

# Epicurus

## Reading 2 – On Living Well & Happily – The Letter to Menoeceus

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! . . . For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. . . . You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. . . . I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" —Titus Lucretius Carus

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## On Living Well & Happily

### The Letter to Menoeceus

#### Reading 2

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The source for the following text is

Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

All section numbers are part of Book 10. For example, section 117, or [117], is 10.117.

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DIOGENES LAERTIUS: [117] As for those things having what we should avoid, Epicurus writes as follows: . . .<sup>1</sup>  
to do with human life, what we should choose and [121]

#### EPICURUS TO MENOECEUS, GREETING. [122].

**L**ET NO ONE put off studying philosophy when he is young, nor become weary of it when he is old, for no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. To suggest that the time for studying philosophy has not yet come or that it is long gone is like saying that it is too early or too late for happiness. Therefore, both the young and the old should seek wisdom. The latter should do philosophy so that, even though he is old, he may be young in good things through the delight of what has been, whereas the former should do philosophy so that, while he is still young, he may at the same time be old through his lack of fear of what is destined to come. So, we must practice those things that produce happiness since if happiness is present, we possess everything, and if it is not, we do everything to acquire it.

## THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF LIVING WELL

[123] Do and practice those things that I have continually recommended to you, taking them to be the basic elements of living well.

*The Gods*

First, you should acknowledge that the god is an indestructible and blessed living being. This is the commonly held understanding of the god, the common epithet in writing. Accordingly, do not attribute to him anything that is contrary to his indestructibility or incongruous with his blessed happiness. Instead, think about the god whatever can defend and uphold his blessed happiness and his indestructibility.<sup>2</sup>

I say this because there are gods. And knowledge related to them is manifest. But the gods are not such as the many customarily believe since the many do not carefully guard and thus maintain a consistent view about the gods. The impious man is not the one who denies the gods of the many; rather, the impious man is the one who adheres to the opinions of the many about the gods. [124] This is so because the assertions of the many about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions.

So it is that the greatest harms come to bad men from the gods, while the greatest benefits come to good men. For the gods always receive those men who are like them since they make every virtue their own, while rejecting everything that does not belong to them.

*Death*

You should get used to the idea that death means nothing to us. This is so because every good and every evil is connected to sensation. And death is the loss of all sensation.

It follows that a right understanding of the fact that death means nothing to us makes the mortal nature of life beneficial to us—not by adding to life an unlimited amount of time, but by taking away the

yearning for immortality. [125] For there is no terror at all in living for the one who has thoroughly grasped that there is no terror at all in not living. Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death because it pains him to think about its eventual coming rather than actually pain him when it comes. Whatever causes no trouble when it is present causes only a groundless pain in its mere anticipation.

So then, death—that evil which most causes us to shudder—means nothing to us since when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist. In fact, death means nothing either to the living or to those who have finished living since it does not exist for the former, and the latter no longer exist. Nevertheless, most people flee death as the greatest of evils. Yet at other times they choose it as a rest from life's sufferings.

[126] The wise man neither spurns living nor does he fear not living. The thought of living does not upset him, nor does he feel that not living is evil. And even as one chooses the more pleasant portion of food rather than merely the larger portion, so the wise man seeks to enjoy the most pleasant time of life and not merely the longest time.

The one who exhorts the young to live well and the old to make a good end is foolish, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same practice at once teaches one to live well and to die well.

Much worse is the man who says that it is a good thing not to be born. Yet when born, he says, it is “best to pass quickly through the gates of Hades.”<sup>3</sup> [127] If he is truly persuaded by what he says, then why does he not make his exit from life? It is an easy thing for him to do if he is firmly resolved.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if he is only joking, then he is a thoughtless man among those who do not welcome him.

We should remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours. Accordingly, we must neither count on it as certain to come nor despair of it as certain not to come.

*The Different Desires & Pleasure and Pain*

We must consider that of the desires, some are natural, and some are groundless.

Of the natural desires, some are necessary, and some are merely natural.

And of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for freeing the body from disturbance, and some for living itself.

[128] He who has a firm understanding of these things knows how to direct every choice and every avoidance toward securing bodily health and mental tranquility since this is the goal of a blessedly happy life. Everything we do is for the sake of being free from pain and from fear. The soul's storm scatters as soon as we achieve this condition. Then we have no need to go around looking for anything that is lacking or seeking something else by which the good of the soul and the good of the body will be fulfilled.

