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伊壁鳩魯與老子《道德經》生死觀的比較

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**A Comparison of Epicurus with Laozi's
Daodejing on their Philosophies of Life and
Death**

伊壁鳩魯與老子《道德經》生死觀的比較

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
In fulfilment of the requirements for BA (Hons) in Sinology Degree

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Abstract

Death is inevitable for all living creatures. As such, a fear of death or death anxiety becomes natural to many living beings. Humans tend to rely on cultural constructs, philosophy, religion, or psychology to reduce this fear. Epicurus is a hedonistic Greek philosopher and atomist who taught that the goal is to reach a state of tranquillity or *ataraxia* in life, freedom from fear and pain through moderate pleasure-seeking. To him, pleasure is not living an expensive luxurious life, but a term used to describe the absence of bodily and mental pains and disturbances. Therefore, understanding how things work in the universe, having correct views on death, and knowing which pleasures to fulfil are essential to attaining *ataraxia* and living a happy life. Laozi's *Daodejing* articulates that 'the *Dao* emulates what is self-so (*ziran* 自然)'. All things in the universe embody the *Dao* and abide by its return and cyclic movement. Life and death are phases within this movement process. Hence, apprehending and acceptance of this enables people to let go of the individuality of death and be connected with the grand movement of the *Dao*. To live a tranquil life, the *Daodejing* emphasises the importance of knowing the limits and knowing contentment. This paper aims to compare the philosophies of Epicurus and the *Daodejing* on their perspectives of the universe, death, and way of life to determine how Epicureanism and Daoism can assist in providing an alternative outlook on life and death and reduce death anxiety.

Key words: Epicurus, Laozi, *Daodejing*, philosophy of life, death

摘要

死亡是所有生物都不可避免的生命過程，擔憂和懼怕死亡也成為許多人的常態。在人類社會中，人們更傾向於依靠文化、哲學、宗教或心理學來緩解這種焦慮心態。伊壁鳩魯是古希臘享樂主義的哲學家和原子論者，他主張人生的理想目標是要通過適當的享樂，來從恐懼和痛苦中解脫，而達到安定和寧靜的狀態。對於伊壁鳩魯而言，「享樂」一詞，並不是追求奢靡的生活，而是描述身心煩惱的解除。所以，要達到平和狀態並獲得愉悅的人生，必須理解宇宙運行的原理，正確認知死亡的本質，以及滿足何種慾望。老子《道德經》則指出「道法自然」。宇宙間的萬物都是「道」的體現並且依循著「道」的「大逝遠反」規律流轉。生死不過是這個循環中的一個過程。所以，對於這個概念有了清楚的理解並接受後，可使人們放下對於「小我」的死亡的執著，而將自身融入到「道」的大流當中。此外，《道德經》也強調知足和知止的人生觀，以此獲得安樂的生活。本文將從宇宙觀、死亡觀、人生觀三方面來對比伊壁鳩魯和《道德經》的哲學思想，進而探討伊壁鳩魯學派和道家思想如何提供看待生死的另一種觀點，從而緩解人們對於死亡的憂慮。

關鍵詞：伊比鳩魯，老子，道德經，人生哲學，死亡

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1. Introduction

Death is a universal and natural phenomenon for all humans and living organisms. As human beings, the awareness of this inevitability can cause fear and anxiety about the idea of death. Hoelter suggests that this fear can be multidimensional, involving fear of the dying process; fear of the dead; fear of being destroyed; fear for significant others; fear of the unknown; fear of conscious death; fear for body after death; and fear of premature death.¹ Despite knowing that death is the irreversible cessation of all organ functioning systems, people still hold various philosophical, cultural, and religious views on death, the soul, and what happens after death. For example, philosophically, Epicurus puts forward that death is nothing and that people should not be fearful of it, claiming ‘when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist.’² From a Daoist perspective, the *Daodejing* lets go of the individuality of death and acknowledges it as part of the broader, natural process in the cyclic transformation of the *Dao*.³

Today, some studies also suggest humility, or a quiet ego, can lower death anxiety.⁴ Humility is often a positive moral virtue in philosophy that is ‘neither excessively self-focused nor excessively other-focused.’⁵ Humble people can step back and look at the bigger picture and feel more connected to greater forces than themselves, such as God, humanity, nature, or the cosmos.⁶ These traits are present in the philosophy of Epicurus and the *DDJ*.

Epicurus (341–270 BCE) is a philosopher from the Hellenistic period of ancient Greece from 323 BCE (following the deaths of Alexander the Great and Aristotle) until 31 BCE.⁷ He believed in an atomist natural philosophy and proposed a way of life that sought to bring people happiness and tranquillity through seeking simple

¹ Jon W. Hoelter, ‘Multidimensional Treatment of Fear of Death’, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 47.5 (1979), pp. 996-999.

² *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, trans., Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (United States of America: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), p. 29.

³ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 125.

⁴ Pelin Kesebir, ‘A Quiet Ego Quiets Death Anxiety: Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106.4 (2014), pp. 610-623.

⁵ Heidi A. Wayment, Jack J. Bauer, and Kateryna Sylaska, ‘The Quiet Ego Scale: Measuring the Compassionate Self-Identity’, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16 (2015), pp. 999-1033.

⁶ Everett L. Worthington Jr. *Humility: The Quiet Virtue* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), p. 43.

⁷ Anthony Arthur Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* 2nd edition (London: Duckworth, 1974), p. 1.

pleasure. Finding peace and tranquillity was a common theme in the philosophies developed in this period (such as Stoicism) due to political and sociological insecurities at the time.⁸ Today, Epicureanism remains popular, though its interpretation and indulgent lifestyle has deviated from his original philosophy.

