

Introduction to Epicurus' "Letter to Menoecus"

Written by a student in a previous version of PHIL 102 at UBC

Have you ever envisioned yourself living like "a god among men?" Well, according to Epicurus, that is possible if you follow his teachings! In his "Letter to Menoecus" the ancient Greek philosopher explains how to live that successful and god-like life you desire.

But, before we begin, who exactly was Epicurus? Well, Epicurus was a philosopher from ancient Greece. He was born in Samos in Greece in 341 BC, and moved to Athens at the age of eighteen. There, for many years, he accumulated followers of his philosophy, now termed "Epicureanism". Finally, he died in the year 270 BC in Athens. To put his life in further context, he was a part of the Hellenistic period, which occurred two centuries after the death of Alexander the Great. (This is a very brief summary, for more, the Oxford Bibliography website offers a more complex version of his story).

Now back to the text: First and foremost, Epicurus wants us to get rid of all our pain and anxiety. Since fear causes anxiety, he wants us to stop being fearful, which at the time meant eradicating fears of the gods and death, although as university students it might more be our fear of an upcoming midterm. Either way, fear has got to go! He also gives more ways to be freed from pain and anxiety, which you can find in the section on "Mastering Desires" and "Living Wisely" so pay close attention to those parts! Once all pain and anxiety is gone we experience pleasure, which he defines as the highest good. To Epicurus, pleasure is the key to everything happy, and it is by living pleasurably that we can truly excel in life. So when you're reading the following text, try to flesh out Epicurus' main argument in support of seeking pleasure, and then his other contentions in support of this ultimate goal, like why we shouldn't fear death, for example. Clearly, mastering the Epicurean way of life is essential to gain god-like superiority over one's peers!

Finally, for more information on Epicurus' views of the gods (since our class readings do not go into much detail), visit the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy's page on this philosopher, a citation for which has been provided below.

O'Keefe, Tim. "Epicurus." *Oxford Bibliographies*, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0261.xml>. Accessed 25 Feb 2018.

O'Keefe, Tim. "Epicurus (341-271 B.C.E)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/epicur/>. Accessed 25 Feb 2018.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus

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From <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/Lives.html#140>

Exhortation

Epicurus to Menoeceus, greetings,

Let no one hesitate to study philosophy while young, and let no one tire of it when old, for it is never too soon nor too late to devote oneself to the well-being of the soul. Whoever says that the time for philosophy has not yet come or that it has already passed is saying that it is too soon or too late for happiness. Therefore both the young and the old should study philosophy so that, while old, one may still be young with all the joy he has gathered from the past; and while young, one may at the same time be old through fearlessness of the future.

We must practice what produces happiness because when we have it, we have everything, and if we lack it, we shall be doing everything necessary to regain it. So I encourage you, as always, to study and practice my teachings, for they are the basic ingredients of a happy life.

Don't Fear the Gods

A god is an immortal and happy being. This is well-known, but do not believe anything about divine nature other than what is congenial for an eternally happy existence. The gods do exist because we have preconceived notions of them, but they are not like how most people describe them. Most people embellish their notions of the gods with false beliefs. They credit the gods for delivering rewards and punishments because they commend those who share their own ways and condemn those who do not. Rejecting the popular myths does not make one impious; preaching them is what demonstrates impiety.

Don't Fear Death

Death is no concern to us. All things good and bad are experienced through sensation, but sensation ceases at death. So death is nothing to us, and to know this makes a mortal life happy. Life is not improved by adding infinite time; removing the desire for immortality is what's required. There is no reason why one who is convinced that there is nothing to fear at death should fear anything about it during life. And whoever says that he dreads death not because it's painful to experience, but only because it's painful to contemplate, is foolish. It is pointless to agonize over something that brings no trouble when it arrives. So death, the most dreaded of evils, is nothing to us, because when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist. It neither concerns the living nor the dead, since death does not exist for the living, and the dead no longer exist.

Most people, however, either dread death as the greatest of suffering or long for it as a relief from suffering. One who is wise neither renounces life nor fears not living. Life does not offend

him, nor does he suppose that not living is any kind of suffering. For just as he would not choose the greatest amount of food over what is most delicious, so too he does not seek the longest possible life, but rather the happiest. And he who advises the young man to live well and the old man to die well is also foolish – not only because it’s desirable to live, but because the art of living well and the art of dying well are the same. And he was still more wrong who said it would be better to have never been born, but that “Once born, be quick to pass through the gates of Hades!” {Theognis, 425 - 427} If he was being serious, why wasn’t he himself quick to end his life? Certainly the means were available if this was what he really wanted to do. But if he was not serious, then we have even less reason to believe him.