We have the need for pleasure only when we feel pain due to the absence of pleasure. When we feel no pain, however, there is no need for pleasure. For this reason, we say that pleasure is the beginning point and goal of living happily. [129] We recognize that pleasure is our first good, present at birth, and that it is the beginning point of every choice and avoidance. We resort to pleasure when we use feeling as the measure for judging every good.

Even though pleasure is our first and inborn good, we nevertheless do not choose every pleasure. Rather, we oftentimes forgo many pleasures when a greater annoyance will follow from choosing them. And oftentimes we acknowledge that many pains are better than many pleasures when an even greater pleasure follows from patiently enduring these pains for a long period of time. And so, even though every pleasure is naturally good and fitting, not every pleasure is to be chosen. In the same way, even though every pain is bad, not every pain is always to be avoided. [130] To be sure, we may aptly judge every case by measuring one feeling in comparison with the other and taking a look at the advantages and disadvantages of both sides. Sometimes we treat a good thing as though it is bad. On the other hand,

sometimes we treat a bad thing as though it is good.

We regard self-sufficiency as a great good. This is not so that we may enjoy just a little in every case, but so that when things are scarce, we may nevertheless be satisfied with little, genuinely persuaded that the ones who derive the greatest pleasure from luxury are the ones who need it the least, and that everything natural is easy to get, but whatever is groundless is hard.

Simple food gives just as much pleasure as rich food does as soon as the hunger pains are gone. [131] A barley cake and water offer the highest possible pleasure when they are given to a hungry man. Getting used to simple and inexpensive food, therefore, aids the health of a man and enables him to perform the necessary requirements of life with resolution. Not only that, but such a habit better disposes us for when we encounter extravagant fare now and again, and makes us fearless in the face of fortune.

So then, when we say that pleasure is the beginning point and goal of life, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent men or the pleasures of sensuality, as some ignorant persons believe, or those who do not agree with us, or those who have willfully misrepresented our position. Rather, by pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. [132] A pleasant life is not produced by stringing together one drinking party after another, or by having sex with young boys or women, or by enjoying fish and other delicacies set on a luxurious table. Instead, it is produced by sober reasoning that examines what is responsible for every choice and avoidance, and expels those beliefs by which the greatest confusion lays hold of the soul.

*Practical Wisdom and the Wise Man*

Practical wisdom is the foundation of all of these things and the greatest good. For this reason, we value practical wisdom even more than philosophy. Every other virtue is produced from practical wisdom, teaching us that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, nobly, and justly—just as we cannot live wisely, nobly, and justly without living pleasantly.

The virtues have become one with living pleasantly. Living pleasantly is inseparable from the virtues.

[133] Getting this point, who do you believe is better than the man who holds pious beliefs about the gods?—or the one who is altogether free from the fear of death?—or the one who has considered the natural goal of life and understands how easily the limit of good things can be reached and attained, and how the limit of bad things is either short in its duration or slight in its distress?

This man scorns the notion of destiny that some introduce as the master of all things, affirming rather that some things happen by necessity, others by chance, and others through our own agency. This is because he sees that necessity promotes irresponsibility and that chance or fortune is unstable, whereas our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame are attached. [134] It would be better, in

fact, to accept the myths told about the gods than to bow beneath the yoke of destiny that the natural philosophers have imposed. The one holds out some small hope that we may escape if we honor the gods, while the other offers inexorable necessity.

Nor does he hold chance (or luck or fortune) to be a god as the many do, assuming as he does that, with a god, nothing is done in a disorderly fashion. Nor does he hold that chance is even an unreliable cause, for he believes that chance delivers nothing good or bad to humans toward living happily—though, to be sure, chance furnishes the beginning point of the excessive goods of fortune and misfortune.

[135] He believes that the bad luck of the thoughtful, reasoning man is better than the good luck of the thoughtless, unreasoning man. In short, in human affairs, it is better for a well-judged effort to fail than for one poorly judged to succeed by means of chance.

#### FINAL EXHORTATION

Take thought of and practice these matters and related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with others who are like-minded. If you do, then you will never be disturbed by confusion, whether you

are awake or dreaming. Instead, you will live like a god among human beings. For the man who lives among immortal blessings loses every likeness to mortal beings.