Laozi (flourished 6th Century BCE) was a philosopher-sage believed to be the founder of Daoist thought and religion, and author of the classic text the *Laozi*, also known as the *Daodejing* (or *Tao Te Ching*) in ancient China. Despite its ambiguous and paradoxical writing style, the *Daodejing* (hereafter, *DDJ*) is influential in Eastern and Western cultures, being one of the most translated Chinese texts after the Bible.⁹ The book consists of approximately five thousand characters arranged into eighty-one chapters. It describes the *Dao* as the fundamental root of all things (living and non-living), providing a philosophy of life that emphasises simplicity, tranquillity, knowing contentment, and freedom from insatiable desires by understanding the return and cyclic movement of the *Dao*.

Within the literature, many scholars have made cross-cultural connections between the *DDJ* and Western philosophy. These include comparing the *DDJ* with the philosophies of Pre-Socratics (Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras), Plato, Stoicism, Spinoza, Hegel, Emerson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freire. On the topic of death, numerous articles compare Epicurus' philosophy with other Western philosophers. Other studies explore how a Daoist conception of life and death minimises perplexities on death (Dong Ping and Wang Xiao-yan¹⁰). However, there is little on the links between the philosophy of Epicurus and the *DDJ*. Thus far, only specific aspects of their philosophies such as happiness (Lobel¹¹; Shi Haiping¹²), philosophy of life and or death (Xu Rongxia¹³; Chao Lehong and Gong

⁸ Robert M. Strozier, *Epicurus and Hellenistic Philosophy* (United States of America: University Press of America, 1985), p. 17.

⁹ Qing Chang, 'Translation of *Daodejing* in English: its place and time', *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 4 (2017), pp. 93-102.

¹⁰ Dong Ping and Wang Xiao-yan, 'Life, Death and End-of-life Care: Taoist Perspective', *Bioethics: Asian Perspective. Philosophy of Medicine*, 80 (2003), pp. 147-155.

¹¹ Diana Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing Life* (United States: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹² Shi Haiping 施海平, *The Comparison of Happiness Between Epicurus and Chuang Tzu 伊壁鳩魯和莊子的快樂觀之比較* (Master's Thesis, Jiangxi Normal University, 2017).

¹³ Xu Rongxia 許榮霞, *Comparison and Analysis of Life-Death Theory between Chuangzi and Epicurus 莊子與伊壁鳩魯生死觀比較研究* (Master's Thesis, Ningxia University, 2016).

Haoyu¹⁴; Parkes¹⁵) have been compared but only from a general Daoist perspective or with just the *Zhuangzi*, and not the *DDJ*. Therefore, this paper aims to compare and draw from the philosophies of Epicurus and the *DDJ* on life and death to provide an alternative perspective to help reduce death anxiety.

2. View of the Universe

Understanding how Epicurus and the *DDJ* view the universe is essential in their perspectives on life and death. Although different in composition, both Epicurus and the *DDJ* views of the universe are parallel in some respects. As aforementioned, Epicurus holds a materialist view of atomism, whereby atoms and the void constitute the natural world; whilst the *DDJ* maintains that everything in the universe is an embodiment of the *Dao*. This section will compare and expound on these views.

2.1. Epicurus: Atomism

Epicurus' atomism was founded on Democritus' theory with significant modifications made. Leucippus and his student Democritus were the earliest Greek philosophers to develop the ancient atomist theory of the universe. In the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus provides a summary of his theory outlined by these principles:

- I. 'Nothing is created from what does not exist.'¹⁶
- II. 'The universe consists of bodies and void.'¹⁷
- III. 'Of the bodies some are compounds and others are those from which the compounds have been formed'¹⁸
- IV. 'The universe is boundless both in the number of bodies and the magnitude of the void.'¹⁹
- V. 'The indivisible and solid bodies from which compound substances are created and into which they are dissolved are incomprehensible in varieties of

¹⁴ Chao Lehong 晁樂紅 and Gong Haoyu 龔浩宇, 'Epikouros and Taoist – The Comparison of Their Philosophy', *Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University*, 3 (2016), pp. 13-20.

¹⁵ Graham Parkes, 'Confucian and Daoist, Stoic and Epicurean. Some Parallels in Ways of Living', in *Confucius and Cicero*, ed. by Andrea Balbo and Jaewon Ahn (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), pp. 43-58.

¹⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, trans. by Eugene O'Connor, 39.

¹⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 39-40.

¹⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 40-41.

¹⁹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 41-42.

their shapes.’²⁰

VI. ‘The atoms move continuously forever.’²¹

Epicurus believed that atoms and the void make up the entire universe. The space in which atoms move freely is called the void. It should not be understood as simply nothing or non-existence, as atoms require a space to move in; otherwise, everything in the universe would be changeless and stuck in the same place.²² Compared to atoms, the void has a non-resistant property that allows matter to move through it.²³ In Greek, the adjective *átomos* means ‘uncuttable’.²⁴ It is the idea of cutting physical matter an infinite number of times before reaching the atom, the smallest indivisible element that exists.

With matter, he claimed that there was a limit to which they can be divided into smaller units, else things would disappear into nothingness. That means the universe would eventually disintegrate and cease to exist over time with the wearing-down of materials. Since this is not so, and things cannot come into existence from nothingness, Epicurus wrote in the *Letter to Herodotus*,

...nothing is created from what does not exist...Moreover, the universe was and always will be the same as it is now. For there is nothing into which it changes. Beyond the universe there is nothing which, entering into it, could accomplish the change.²⁵

Epicurus thought that atoms, void, and the universe has always existed with no beginning and are limitless and without boundaries.²⁶ His logic was that the universe did not have a perceivable endpoint or outer limit, like things such as the ends of a ruler or perimeter of a soccer field. As such, an infinite number of atoms in a limited void would not allow enough room for the atoms to move, whilst a limited number of atoms scattered within a boundless void would not be able to bond and create the world we live in today.²⁷ Hence an infinite universe meant that both the number of atoms and the void must also be unlimited. Following this logic,

²⁰ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 42.

²¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 43.

²² George K. Strodach, ed. *The Philosophy of Epicurus* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2019), p. 33.

²³ Philip Mitsis, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 184.

²⁴ Sylvia Berryman, *Ancient Atomism* (2016) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atomism-ancient/>> [accessed 14 March 2021].

