CONFRONTING COVID-19 WITH HELP FROM EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY

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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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