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DIOGENES LAERTIUS: In other works, Epicurus rejects everything having to do with prophecy and divination, as he does in the short epitome, where he says, “The art of divination is unreal, and if it were real, we

must suppose what it predicts is nothing to us.”

Such are his views on human life—though he has spoken about them more fully elsewhere.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the missing sections (parts of 10.117-121), see the next chapter on the wise man, his nature and activity.

<sup>2</sup> By “the commonly held understanding of the god, the common epithet in writing,” we should understand the view of the gods and divine nature that came primarily from Homer and Hesiod. On this, the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BC) provides the key witness. In the *Histories*, he explains that the Greeks “did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak” much about the gods. They didn’t know “when and from where each of the gods came to be, or whether they all had always been, and how they appeared in form.” So it was, he testifies, that “Hesiod and Homer . . . taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms” (2.53).

According to Homer and Hesiod, the gods have a few key attributes that outline or define their nature, distinguishing them from human beings. First, the gods are immortal (*athanatos*) and ageless (*agēraos*) (see, for instance, *Iliad* 8.539 and *Odyssey* 5.218). In

other words, as Epicurus has it, the gods are indestructible or incorruptible (*aphthartos*). As Hesiod puts it, “The holy race of the immortals always is. They live on forever” (*Theogony* 21). Second, the gods are counted blessed (*makar*). They live a life of ease. In the *Iliad*, Achilles says “the gods . . . live without any sorrow or grief. Their life is a life without care” (24.526). In the *Odyssey*, Homer reveals that “upon Olympus the blessed gods are delighted every day” (6.46). Finally, the gods or divine beings are different from human beings. In the *Iliad*, the god Apollo makes the point to the Greek hero Diomedes in this way: “Consider what I have to say, son of Tydeus, and fall back. You shouldn’t think of yourself as equal to the gods. You’re not. The immortal gods and men who walk the earth are not the same kind of tribe or being” (5.440-442).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Theognis of Megara 425-428: “Not to be born and not to look upon the bright light of the sun—this is the best of all for mortal men upon the earth. But to lie dead beneath a huge pile of dirt and to pass through the gates of Hades—this is the best when a man is already born.”

<sup>4</sup> Regarding suicide, which he *does not* recommend, Epicurus elsewhere declares, “That man is small in every way who has many good reasons to commit suicide” (*Vatican Sayings* 38). Otherwise he states, “The wise man will not withdraw from life—even when he has lost sight” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.119).

For Epicurus, the general pleasure of living is always greater than and so outweighs the general or even specific pain(s) of life *if we are living well*. See, for instance, what L. Manlius Torquatus says: “. . . There is no moment when the pleasures he experiences do not outweigh the pains.” And: “. . . Pains are never so severe that the anguish is more than the joy” (in Cicero, *On the Ends* 1.62). This does not mean that pain is entirely absent for the one who is happy or living well or tranquilly. It is just that, if we pay close attention, the balance is always in favor of pleasure, an overall sense of well-being.

The big question, therefore, is: are we living well? Which is to ask: are we listening to the voice of practical wisdom? Are we living virtuously (wisely, nobly, justly, moderately, courageously)? Are we living oriented to friendship? Are we living simply?—for what truly matters? Or are we living for what is unnecessary and groundless or empty?—things like money or reputation (fame, honor, glory) or a great quantity and variety of pleasure (rather than that pleasure which adheres to the “measure of pleasure,” which is the simple absence of pain)?

For Epicureanism, the goal is to know the simple joy (*chara*) of life—of *being*—rather than complexities that are far from certain; it is to be at peace, to experience tranquility (*ataraxia*).

Suicide is not the solution to the problem of living. Rather, time is, which is to say that living another minute, hour, day, or week is the way to go. And if we need to, we will live with the help of other human beings—a priest or minister, a counselor or psychiatrist, a wise friend, relative, or mentor.

By the way, if these remarks seem to go beyond Epicurus or seem inappropriate in an “academic” presentation of his work, we at the Cave counter by highlighting the fact that we do not read Epicurus or others for mere academic reasons but in order to practice, as our mission statement says, to apply ancient wisdom to our contemporary ways and lives.

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