²⁵ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 39.

²⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 41-42.

²⁷ Philip Mitsis, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism*, p. 204.

Epicurus also suggested that with infinite atoms and a never-ending void, there is the possibility of countless number of worlds existing.²⁸

With atoms and void being the building blocks of the universe, it is logical to say that all diverse shapes and sizes of reality are composed of different combinations of various-shaped atoms or compounds – as Epicurus calls it. Even though there are limitless atoms, he further clarifies in the *Letter to Herodotus* that variety in atom shapes are ‘not absolutely infinite but only incomprehensible’.²⁹ The reasoning for using ‘incomprehensible’ rather than ‘infinite’ is that if there were an infinite variety in atom shapes, some atoms would be visible in size, and unlimited combinations of atoms would allow for mutant creatures to exist.³⁰ But because this is not the case, the varieties of atoms can only be described as incomprehensible, not unlimited. Therefore, these atoms have unchangeable unique properties (mass and configuration) that creates what is perceived in reality from colliding and interacting with one another in different ways.

Moreover, Epicurus held that atoms are constantly moving with equal velocity – vibrating or rebounding after colliding with one another.³¹ The eternal motion is the effect of the void, as it does not have any resistance. Other than relying on collisions for movement, Epicurus added that atoms have weight, which causes them to have a natural downward direction of motion.³² However, he also puts forward that atoms can swerve from their original motion path at random times. Although this is not explicit in Epicurus’ surviving works, its role can be seen in the *De Rerum Natura* by Roman Epicurean poet and philosopher Lucretius. He justifies,

For if they were not apt to incline [swerve], all [atoms] would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first-beginnings [atoms]: thus nature would never have produced anything.³³

In the physical sense, the swerve introduces spontaneity in atom motion, allowing these collisions to produce different combinations of compounds and whole worlds. The swerve then is just as important as the properties of weight and the downward

²⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 45.

²⁹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 42.

³⁰ Philip Mitsis, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism*, p. 198.

³¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 43-44.

³² Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 54, 60-61.

³³ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans by W. H. D. Rouse, 2.216.

atomic motion in Epicurean atomism. However, there is also an ethical perspective, where Lucretius argues it is the source that enables freedom of choice in our actions; otherwise, all movement in the universe would be pre-determined by the motion of atoms.³⁴ While there are many interpretations of this second argument by modern scholars, this paper will focus on Epicurus' philosophical perspective.³⁵ For Epicurus, this ethical side of the argument can be understood as his way of explaining how human beings can think, have freedom of action, and in turn, be morally responsible for their happiness without going into too much detail at the atomic level.

2.2. Laozi: *Dao*

The *Dao* is described as a process that is constant and not affected by time and space as seen in Chapter 25 of the *DDJ*,

‘There was some process that formed spontaneously, emerging before the heavens and the earth. Silent and empty, standing alone as all that is, it does not suffer alteration. All pervading, it does not pause. It can be thought of as the mother of the heavens and the earth.’³⁶

Other characteristics mentioned in Chapter 14 and 21 such as elusive (*yi* 夷), inaudible (*xi* 希), intangible (*wei* 微), and indefinite and vague (*weihuangweihu* 唯恍唯惚) show the imperceptibility of the *Dao*.³⁷ Due to its formlessness and ability to pervade all things, the term *Dao* is used for convenience. It is stated right from the beginning in Chapter 1, ‘Way-making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making, and naming (*ming*) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming.’³⁸ Once it has been defined or named, the functionality and possibilities of the *Dao* become restricted. No words can fully describe the *Dao*. However, Ames and Hall try to bring its characteristics of an ongoing process with unlimited possibilities in the translation ‘way-making’.³⁹ If translated as ‘the way’, which it is commonly

³⁴ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 2.252-293.

³⁵ See Tim O’ Keefe, *Epicurus on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2003), p. 115.

³⁷ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation*, p. 95-96.

³⁸ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation*, p. 77.

³⁹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation*, p. 79.

translated, the limitless quality of the *Dao* is lost, as it refers to ‘the only’ way.

Like atoms and void, the *Dao* as presented in the *DDJ* is the source that has always existed and is the ‘biology or fluid mechanics – life and the life-giving, flow and the flowing’ of the universe.⁴⁰ The process is outlined in Chapter 42, ‘The *Dao* generates oneness, oneness generates twoness, twoness generates threeness, threeness generates all things. Everything shoulders *yin* and embraces *yang*, surging *qi* 氣 (energy, vital energy) forms a harmony.’⁴¹ Oneness is the totality of the *Dao* within which *yin* and *yang* constitute the rhythm or movement of the *Dao*, generating an endless emergence of all things in the universe. This oneness as shown in Chapter 39,

Of old there were certain things that realised oneness: The heavens in realising oneness became clear; The earth in realising oneness became stable; The numinous in realising oneness became animated; The river valleys in realising oneness became full; The lords and kings in realising oneness brought proper order to the world.⁴²

Oneness is the energy of transformation and rhythm that gives birth to everything and allows them to flourish. According to Moeller, this creative process is not a linear causation or sequence in which events occur but co-exist and go with one another.⁴³ In this process, the *qi* 氣 is the energy or medium consisting of two opposite *qi*’s 氣 (*yin* and *yang*) that concur with one another and characterise the movement and change in all things of the universe. Even though they are opposites, their rhythmic movement allows them to return (*fan* 返) to each other and maintain a balance or harmony. The notion of everything consisting of *qi* 氣 is like Epicurus’ atoms and void, however, it is not understood in the same atomistic way, as *qi* 氣 is like a form of energy, not ‘empty’ or ‘void’.⁴⁴

Of this process, Chapter 40 states, ‘All the things in the world are generated from *you* 有 (presence), *you* 有 (presence) is generated from *wu* 無 (non-presence).’⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Brian Bruya, *Laozi: Dao De Jing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. xiii.

⁴¹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, ed. by Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 258.

⁴² Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation*, p. 136.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 40.

