

Death is Nothing to Us

Epicurus to Menoeceus, greetings.

Let no one postpone practising philosophy while young, and let no one tire of it when old, for no one is either too soon or 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 practise philosophy so that, while old, one may still be young with gratitude from all past joys; and while young, one may at the same time be old through fearlessness of what the future has in store. We must study what produces happiness because when we have it, we have everything, and if we lack it, we can do everything necessary to regain it.

I encourage you, as always, to study and practise the things which are the ingredients of happiness. First of all, consider that a god is an immortal and happy being, as is commonly written. 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, because they do not retain the notion of the gods that they first receive. Rejecting the popular myths does not make one impious. Impious is one who upholds popular beliefs about the gods, because those pronouncements are false opinions rather than actual preconceptions. Hence the severest harm from the gods is anticipated by the many, while benefits are reaped by the virtuous. The reason being is that those who reflect upon their own virtues regard the gods as resembling themselves, and reject all else as outlandish.

Accustom yourself to thinking that 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 the truth of this makes a mortal life happy – not by adding infinite time, but by removing the desire for immortality. 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 joking, then we have even less reason to believe him.

[...]

Who could conceivably be better off than one who reveres the gods, who is utterly unafraid of death, and who has discovered the natural goal of life? Or one who 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? Or one who scoffs at fate, which is believed by some to be the mistress of all?

Such a man is better off than all, because he 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 irreproachable 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.

One who is wise knows fortune is not god, as many believe, because the gods do not act randomly. Nor does he believe that everything is randomly caused. Nor does he believe that chance doles out good or evil for the sake of human happiness. 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.

So practice these and similar 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.

from Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus