

Epicurus

Reading 8 – The Principal Teachings – The Key Teachings & Sayings of Epicurus

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Reading 8

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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 138, or [138], is 10.138.

This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher.

Principal Teachings The Key Teachings & Sayings of Epicurus

DIOGENES LAERTIUS writes: [138]

Let us now, then, add the finishing stroke to this whole work, as some would say, and to the philosopher Epicurus' life, by citing his *Principal Teachings*, thereby bringing the whole work to a close, and making its end to coincide with the beginning of happiness.

**FIVE KEY POINTS FOR LIVING WELL HAVING TO DO WITH THE GODS,
DEATH, PLEASURE AND PAIN, AND THE VIRTUES¹**

[139] 1. A blessed and indestructible being is not bothered by troublesome business, nor does this being trouble others. Therefore, such a being is free from anger and the feeling that he is obliged to grant

favors since these feelings imply weakness.²

2. Death means nothing to us. This is so because the body, when it breaks up into its various elements, has no sensation. And that which has no sensation is nothing to us.

3. The standard measure for the greatest amount of pleasure is the removal of every pain. Whenever pleasure is present, as long as it lasts, there is neither pain nor distress nor both together.

[140] 4. Ongoing pain does not last long in the flesh.

Extreme pain is present for a very short time. And mild pain that barely outweighs pleasure in the flesh does not last for many days in a row. Even long-lasting sickness involves more pleasure than pain in the flesh.

5. It is impossible to live pleasantly without living wisely, nobly, and justly—just as it is impossible to live wisely, nobly, and justly without living pleasantly. The person who fails to inaugurate a wise, noble, and just life is the person who does not have a pleasant life.

LIVING CONFIDENTLY AND SECURELY AMONG OTHER MEN

[141] 6. Any means whatsoever of acquiring confidence before other men, and security, is a natural good.

7. Some men desire to be honored and admired, believing that in this way they will secure their own personal safety from other men. They have attained

the natural good inasmuch as their lives are secure from danger. If, however, their lives are not secure from danger, they have not obtained that for which they reached out in the beginning in response to the prompting of nature.

PLEASURE—IN TERMS OF QUANTITY AND QUALITY

8. In itself, no pleasure is evil. That said, the things that produce certain pleasures entail annoying troubles many times greater than the pleasures themselves.

[142] 9. If every pleasure were condensed within time and all over the whole human organism—or, at any rate, around the principal parts of a man's nature—then the pleasures would not differ from one another.

10. If things that produce pleasure for decadent

humans truly freed them from their fearful thoughts—the fears inspired by things that happen in the sky, and death, and pain—, and if, moreover, these things taught them the limit of their desires, then we would never have any reason to find fault with them since they would then be filled full with pleasures and would never suffer pain, which is the real evil, whether bodily pain or mental distress.

THE BENEFIT OF STUDYING NATURE—FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND WORRY

11. We would have never needed to investigate natural phenomena if we had not been disturbed by worry about things that happen in the sky or by the misgiving that death means something to us or by our failure to understand the boundary markers of suffering and desire.

[143] 12. It is impossible to set ourselves free from fear regarding the most important things if we do not

understand the nature of the whole cosmos, and if we are apprehensive about what the myths tell us. Consequently, without the study of nature, there is no enjoyment of pleasures unmixed with fear and worry.

13. There is no real advantage in acquiring personal safety from other men as long as we are worried about things above or below the earth or in the infinite expanse of things.

VARIOUS TEACHINGS

14. Great power and resources may up to a certain point give us a sense of personal safety relative to

other men. In general, however, a sense of personal safety is established upon a quiet life withdrawn from the many.

[144] 15. Natural wealth is both limited and easy to get. But the wealth based on groundless opinion grows without limit.

16. Luck rarely interferes with the wise man. Rather, it is reason that has managed, does manage, and will manage the greatest and most essential things throughout the course of a wise man's life.

17. The just man is least troubled, whereas the unjust man experiences a full measure of the greatest trouble.

THE LIMITS OF HEALTHY PLEASURE AND LIFE

18. Pleasure in the flesh will not increase after need-based pain is removed. After that, pleasure may only be varied. And the limit of pleasure in the mind is reached in thinking about these and like things that used to cause the greatest fears in the mind.

[145] 19. Unlimited time and limited time carry an equal amount of pleasure if we measure the limits of pleasure by reason.

20. While the flesh behaves as though the limits of pleasure are unlimited and thus it would take an unlimited amount of time to furnish these pleasures, the mind—having reasoned out the purpose and limits

of the flesh, and having banished fears having to do with eternity—provides a complete life that does not require an unlimited amount of time. Nevertheless, the mind does not avoid pleasure. And even when circumstances cause one to leave life, the mind enjoys the best life.

[146] 21. He who understands the limits of life knows how easy it is to procure what it takes to remove the pain of need and make the whole of life complete. Therefore, there is no need for things that can only be procured by means of struggle and troublesome business.