⁴⁴ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 36, 39.

⁴⁵ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional*

Within the context of Chapter 42, the relationship between non-presence and presence is like the non-presence of the oneness that generates the presence of twoness and the myriad of things. Both cannot be separated. In Chapter 1, presence and non-presence is described as the names of ‘the beginning of the heaven and earth’ (non-presence) and ‘the mother of all things’ (presence).⁴⁶ It is important to note that non-presence is a form of emptiness that allows presence to proceed. It is not nothingness. The *DDJ* provides examples using analogies such as the mother or female and valley in Chapter 6, ‘The spirit of the valley does not die – This is called: dark femininity. The gate of dark femininity – This is called: root of heaven and earth. How ongoing! As if it were existent. In its use inexhaustible.’⁴⁷ In the non-presence or ‘emptiness’ of the valley and womb of the female is a nurturing fertile quality that enables the birth of all life (presence) and represents the inexhaustibility of the *Dao*. Other examples include the hub of a wheel, the emptiness of a pot, and the vacancy of an enclosed space that gives rise to the functioning of the wheel, pot, and room.⁴⁸

When the *DDJ* depicts *Dao* as something intangible or as a process from non-presence to presence, it can have a metaphysical interpretation, where *Dao* is like a transcendent origin or Creator of the universe. This view is very dominant and is supported by many scholars such as Chan Wing-tsit⁴⁹, Chen Guying⁵⁰, and Star⁵¹. On the contrary, there are also others who believe that the *Dao* is not interpreted as a Creator but embodies all things in the universe.⁵² The latter interpretation is based on a holistic view with other chapters in the *DDJ*, rather than just select chapters. Instead of investigating the *Dao* as Greek philosophers do with existence and the

Commentary, p. 250.

⁴⁶ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁴⁸ Chapter 11: ‘Thirtyspokes come together at the hub of a wheel; it is only because of the empty space in the hub of the wheel that a wagon can function. Clay is kneaded into utensils; it is only because of the hollow spaces in the utensils that they can function properly. By cutting out doors and windows one can make a room; it is only because of the empty spaces where the windows and doors are that it can function as a room. Therefore, “presence” brings people benefit and “non-presence” allows it to fulfill its function.’ See Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 103.

⁴⁹ Chan Wing-tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).

⁵⁰ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*.

⁵¹ Jonathan Star, *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2001).

⁵² Scholars who support this interpretation include: Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall; Hans-Georg Moeller; Leo K. C. Cheung, ‘The metaphysics and unnamability of the “Dao” in the “Daodejing” and Wittgenstein’, *Philosophy East and West*, 67.2 (2017), pp. 352-379.

universe, the *DDJ* uses a variety of metaphors, analogies, and examples to provide an understanding of the *Dao* as seen above. From a comparative philosophical perspective, Coutinho suggests that the idea of a primordial origin is not necessarily transcendent, as natural science in Western philosophy attempts to explain the origins of the universe without mentioning a transcendental existence.⁵³ Both the *DDJ* and Epicurus' atomism is similar in this respect. As opposed to a definite law controlling all things, the *DDJ* emphasises the spontaneity of the *Dao* and letting things naturally grow in their own course without any interference.⁵⁴ Within Epicurus' atomic theory, this spontaneity is similar to the atomic swerves.

3. Perspective on Death

Following Epicurus and the *DDJ*'s views on the universe, this section will compare their perspective on death. To Epicurus, fear of death is one of the main reasons keeping one from attaining a happy and tranquil life or reaching *ataraxia*, peace and being free of fear and anxieties.⁵⁵ In response, he uses Epicurean atomism and reasoning to show nothing is to be fearful about death. On the other hand, the *DDJ* views death as part of the cyclic movement of the *Dao*. Therefore, one's death is becoming part of something bigger than oneself. It is returning and becoming one with nature or the self-so.

3.1. Epicurus: Death is Nothing to Us

The goal of Epicurus' philosophy is to live a tranquil and pleasurable life away from fear and pain. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus highlights the importance of studying philosophy for happiness. He states,

[W]e should study philosophy both in youth and in old age, so that we, though growing old, may be young in blessings through the pleasant memory of what has been; and

⁵³ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 54.

⁵⁴ Chapter 51: 'As for the honour directed at way-making and the esteem directed at efficacy, It is really something that just happens spontaneously (*ziran*) without anyone having ennobled them. Way-making gives them life and nurtures them, rears and develops them. It brings them to fruition and maturation, nourishes and guards over them. Way-making gives things life yet does not manage them. It assists them yet makes no claim upon them. It rears them yet does not lord it over them. It is this that is called profound efficacy.' See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: "Making this Life Significant" A philosophical translation*, p. 157.

⁵⁵ George K. Strodach, ed. *The Philosophy of Epicurus*, p. 60.

when young we may be old as well, because we harbour no fear over what lies ahead.⁵⁶ To him, having correct views eliminates fear and anxieties of the gods and death. Epicurus likened studying philosophy to medicine. It is 'useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind.'⁵⁷ Hence, studying philosophy is not just for the sake of it but rather, for application in life. Overall, he has four Epicurean truths or a four-part cure for human anxiety to attain *ataraxia*. They are 'Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure.'⁵⁸ This section will focus on the first half on god and death, whilst the latter will be discussed in the upcoming section on 'Philosophy of Life'.

Epicurus thought that belief in the gods were the cause of 'chief disturbance' in humankind.⁵⁹ That is not to say that the gods do not exist. Epicurus does not deny the existence of the gods. Instead, he argues that it is due to false and inconsistent conceptions about the gods that brings about anxiety.⁶⁰ These conceptions may be being punished for evil wrongdoings and receiving good fortune for good deeds or having to commit sacrifices or horrific acts to please the gods. Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis is an example that Lucretius uses in explaining the relationship between anxiety and the gods and religion.⁶¹ As false conceptions of the gods can add to one's death anxiety or anxiety in general, it is difficult to view the gods in a way that is beneficial to one's wellbeing. Henceforth Epicurus put forward humans should view the gods or blessed immortals as models living happy lives and aspire to emulate their happy life.⁶² He rationalises that because the gods are already perfect and enjoy the best life, there is no reason to govern in human lives or become upset if not honoured.⁶³ This idea is also portrayed in his atomist theory. Since atoms and void constitute the universe, the gods have no concern over human beings, as they too are composed of atoms, so

⁵⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, trans. by Eugene O'Connor, 122.

