

The Epicureans

Epicurus (341–270) put forward a philosophical system comprising an atomistic view of the world without teleology and an ethical view according to which pleasure was the good, the gods did not interfere in human affairs, and — even though the soul did not survive death — death was nothing to be feared. The school he founded took the good life to be one of tranquil pleasure, free from pain and anxiety.

Death is Nothing to Us

Death is nothing to us. For what is destroyed does not perceive, and what does not perceive is nothing to us (*Ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ, τὸ δ' ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς*).

Epicurus *Key Doctrines* 2

[124] Accustom yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us (*Συνέθιζε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον*). For all good and evil lie in sensation, whereas death is the absence of sensation (*ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν ἐν αἰσθήσει· στερήσις δὲ ἐστὶν αἰσθήσεως ὁ θάνατος*). Hence a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding infinite time, but by ridding us of the desire for immortality.

[125] For there is nothing fearful in living for one who genuinely grasps that there is nothing fearful in not living. Therefore he speaks idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful in anticipation. For if something causes no distress when present, it is fruitless to be pained by the expectation of it. Therefore that most frightful of evils, death, is nothing to us, seeing that when we exist death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist. Thus it is nothing to either the living or the dead, seeing that the former do not have it and the latter no longer exist. The many sometimes shun death as the greatest of evils, but at other times choose it as a release from life's <evils. But the wise man neither deprecates living> nor fears not living.

[126] For he neither finds living irksome nor thinks not living an evil. But just as he chooses the pleasantest food, not simply the greater quantity, so too he enjoys the pleasantest time, not the longest. He who advises the young man to live well but the old man to die well is naive, not only because life is something to be welcomed, but also because to practise living well and to practise dying well are one and the same.

Much worse, however, is he who says 'It's a fine thing never to be born. Or, once born, to pass through the gates of Hades with the utmost speed.

[127] If he believes what he says, why does he not take his departure from life? He has every opportunity to do so, supposing that his resolve were serious. If he is joking, his words are idle and will be greeted with incredulity.

Epicurus *Letter to Menoeceus* 124–7 (= LS 24 A) ['LS' refers to Long & Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (CUP, 1987)]

Therefore death is nothing to us, of no concern whatsoever, once it is appreciated that the mind has a mortal nature (*nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum, quando quidem natura animi mortalis habetur*).

Just as in the past we had no sensation of discomfort when the Carthaginians were converging to attack [...] so too, when we will no longer exist following the severing of the soul and body, from whose conjunction we are constituted, you can take it that nothing at all will be able to affect us and to stir our sensation — not if the earth collapses into sea, and sea into sky.

Even if the nature of our mind and the power of our spirit do have sensation after they are torn from our bodies, that is still nothing to us, who are constituted by the conjunction of body and spirit. Or supposing that after our death the passage of time will bring our matter back together and reconstitute it in its present arrangement, and the light of life will be restored to us, even that eventuality would be of no concern to us, once our self-recollection was interrupted. Nor do our selves which existed in the past concern us now: we feel no anguish about them. For when you look back at the entire past span of measureless time, and then reflect how various are the motions of matter, you could easily believe that the same primary particles of which we now consist have often in the past been arranged in the same order as now. Yet our minds cannot remember it. For in between there has been an interruption of life, and all the motions have been at random, without sensation.

For if there is going to be unhappiness and suffering, the person must also himself exist at that same time, for the evil to be able to befall him. Since death robs him of this, preventing the existence of the person for the evils to be heaped upon, you can tell that there is nothing for us to fear in death, that he who does not exist cannot be unhappy, and that when immortal death snatches away a mortal life it is no different from never having been born.

So when you see a man resent the prospect of his body's being buried and rotting after death, or being destroyed by fire or by the jaws of wild beasts, you may be sure that his words do not ring true, and that there lurks in his heart some hidden sting, however much he may deny the belief that he will have any sensation in death. For he does not, I think, grant either the substance or the ground of what he professes. Instead of completely stripping himself of life, he is unconsciously making some bit of himself survive. For when anybody in life imagines that in death the birds and beasts will rip up his body, he pities himself. For he does not distinguish himself from it or adequately detach himself from the abandoned corpse: he identifies himself with it, and by remaining present he infects it with his own sensation. He thus comes to resent the fact that he was born mortal, and does not see that in the reality of death he will have no other self left alive, able to mourn his passing, and to stand by, suffering the agony of his fallen body being ripped or burnt [...]

'No more for you the welcome of a joyful home and a good wife. No more will your children run to snatch the first kiss, and move your heart with unspoken delight. No more will you be able to protect the success of your affairs and your dependants. Unhappy man', they say, 'unhappily robbed by a single hateful day of all those rewards of life.' What they fail to add is: 'Nor does any yearning for those things remain in you,' If they properly saw this with their mind, and followed it up in their words, they would unshackle themselves of great mental anguish and fear.

'You, at least, in death's sleep, will be evermore free of all pain and suffering. But we have stood viewing your ashes before us on the grim pyre, weeping inconsolably. Our grief will be everlasting. No day will come to purge our hearts of it.' Of the person who says this, we should ask what is so sad about a return to sleep and rest, that someone should be able to pine in everlasting grief,

Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 3.830—911 (= LS 24 E)