Future days are neither wholly ours, nor wholly not ours. We must neither depend on them as sure to come nor despair that we won’t live to see them.

Master Your Desires

Among desires, some are natural and some are vain. Of those that are natural, some are necessary and some unnecessary. Of those that are necessary, some are necessary for happiness, some for health, and some for life itself. A clear recognition of desires enables one to base every choice and avoidance upon whether it secures or upsets bodily comfort and peace of mind – the goal of a happy life.

Everything we do is for the sake of freedom from pain and anxiety. Once this is achieved, the storms in the soul are stilled. Nothing else and nothing more are needed to perfect the well-being of the body and soul. It is when we feel pain that we must seek relief, which is pleasure. And when we no longer feel pain, we have all the pleasure we need.

Pleasure, we declare, is the beginning and end of the happy life. We are endowed by nature to recognize pleasure as the greatest good. Every choice and avoidance we make is guided by pleasure as our standard for judging the goodness of everything.

Although pleasure is the greatest good, not every pleasure is worth choosing. We may instead avoid certain pleasures when, by doing so, we avoid greater pains. We may also choose to accept pain if, by doing so, it results in greater pleasure. So while every pleasure is naturally good, not every pleasure should be chosen. Likewise, every pain is naturally evil, but not every pain is to be avoided. Only upon considering all consequences should we decide. Thus, sometimes we might regard the good as evil, and conversely: the evil as good.

We regard self-sufficiency as a great virtue – not so that we may only enjoy a few things, but so that we may be satisfied with a few things if those are all we have. We are firmly convinced that those who least yearn for luxury enjoy it most, and that while natural desires are easily fulfilled, vain desires are insatiable. Plain meals offer the same pleasure as luxurious fare, so long as the pain of hunger is removed. Bread and water offer the greatest pleasure for those in need of them. Accustoming oneself to a simple lifestyle is healthy and it doesn’t sap our motivation to perform the necessary tasks of life. Doing without luxuries for long intervals allows us to better appreciate them and keeps us fearless against changes of fortune.

When we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasure of debauchery or sensuality. Despite whatever may be said by those who misunderstand, disagree with, or deliberately slander our teachings, the goal we *do* seek is this: freedom from pain in the body and freedom from turmoil in the soul. For it is not continuous drinking and revelry, the sexual enjoyment of women and boys, or feasting upon fish and fancy cuisine which result in a happy life. Sober reasoning is what is needed, which decides every choice and avoidance and liberates us from the false beliefs which are the greatest source of anxiety.

Live Wisely

The greatest virtue and the basis for all virtues is *prudence*. Prudence, the art of practical wisdom, is something even more valuable than philosophy, because all other virtues spring from it. It teaches us that it is not possible to live pleurably unless one also lives prudently, honorably, and justly; nor is it possible to live prudently, honestly, and justly without living pleurably. For the virtues are inseparable from a happy life, and living happily is inseparable from the virtues.

Who could conceivably be better off than one who is wise? No one could be more content than one who simply reveres the gods, who is utterly unafraid of death, and who has discovered the natural goal of life. He understands that pleasure, the greatest good, is easily supplied to absolute fullness, while pain, the greatest evil, lasts only a moment when intense and is easily tolerated when prolonged.

Some believe that everything is ruled by *fate*, but we should dismiss this. One who is wise knows that the greater power of decision lies within oneself. He understands that while some things are indeed caused by fate, other things happen by chance or by choice. He sees that fate is irrefutable and chance unreliable, but choices deserve either praise or blame because what is decided by choice is not subject to any external power. One would be better off believing in the myths about the gods than to be enslaved by the determinism proclaimed by certain physicists. At least the myths offer hope of winning divine favors through prayer, but fate can never be appealed.

Some believe that *chance* is a god, but we should dismiss this also. One who is wise knows the gods do not act randomly. He does not believe that everything is randomly caused. Nor does he believe, in cases when they are, that chance is doling out good and evil with the intent of making human lives happy or unhappy. He would actually prefer to suffer setbacks while acting wisely than to have miraculous luck while acting foolishly; for it would be better that well-planned actions should perchance fail than ill-planned actions should perchance succeed.

Conclusion

Practice these teachings daily and nightly. Study them on your own or in the company of a like minded friend, and you shall not be disturbed while awake or asleep. You shall live like a god among men, because one whose life is fortified by immortal blessings in no way resembles a mortal being.