⁵⁷ 'Vain is the word of a philosopher, by which no mortal suffering is healed. Just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away bodily disease, so is philosophy useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind. See Epicurus, *Fragments*, trans. by Eugene O'Connor, 54.

⁵⁸ *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, trans., Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, p. vii.

⁵⁹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 81.

⁶⁰ For the gods exist; of them we have distinct knowledge. But they are not such as the majority think them to be. For they do not maintain a consistent view of what they think the gods are. The impious man is not he who confutes the gods of majority, but he who applies to the gods the majority's opinions. See Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123-124.

⁶¹ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.80-101.

⁶² James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 40.

⁶³ James Warren, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.240.

there is no need to be afraid of them.

For many, death anxiety is also related to a fear of pain or what will happen when death arrives. Epicurus addresses this fear through the nature of the soul and sensations and perceptions of the body. Unlike philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato who believed that the soul was immortal, Epicurus believed the opposite. The soul ceases to exist when the body dies.⁶⁴ At the atomic level, the soul is the same as everything else in the universe. However, in the *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus describes the soul as a 'body of fine particles dispersed throughout the entire organism [body]', like air in a balloon.⁶⁵ He also uses the independent existence of the void to support his claim that the soul is mortal. Where the void only allows atoms to pass through it, it 'can neither act nor be acted upon'.⁶⁶ The soul, on the other hand, has neither of these properties. Therefore, it cannot be deemed immortal or independently existing. According to Epicurus, the soul exists because we can feel them through our feelings and senses.⁶⁷ He uses sense perception to demonstrate the relationship between the body and soul.

It is the soul that allows the body to feel different sensations. For Epicurus, sensations are perceived through a constant flow of films or atomic streams that interact with the body's sense organs.⁶⁸ About the section on 'Epicurean Atomism', atoms already possess unique mass and configuration properties that are unchangeable. Thus, it is not that the sensations already have the shape, size, colour properties of what is perceived, but a result of the collisions and combinations of atoms that bring about this perception. So, when the soul passes, the body also loses its ability to perceive sensations. Hence his famous quote, 'Death is nothing to us. For what has been dispersed has no sensation. And what has no sensation is nothing to us.'⁶⁹ This is the same as saying 'since while we exist, death is not present, and whenever death is present, we do not exist.'⁷⁰ All pleasantness and unpleasantness lies in our sensory perception. When this ability is gone, what makes death pleasant or unpleasant?

For this reason, Epicurus concludes that a person who fears death is foolish

⁶⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 64.

⁶⁵ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 63.

⁶⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 67.

⁶⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 65.

⁶⁸ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 46a-48.

⁶⁹ Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, trans. by Eugene O'Connor, 2.

⁷⁰ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 125.

because it is not death that is painful but the act of anticipating it.⁷¹ Rather than enjoying every moment in life, every moment is spent worrying about death. Living in this state and mindset reinforces the need for a correct understanding of death. It is evident in his *Principal Doctrines*, ‘If apprehensions about the heavens and our fear lest death concern us, as well as our failure to realise the limits of pains and desires, did not bother us, we would have no need of natural science.’⁷² Although the natural science of today is much more advanced, Epicurus’ argument is clear. The ‘training for living well and dying well is the same.’⁷³ It is necessary to eradicate false understandings and fears of god and death to live a happy life. By doing so, life is more enjoyable, and it takes away the yearning for immortality.⁷⁴

3.2. Laozi: Returning to the Self-So

The *DDJ*’s perspective on death is not explicit as in Epicurus’ philosophy. Where the character death (*si* 死) is mentioned in the *DDJ*, it is often in a political context (Chapters 67, 74, 75, 80),⁷⁵ describing the *Dao* (Chapter 6)⁷⁶ or sage (Chapter 33)⁷⁷ and health preservation (Chapters 42, 50, 76).⁷⁸ Instead, it is implied within the ongoing cycle of motion of the *Dao*. This cycle is expressed in Chapter 25 as grand, ‘spreads into the distance, reaches all things, and returns.’⁷⁹ Because the *Dao* is borderless and all-encompassing, it can pervade everything and return, moving in a ceaseless cycle. This movement is reinforced in Chapter 40 which states, ‘the movement of the *Dao* is reversal.’⁸⁰ Within nature, this cyclic motion is like the continuous change from dusk to dawn and dawn to dusk, from the four seasons each year, or the regular rise and fall of the tides in the ocean. Moeller suggests that the

⁷¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124-125.

⁷² Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 11.

⁷³ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 126.

⁷⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124-125.

⁷⁵ See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing*: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation, p. 183, 193, 194, 201-202.

⁷⁶ Chapter 6: ‘The spirit of the valley does not die – This is called: dark femininity. The gate of dark femininity – This is called: root of heaven and earth. How ongoing! As if it were existent. In its use inexhaustible.’ See Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁷⁷ See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing*: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation, p. 128.

⁷⁸ See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing*: “Making this Life Significant” A philosophical translation, p. 143, 155, 195.

⁷⁹ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, p. 52.

⁸⁰ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, p. 61.

reversal of the Dao's motion is a constant re-turn system that is self-sustained and self-generative, always returning to itself.

