

Epicurus

General Summary of the Letters of Epicurus

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

General Summary of the Letters of Epicurus

THE LETTER TO HERODOTUS

AFTER GREETING HERODOTUS, Epicurus explains the purpose of the letter, which is to provide a general survey or epitome of his conclusions regarding the nature of reality. This will help Herodotus and "all who take up natural science" to "obtain a valid understanding of the facts," which will in turn aid them in further discovering the nature of things.

Regarding a general method, Epicurus reminds Herodotus to rely on clear terms and the criteria of sensation and feelings when investigating and drawing conclusions about things.

The first two major points are that "nothing comes

into being out of what is non-existent" and that nothing completely falls into non-existence. Rather, considered as a whole, the sum of things is infinite and everlasting. Epicurus gives arguments for each of these points.

Everlasting and infinite, the cosmos has two basic elements, bodies and void. Bodies are either composite or non-composite. The latter non-composite bodies are the elements out of which the composite bodies are made. These non-composite bodies are "atoms"—indivisible, solid, indestructible. The whole of reality is infinite in terms of the number of atoms and the extent of the void.

Atoms have an indefinite number of shapes. Atomic shape accounts for the great variety of everything that has come to be. Atoms continually move, rebounding off one another or oscillating when entangled with or enclosed by a mass of other atoms.

The void allows for movement. Atoms have always moved in the void. There was no beginning nor will there ever be an end. Given the infinite number of atoms and the infinite size of the void, it follows that there is an infinite number of worlds.

Epicurus next explores the nature of seeing, hearing, and smelling, three ways by which we sense reality. Seeing happens by means of impression. Solid bodies or objects emanate outlines or films of themselves that rapidly move “as quick as thought” in multiple directions. When such an outline or image strikes the senses, it communicates the appearance (color, form, etc.) of the solid body or object. Consequently, there is direct contact with the senses, whether with the sense organ itself (e.g., the eyes) or the mind. The contact is like a mirror’s reception of an image. Epicurus reminds Herodotus how important it is to stick with clear and distinct perceptions before moving on to discuss hearing and smelling.

He then expounds the qualities and motion of atoms. The basic qualities of all atoms are shape, weight, and size. Atoms do not have parts; they are indivisible or uncuttable (*atomos*). All atoms move at

the same speed through the void. This speed is equal to the speed of thought.

Epicurus moves on to explore the corporeal or bodily nature of the soul and the significant role it has in sensation. When the soul departs, the rest of the human organism no longer has sensation. Neither does the soul (i.e., its now-scattered or uncontained atoms) have sensation when it is alone since the rest of the human organism “provides the indispensable condition” for the soul’s powers of sensation.

Next, he describes what we sense in terms of properties and accidents, adding on a short reflection on how we should think and speak about time.

Moving on, he addresses the formation and breaking apart of multiple worlds from the infinite, the rise of plants and animals, and the evolution of human cultures and languages.

Lastly, Epicurus considers how we can best understand heavenly phenomena so as to avoid fear and anxiety and be at peace. Things in the sky are not managed by beings that enjoy perfect bliss. Rather, as with all things, they occur in some natural way. Our happiness depends on the study and understanding of natural phenomena. We must realize that our investigations may only lead to a variety of possible explanations. We should be content with these and not demand single explanations.

Epicurus concludes by urging Herodotus to keep his summary of the nature of things in mind.

THE LETTER TO PYTHOCLES

AFTER GREETING PYTHOCLES, Epicurus happily agrees to satisfy his request for an epitome on things that happen in the sky.

Before getting to these celestial phenomena, Epicurus reminds Pythocles that the whole point of seeking knowledge of anything is to obtain “tranquility of mind and resolute conviction and confidence.” He suggests that some things admit one explanation, whereas others, such as things in the sky, allow for multiple explanations. Sometimes we can interpret phenomena by means of our own experiences. Regardless, it is important to keep to the facts alone.

Epicurus first explores the development of the many worlds from the infinite. A world (cosmos) is “a circumscribed portion of the sky” that “contains stars, an earth, and all other visible things.” There are an infinite number of worlds that have many different shapes. Worlds develop from prior “seeds.”

He goes on to offer various explanations for those things in the sky having to do with the sun, the moon, and other stars—the relative size of the sun and other stars; their rising and setting; why the sun and moon follow particular paths; the waxing and waning of the moon, how it shines, and why a face appears in the

moon; eclipses of the sun and moon; and why days and nights vary in length. He later discusses comets (“stars with long hair”), and why some stars appear to move, while others appear to remain still or fall.

Otherwise, he explores how different earthly, atmospheric, and weather phenomena occur—including clouds, rain, thunder, lightning, whirlwinds, earthquakes, winds, hail, snow, dew, frost, ice, rainbows, and lunar halos. He denies that animals foretell weather.

In going through these things, Epicurus’ point is two-fold. One, there are many possible explanations for all these phenomena. Two, one should not resort to mythological or any other non-observational accounts in order to explain them. It is important to always keep the ultimate goal of study in mind while making any investigation—the goal of genuine tranquility of mind, of living undisturbed by various feelings, thoughts, and judgments.

THE LETTER TO MENOECEUS

AFTER GREETING MENOECEUS, Epicurus suggests that everyone should study philosophy in order to be happy. One should practice living well by keeping a few key truths in mind and making choices in keeping with these.

The first truth is that the gods are blessed and indestructible and nothing to the contrary. The second is that death means nothing to human beings since death is the loss of all sensation. “When we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist.” The wise man does not pine for immortality; rather, he seeks merely to enjoy life. And yet—the third truth—we should not seek to satisfy every desire since only the satisfaction of some desires (natural and necessary versus groundless desires) is

necessary for happiness. The goal is bodily health and mental tranquility. Therefore, we seek freedom from pain and fear. For this reason, Epicurus discusses the fourth truth of pleasure and pain. Not every pleasure is chosen and not every pain is rejected. Rather, pleasure is only required “when we feel pain due to the absence of pleasure.”

The best life is the self-sufficient, simple life centered on natural and necessary desires and trouble-free pleasures. Practical wisdom aids one in living this life, counseling one to live according to the virtues. The wise man freely chooses and practices happiness. In conclusion, Epicurus advises Menoeceus to practice “these matters and related precepts” alone and with others.

So ends Item 5. See you in **another reading or item.**



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