OBSERVATIONAL AND REASONED-BASED CONCLUSIONS AND BEHAVIOR

22. Regarding the goal of life, it is necessary to take into account what truly exists and all clear evidence to which we refer our opinions. Otherwise, everything will be full of poor judgment and disturbing confusion.

23. If you oppose all sensation, then you will have no means by which to judge even those sensations you declare false.

[147] 24. If you wholly reject any single sensation and do not pause to make a distinction between an opinion based on that which awaits confirmation and that which is already present to sensation or the feelings or presentations in the mind, then you will throw into confusion the remaining sensations by

your groundless opinions. Consequently, you will be rejecting every criterion. And if in your opinion-based notions you hastily affirm as true all that awaits confirmation, as well as that which does not, you will not abandon falsehood. Rather, you will maintain complete ambiguity whenever it is a case of determining what is correct and what is incorrect.

[148] 25. If at any moment you do not direct each of your actions to the goal of life indicated by nature, but, instead, you turn aside to some other goal in the act of pursuing some object or avoiding it, your activity will not be consistent with the conclusions drawn from reason.

UNNECESSARY DESIRES

26. Unnecessary desires are those that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied. They involve an appetite

that is easily relieved whenever its satisfaction is hard to procure or when it seems likely to cause harm.

THE GREAT VALUE OF FRIENDSHIP

27. Of all the means that are procured by wisdom to ensure blessed happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship.

28. The same judgment that produces the confidence

that nothing terrible is eternal or long-lasting also perceives the personal safety that is accomplished by friendship relative to these same time-bound and terrible things.

THE THREE KINDS OF DESIRE

[149] 29. Of the desires, some are natural and necessary, whereas some are natural but unnecessary. Others are neither natural nor necessary but arise thanks to groundless notions.³

30. If one's zeal is intense in the case of those

natural desires that lead to no pain if they remain unsatisfied, then such desires arise thanks to groundless notions. And when they do not vanish, it is not because of their own nature but thanks to those groundless human notions.

JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE

[150] 31. Natural justice is a pledge of reciprocal advantage neither to harm one another nor to be harmed.

32. Nothing is just or unjust for those animals that are unable to make non-harm agreements—that is, compacts neither to harm one another nor be harmed. The same is true for those people groups that either are unable or unwilling to make non-harm agreements.

33. There is no such thing as justice in itself. Rather, justice is an agreement neither to harm nor be harmed that is made when men gather together from time to time in various places.

[151] 34. Injustice is not something evil in itself. Rather the evil coincides with the worry and worming fear that one will not escape the notice of those who are responsible for punishing injustice.

35. It is impossible for the man who secretly violates the agreement to neither harm one another nor be harmed to feel confident that he will remain undiscovered, even if up to the present moment he has already escaped ten thousand times. No, to the end of his life such a man is never sure he will remain undetected.

36. Taken generally, justice is the same for all because of its reciprocal advantage when men associate

with one another. But in its specific application to places and conditions, justice is different depending on the circumstances.

[152] 37. Among the things considered just by custom, whatever is affirmed to be reciprocally advantageous in meeting the needs of men who associate with one another is characterized as just, whether or not it is the same for all. On the other hand, the law or custom that proves not to be reciprocally advantageous when men associate no longer possesses a just nature. And even if what was considered the just reciprocal advantage changes after having been considered just for some time, it is nonetheless true that it was really just for that period of time—as long as we do not trouble ourselves with groundless discourses, but simply look at the facts.

[153] 38. If circumstances have not changed, and things considered just by custom are shown not to correspond with the preconception of justice in terms of the results, then these things are not just. And if circumstances do change, and the things considered just turn out to be no longer advantageous, then those things were just for a time relative to the advantages of men associating with one another as fellow citizens, but later on, as soon as there was no advantage, they were no longer just.

CONFIDENCE AND SECURITY

[154] 39. The man who best endures the lack of confidence relative to things external to himself is the man who assimilates to himself what he is able. At the very least he does not alienate those things he is unable to assimilate. Nevertheless, when he is unable to do even this, he avoids all connection with these external things, banishing them to the extent that is profitable.

40. The ones who are able to establish the greatest security relative to those who live around them are the ones able to live pleasantly among others thanks to this firm guarantee of security. And after enjoying the relationship to the full, they do not piteously lament its completion when it ends.

So ends Reading 8. See you in **another reading or item**.

NOTES

¹ This and the following subtitles are not found in the original Greek. They are provided by the Cave for the sake of organization and to facilitate memory.

² Added commentary: “In another place he says that the gods are discernible by reason alone, some being numerically distinct, while others result uniformly from the continuous influx of similar images directed to the same spot and in human form.”

³ Added commentary: “Epicurus regards as natural and necessary desires that bring relief from pain, such as drink when we are thirsty. And by desires that are natural and unnecessary he means those that merely vary the pleasure without removing the pain, such as costly food. And by desires that are neither natural nor necessary he means those for crowns and the erection of statues in one’s honor.”

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