While Chapter 25 provides an overall understanding of the cyclic movement of the *Dao*, it is discussed in further detail in Chapter 16,

The ten thousand things arise in unison; I observe how they return, resume. All things come forth so numerously; each of them returning to their roots. Returning to the root is called tranquillity. Tranquillity is called returning to destiny. Going back to the propensity of things is understanding. If one does not understand the propensity of things, they will act recklessly, and bring misfortune.⁸¹

This chapter expresses the *DDJ*'s perspective on death. All things that emerge from the cyclic movement of the *Dao* will 'return to their root' which is also called tranquillity and destiny. Whereas tranquillity in Epicurus' philosophy is the ideal state of happiness, being free from fear and pain, tranquillity (and destiny) in this chapter of the *DDJ* is going back to the emptiness and oneness of the *Dao*. As earlier mentioned in discussing Laozi's *Dao*, this emptiness and oneness is the non-presence (*wu* 無) of the *Dao* stated in Chapter 42 where 'oneness generates twoness [presence (*you* 有)], twoness generates threeness, threeness generates all things.'⁸² In returning to this oneness, Moeller maintains that this process is being able to accept death (or the returning of the roots) as a natural process in the cyclic movement of the *Dao*.⁸³ Therefore, it is letting go of the individuality of death and becoming connected with the bigger *Dao* that nurtures all things. In nature, this returning process is like the fallen leaves of a tree, returning to the soil and decomposing to become nutrients for other organisms, allow for the growth of new leaves, and other endless possibilities. Through observing the return (*guanfu* 觀復) people are taking a step back to look at the death from the entirety of the all-pervading ceaseless cycle of the *Dao* and become part of the grand process.

In addition to this, the *DDJ* reveals that 'Human beings follow the example of the earth, the earth follows the example of the heaven, heaven follows the example

⁸¹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 12, 124. The translation includes modifications with reference to Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: "Making this Life Significant" A philosophical translation*, p. 99.

⁸² Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, ed. by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 258.

⁸³ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 125.

of the *Dao*, the *Dao* follows the example of what is self-so (*ziran* 自然).⁸⁴ When humans act against the *Dao*, misfortunes will follow. Self-so (*ziran* 自然) is the idea of what is spontaneously so.⁸⁵ It is the unintentional course of nature, where every response is not forced, and things happen naturally. It is also the natural and fluid process that brings all things in harmony together.⁸⁶ Therefore, death is not the permanent end to the body or individual. It is part of continuous shifts in the phases of life and death within the return and cyclic movement of the *Dao*.⁸⁷

Equivalent to how Epicurus stresses the importance of studying philosophy to have correct views on the gods and death, the *DDJ* also does the same with understanding the propensity of things or cyclic movement of the *Dao*. As stated in Chapter 16 above, those who fail to realise and accept death will act recklessly to try and extend their life.⁸⁸ Consequently, this will bring about misfortune, as it goes against the natural process of the *Dao*. However, with clarity on this propensity, the latter part of Chapter 16 tells that people are able to become all-embracing, which leads to being selfless and all-pervading, as this is in accordance with the constant *Dao*. As a result, they would not come across danger in this life.⁸⁹ The notion of not coming across danger here is not interpreted in the physical sense, but rather as a form of mentality like Epicurus' perspective on death. From accepting and understanding the return and cyclic movement of the *Dao*, people no longer feel anxious about their physical bodies or fear dangers (death). This logic is identical to Epicurus' view, whereby understanding death is the absence of sensation eliminates the fear of death.

⁸⁴ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, ed. by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), p. 171.

⁸⁵ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: "Making this Life Significant"* A philosophical translation, p. 115.

⁸⁶ Liu Jing, *Nature Nurturing Ziran in Early Daoist Thinking* (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, University of Hawaii, 2018), p. 72.

⁸⁷ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 122.

⁸⁸ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Translated by myself with reference to Wang Bi 王弼, Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, *Laozi Daode Zhenjing Zhu Jiaoshi* 老子道德真經注校釋 [Explanations of The Commentary on the Genuine Daodejing] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2008), pp. 36-37; Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao – A New Way of Thinking* (London and Philadelphia: Singing Dragon, 2014), pp. 123-124.

4. Philosophy of Life

Besides gaining insight on different viewpoints of death, a further aspect to consider is their outlook on life. This section will compare the Epicurus' and the *DDJ*'s philosophy of life. Epicurus' philosophy of life is a form of enlightened egoistic hedonism. It is seeking to fulfil simple, moderate pleasures through reflection and practical reasoning known as prudence (or practical wisdom *phronesis*). The *DDJ* has many similarities to Epicurus' philosophy such as leading a simple self-content life. However, rather than exercising prudence, the *DDJ* emphasises attentive awareness and effortless action.

4.1. Epicurus: Enlightened Egoistic Hedonism

Hedonism means pleasure in Greek. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus states that 'pleasure is the beginning and the goal of a happy life.'⁹⁰ The meaning of pleasure in Epicurus' philosophy is very different to the modern representation in hedonism, referring to indulging in luxuries, delicacies, and or physical pleasures; for Epicurus, pleasure refers to the absence of pain and fear. On his four-part cure previously mentioned, this section will focus on the latter half, 'what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure'.⁹¹

The third of his four-part cure is 'what is good is easy to get'. In other words, self-sufficiency. Epicurus' definition of a happy life is characterised by simple pleasures that are easy to obtain. He says, 'everything easy to procure if natural while everything difficult to obtain is superfluous.'⁹² Epicurus acknowledges there are many types of pleasures and desires. He makes distinctions between those that are natural and necessary desires; natural but unnecessary desires; and those that are not natural or necessary which stem from groundless opinion.⁹³ Of the natural and necessary desires, he further elaborates that there are 'those that are necessary for happiness and those that are necessary for the body's freedom from disturbance, and those that are necessary for life itself.'⁹⁴ To him, pleasure is not just the satisfaction of human desire. It is an essential part of living a happy life. Even if it is

⁹⁰ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128-129.

⁹¹ *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, trans., Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, p. vii.

⁹² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 130.

⁹³ Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 29.

⁹⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 128.

human nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain, not all pleasures are unnecessary and pains avoidable.⁹⁵ This innate nature can be seen in infants.⁹⁶ Thirst and hunger are examples of unavoidable pains, or natural and necessary desires for survival, as humans require food, water, and shelter to survive. These desires are easy to fulfil because there is a limit to the capacity of the stomach. Other natural and necessary mental pleasures involve being free from anxiety and fear such as that of death as discussed earlier.

