

The Epicureans and the Stoics.

Two groups of philosophers are mentioned in Acts 17:

1. The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (341-270BC) and they met for discussions in a garden. Epicurus was a hedonist and an atomist. Hedonists believed that that which was pleasant was that which was good and man's highest good was not religious or spiritual but simply pleasure. Atomists believed that the universe was made up of tiny particles or atoms which were indestructible and uncuttable. Some Hedonists believed that one should simply strive for the most pleasure possible in life. Epicurus, however, distinguished between pleasures, counting intellectual pleasures as higher than merely sensual pleasures. He taught that one should avoid pain and live a life of regulated intellectual pleasure. He taught that since we only know about things through the senses and observation, we need not fear death since death is the end of sensation.

2. The Stoics were a very different group of philosophers. They met in a porch (the Greek for porch is *Stoa*) and to us their ideas seem more noble than the hedonists. This popular school of thought lasted from Zeno (340-265BC) to Seneca (4BC-65AD) and Marcus Aurelius (121-180AD). Cleanthes, (c.330-c.230BC) one of the Greek poets Paul quoted in Acts 17, was a Stoic. Stoics emphasised duty, self control, indifference to pain and passion. Pantheistic¹ in outlook, they believed that "reason" permeates all the natural world and that by getting in tune with "reason" or "nature" was the way to live a good life. Stoics believed that "what ever is, is right" as Alexander Pope (much later) said. One should therefore not strive against "nature" but fit into its flow, accepting with passive indifference both good and evil, conquering and controlling one's own passions and impulses. This "stiff upper lip" attitude was considered very useful in soldiers and Roman emperors liked to have stoical subjects who would put up with things heroically and not complain.

What is wrong with these ideas? Using the philosophers' own ideas we can point out problems with their thinking:

Epicurus thought that all knowledge was received through the senses but how did he know that – through his senses?

That men seek pleasure is maybe true but how does Epicurus prove that pleasure is what they *ought* to seek?

If *whatever* is, is right (as the stoics taught) how can it matter whether or not I live a life of self-control? What I do must be right whatever it is.

Mark the following statements with an E for Epicureans or an S for Stoics.

Met in a garden.

Met in a porch.

Believed that everything is controlled by "reason" or "nature".

Believed that the highest good is pleasure.

Thought we can only know what our senses tell us.

Believed that we need not worry about death.

Believed we should control our passions and accept whatever happens with calm indifference.

¹ Pantheists believe that everything is God and that God is everything.