil; rather we have experiences that we choose to label good or evil. If your experience seems to indicate homicide, rape, and racism are evil, all you have done is describe your preference and taste. Why should anyone else agree with you? After all, everyone has their own sentiments and feelings so everyone would have their own code of morals. If you were to argue that experience in the past seems to teach that these things do not produce good results for society, well, so what? Who knows what will be the case in the future, since, in your worldview, there is no reason to expect the future to be like the past (Beck, p. 100ff)? You can't know the future consequences of an ethical action any more than you can know bread will be nourishing in the future (Beck, p. 104). You have had no more experience of the consequences of future acts than the Athenians have had of heaven.

"To appeal to custom as our guide is not at all adequate. 'Custom' and 'instinct' are too flimsy a foundation to build ethical rules upon. Nor is it valid to simply claim that we should seek the good of society. To say any given action will bring good to society seems to require an unwarranted generalization. Such a claim requires omniscience. How can anyone leap from what he personally thinks will do society good to the what everyone else thinks (or should think) about society's welfare, without either assuming uniformity in human experience or imposing his experience on others? Each person is entitled to his own definition of 'the good' as well as his own view of what will bring society good. Once again, if we differ, we have no way to settle our disputes for there is no higher ethical authority than personal experience. There is no agreed upon standard. Besides, even if custom clearly could tell me what would be good for society, why *should* I seek the good of society? Where does this obligation spring from? There is no objective grounding for morality or moral laws in your system. Making experience or sentiment the ultimate criteria of morality simply does not work. Not only is it impractical, it is immoral.

"Your ethic of experience fails to live up to the high moral standards of biblical Christianity, but I think it fails to live up to its own standard as well. Christianity can account for ethics and provide a firm basis for a moral society because its ethical norms

are grounded in the will and character of a moral God. But, Epicurus, your ethical system does not meet even its own criteria. It is self-refuting. If your basic ethical norm is 'obey the dictates of past experience,' I must ask, *when have we ever experienced this ethical norm?* How can this empirical approach to ethics be verified empirically? You tell us dogmatically that ethics derives from experience, but your most foundational ethical premise is something *imposed on* experience rather than taken from it! Has the great empiricist smuggled in an a priori? Even if *you* claim to have somehow experienced this moral standard in some way, what if others claim they have not? Or what if others claim that an evaluation of their own past experience proves that experience is a *poor* guide in ethical matters and therefore we need to look elsewhere for guidance? Because you are locked inside your experience and feelings, there is no 'supreme court' to which you can take others who disagree with you.

"I appreciate your skepticism, Epicurus, but perhaps you have not been skeptical enough. You have hung the Athenians, but it appears there is just enough rope left for you. Perhaps the Athenians do not know as much as they thought they did, but perhaps you do not either. You see, I, the Apostle Paul, as a Christian, am the real skeptic -- skeptical of all those who try to build a philosophy or religion or ethical code without reference to God's revelation. No doubt, when you hear my position you will consider it to be superstitious, a form of intellectual suicide. You are too proud to depend on an external authority. You insist that whatever deity exists 'can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience' (Beck, p. 124). But the God I serve is not to be put to the test; rather he puts us to the test. He is the source and standard of knowledge and ethics, not our experience. He is the One who makes our experience intelligible because he is the Creator of the universe and of man (Acts 17:24), the Providential Controller of every situation we face (Acts 17:26, 28), and the Law-Giver, who authoritatively tells man the good he ought to seek (Acts 17:30, 31). It seems the *unmitigated* skepticism I have driven you to is too high a price to pay for refusing to submit to his authority and revelation. Theological agnosticism leads to ethical agnosticism. Without knowing God you cannot know 'the good.' Epicurus, the Athenians have claimed far too much for natural theology. But you have claimed far too much for natural atheology."

The Apostle Paul continued speaking for quite some time. He spoke of creation, man's sin, Christ, and the resurrection, all as taught in Holy Scripture. I think he had more to say, but heckling from the crowd began to make it impossible to listen. Some in the audience began to cry out, "What is this vain babbling trying to say?" (Acts 17:18). Epicurus sat in silence but was raging within. Most who had been there walked out in total disgust....but some wanted to hear more....and I think even a few repented.