Natural but unnecessary desires are like that of luxury foods. Even though food is necessary for life, there is no requirement to eat a certain quality to survive. Simple and plain foods provide the same pleasure when one is hungry. For the underprivileged, the simplest of foods such as bread and water can provide the greatest pleasure. As a result, Epicurus warns against becoming too attached or addicted to these natural but unnecessary pleasures, for dependency on these increases one's unhappiness if unfulfilled.⁹⁷ So a secret to happiness is to not become dependent on any pleasures that are not natural and necessary for survival.

Desires that are neither natural nor necessary include fame, wealth, and power. Differing from natural and necessary desires, which are naturally limited and easily fulfilled, these desires are difficult to fulfil because they do not have a natural limit. Epicurus believes these desires are instilled by society's expectations and should not be pursued. It is stated in his *Principal Doctrines*, 'No pleasure is evil in itself; but the means of obtaining some pleasures bring in their wake troubles many times greater than the pleasures.'⁹⁸ Seeing as greed knows no bounds, pursuing these pleasures can cause desires to increase and become uncontrollable, bringing more troubles than pleasure. Additionally, these unnatural and unnecessary desires decrease one's feeling of self-sufficiency and affect their overall happiness. By adjusting to and accepting the simple life, people are in a better mindset when faced with these lavish pleasures and are less likely to become attached. Yet Epicurus also speaks against excessive frugality, asserting '[t]here is also a limit to frugality. The man unable to consider this suffers a similar send as the [one] who indulges in excess.'⁹⁹ So, the

⁹⁵ Diana Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing Life* (United States: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 43-44.

⁹⁶ Cicero, *Cicero: On Moral Ends*, trans. by Raphael Woolf, Julila Annas, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.30.

⁹⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 131.

⁹⁸ Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 8.

⁹⁹ Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings*, trans. by Eugene O'Connor, 63.

way to a happy life lies in making judgements through prudence on the pleasures to fulfil. That is, fulfilling those that are natural and necessary at the foremost, those that are natural but unnecessary with moderation, and avoiding desires that are neither natural nor necessary.

Behind his hedonistic philosophy of life, prudence is highly regarded by Epicurus, even more so than philosophy, as it is responsible for reasoning and judgement to achieve a happy life. Epicurus believes that '[p]rudence teaches us how impossible it is to live pleasantly without living wisely, virtuously, and justly, just as we cannot live wisely, virtuously, and justly without living pleasantly.'¹⁰⁰ Prudence is how one can live a wise and happy life. As mentioned above, it is the top priority to cater to natural and necessary desires, as this is the basis for a happy and tranquil life. In the *Principal Doctrines*, Epicurus explicates, 'If every pleasure were condensed [maximised] and existed for a long time throughout the entire organism or its most important parts, pleasures would never differ from one another.'¹⁰¹ If other pleasures derived from unnecessary desires can be perceived as no different to natural and necessary desires, humans would only need to fulfil those necessary for survival. Furthermore, he reveals that desires that do not bring pain do not need to be pursued, as they easily can be eliminated.¹⁰² Usually, these desires are difficult to fulfil and bring more harm than pleasure. However, sometimes pain is chosen over pleasure, as the resulting pleasure is far greater than the initial pain.¹⁰³ This concept is the fourth of his four-part cure is 'what is terrible is easy to endure'. Much thought and judgement on the outcomes goes into each choice and avoidance of pain and pleasures. Hence, Epicurus' happy and tranquil life is self-sufficiency and making wise choices to be free of pain, fear, and (unnecessary) desires.

4.2. Laozi: Knowing Contentment

The *DDJ*'s philosophy of life is very alike to Epicurus' pleasure-seeking life. In terms of tranquillity, it was earlier started in discussing the perspectives on death that the returning to the root is also called tranquillity. Within that context, tranquillity represented the emptiness and oneness of the *Dao*. However, Chen Guying suggests

¹⁰⁰ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 133.

¹⁰¹ Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 9.

¹⁰² Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines*, 26.

¹⁰³ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 129.

that emptiness in social and interpersonal contexts, such as not being too engrossed with oneself and being free of desires also demonstrate the quality of tranquillity.¹⁰⁴ This can be seen in Chapter 37 ‘Without desires it is tranquil, everything in the world will self-correct (*zizheng* 自正)’¹⁰⁵ and Chapter 57,

That is why someone who is in line with the Dao says: “I do not act and the people cultivate themselves; I delight in tranquillity, and the people spontaneously get on the right track; I do not interfere, and the people prosper out of themselves; I have no greedy desires, and the people naturally embrace simplicity.”¹⁰⁶

Within these chapters, the *DDJ* tells that a pure, simple, and tranquil state can be attained from being free of (greedy) desires. The *DDJ*’s conception of desires can also be seen in Chapter 12, ‘The five colours blind the eyes; the five tones deafen the ears; the [five] tastes damage the mouth. Hunting frantically serves only to make the human heart-mind crazy.’¹⁰⁷ Seeking sensory stimulation can lead to an addiction or obsession of the stimulus, as one gradually becomes used to the sensation and craves for more intensity. In this sense, one is never really satisfied. So, desires are an absence of stimulation for satisfaction, while satisfaction is the fulfilment of desires. Henceforth, the *DDJ* promotes a form of ‘paradoxical hedonism’, where contentment is achieved through prohibiting the emergence of desires that are insatiable.¹⁰⁸ Or in other words, satisfying desires that are satiable and required for survival. Here, Epicurus’ and the *DDJ*’s philosophies of life are almost identical. They are both forms of hedonism, refer to tranquillity as the state of contentment, and only seek to fulfil satiable desires.

Both Epicurus and the *DDJ* accentuates the importance of being free from unnecessary desires of wealth, fame, and power. Within the *DDJ*, these aspects are often written from a political perspective, outlining how a sage-ruler should be. Desires as understood in the *DDJ* to be artificially constructed by the human language. Chapter 2 of the *DDJ* denotes, ‘Once all in the human realm know the

¹⁰⁴ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁵ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 319.

¹⁰⁷ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 94.

reason for deeming beautiful beautiful, the notion of ugliness has already arisen; once all know the reason for deeming good good, the notion of badness has already arisen.¹⁰⁹ As humans use language to make meaning of the world, certain values are implicitly embedded within the naming and classification of things, causing them to lose their 'potential to be' and become locked within a dualistic standard. If it is not beautiful, then it is ugly; if it is not good, then it is bad. Subsequently, certain things are deemed as desirable and will increase one's social status (virtue, wealth, beauty, social position), whilst others are not. Coutinho claims that these additions are what deviates humans from flourishing naturally and knowing contentment.¹¹⁰ In the same view as Epicurus, the *DDJ* demonstrates that pursuing these desires lead to insatiable greed and a big ego. Chapter 24 reads, 'Flaunting your own opinions, you will not make yourself seen. By considering yourself to be the right, you will not be able to shine forth. By bragging, you will not achieve success. By being conceited, you will not endure.'¹¹¹ Greed and desires are exhibited through these four egoistic behaviours. Instead, the *DDJ* advocates humility and altruism through 'removal' or de-construction of these four tendencies. Only then can one achieve everlasting contentment.

As a consequence, the *DDJ* reinforces the significance of knowing the limits in order to be content. The *DDJ* proposes questions to consider in Chapter 44 about knowing the limits and contentment.

Which is closer to you in comparison with one another, reputation or life? Which is more valuable to you in comparison with one another, life or possessions? Which is more harmful, getting reputation and profit or losing one's life? Overly loving reputation will necessarily lead to expending a lot; gathering too many possessions will necessarily lead to grievous losses. Therefore, knowing satisfaction one will not suffer humiliation or disgrace, knowing when it is appropriate and acceptable to stop, then danger will not follow, and this way can be maintained for a long time.¹¹²

These questions ask people to truly consider the value of pursuing unnecessary desires that are insatiable in nature. There is a lot more to lose in the process of

¹⁰⁹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 61.

¹¹⁰ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, p. 69.

¹¹¹ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 169.

¹¹² Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 269.

chasing after success, fame, and money than gain, as ‘one’s life’ appears in all the choices within the questions. The *DDJ* uses this chapter to show that the sacrifices (time, health, family, freedom) made just to gain recognition is not worth it. The *DDJ* also warns against possible dangers or misfortunes following this path, as it may lead to actions that are not in accordance with the *Dao*. Knowing the limits is like understanding the return and cyclic movement of the *Dao* and accepting death as part of the fluid process mentioned in Chapter 16 on the *DDJ*’s perspective on death.

¹¹³ As such, people would not try to act recklessly in trying to prolong their lives otherwise misfortunes will follow. The notion of knowing the limit in the *DDJ* is similar to prudence in Epicurus’ philosophy in which careful reasoning and judgement is required in choosing which pleasures to seek and avoid.

Comparable to how Epicurus places the fulfilment of natural and necessary desires in the foremost, the *DDJ* does the same with the needs of the physical body in the latter part of Chapter 12, ‘Therefore, the wise concentrates on the belly and not on the temptations of the senses. Thus, [s/]he abides in the one and forgoes the other.’ ¹¹⁴ Rather than seeking sensory stimulations and pleasures, the *DDJ*’s elimination of insatiable desires lie in choosing to focus on the needs of the physical body. When these needs such as hunger are met (by eating), the body will not have any further desire. That is unless the purpose of eating is not to satisfy hunger. Thus, knowing the limits and knowing contentment are essential in eliminating one’s desires.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, both Epicurus and the *DDJ* provide valid perspectives on life and death. Although science has evolved since the time of Epicurus’ atomic theory, his work has influenced many famous thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx. Epicurus showed how looking at death objectively through the medium of science can help to understanding the workings of the universe and help reduce death anxiety. In cognitive behavioural therapy today, finding ways to accept and

¹¹³ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, p. 12, 124. The translation includes modifications with reference to Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Daodejing: “Making this Life Significant”* A philosophical translation, p. 99.

¹¹⁴ Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao – A New Way of Thinking*, p. 110.

adjust people's attitudes towards death is what Epicurus tried to share in his philosophy.¹¹⁵ Though it is revealed in modern psychology that pleasure is not the opposite of pain, there is evidence showing that happiness derives from moderate pleasure-seeking.¹¹⁶ Overall, Epicurus himself is the perfect example of his own philosophy put into practise.

On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them; but over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your life-long attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus.¹¹⁷

Even while suffering from kidney stones, he remained happy until the very end of his life.

Laozi's *DDJ* on the other hand, provides people with a greater connection to the universe through the *Dao* and understanding their role and position in the great cyclic process. Rather than believing in an afterlife or immortality of the soul, both philosophies accept the realities of death and highlight the significance of reason and understanding in vanquishing superstition and irrational fear and anxieties about it. As such, people can let go of their ego and fears to see the flow of life and death as the ceaseless movement of the *Dao*. Additionally, by knowing the limits and knowing contentment (and self-sufficiency from Epicurus' philosophy) people are less likely to have a longing for immortality and unsatiable pleasures. Instead, they can enjoy the simplicity and subtleties of the self-so (*ziran* 自然) in life.

¹¹⁵ Jeremy Dean, *Hedonist Philosopher Epicurus Was Right About Happiness (Mostly)* (2007) <<https://www.spring.org.uk/2007/12/hedonist-philosopher-epicurus-was-right.php>> [accessed 20 March 2021.]

¹¹⁶ R. J. O'Shaughnessy, 'Enjoying and Suffering', *Analysis*, 26.5 (1966), pp.153-160; Kennon M. Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky, 'How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1.2 (2006), pp. 73-82.

¹¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Complete Works of Diogenes Laertius*, trans. by R. D. Hicks (United Kingdom: Delphi Classics, 2015), p. 845.

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