

Letter to Menoeceus

Epicurus

Introduction

Epicurus was born after the death of Plato and came to Athens at roughly the same time Aristotle died. Plato's Academy endured beyond its founder's death and continued through the life of Epicurus and for some time beyond.

Aristotle's Lyceum did not survive Aristotle's flight from Athens shortly before his death. Other Athenian schools were quite popular as well — the Pythagoreans [An ancient Greek mystery sect best known for their belief that mathematics, particularly geometry, held the secrets to understanding the universe.] among others. Epicurus came into this market of ideas and founded his own school, the Garden, first on Lesbos and ultimately in Athens itself. Unlike Aristotle's school, Epicurus' Garden was open to both men and women in pursuit of knowledge. Epicurus is popularly remembered for his Epicureanism [A theory of hedonism or pleasure that holds that the life of simple pleasures is to be preferred and pursued over that of both asceticism and indulgence.], or Principle of Pleasure [The Epicurean principle that the human good is pleasure.]. This is often naively read to be a view that pleasures are all alike to be welcomed. Instead, Epicurus' ethical theory is considerably more nuanced and sophisticated than unreflective hedonism. Epicurus lays out his ethical views more explicitly in his Letter to Menoeceus.

In the Letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus argues against practices like conspicuous consumption and the pursuit of more and more exotic experiences. Rather, his view is similar to those of Aristotle and Plato concerning balance — with the emphasis here being the balance of pleasures. Key to this, however, is a realistic and unromantic view of the world. For Epicurus, death is inevitable, but more than that, death brings with it the end of consciousness. There is no life after bodily death. Rather than inspiring fear and dread, the knowledge that death is the final experience of consciousness should eliminate the fear of its approach. The fear of death might well lengthen life, perhaps, but it will inevitably make life less happy. Rather, a happy life is much to be preferred to a long one that is tedious or without flavor or, most definitely, to one that is painful.

Similarly, Epicurus argues that while the gods may well exist, they have no concern with humanity. Thus, the attempts to increase pleasure or better one's life through appeasement of the gods is futile, at best. Hence, Epicurus is seen to argue that it is the popular acts of piety that are, in fact, impious. This is so because the gods have no concern with humanity, and since those acts of piety are contrary to pleasure, and since pleasure is the highest good, then the acts of piety are at odds with the highest good. Thus, they are in fact, impious.

The pursuit of exotic pleasures are counterproductive as well. Instead, the pleasures derived from the enjoyment of the simple life are the goal of life. The simple life will be free of the anxieties that so often cause imbalance and displeasure. So, the simple life of simple pleasures will be the life of virtue, or the good life.

Reading

I. Introduction

Epicurus to Menoeceus, greeting.

Let no young man delay the study of philosophy, and let no old man become weary of it; for it is never too early nor too late to care for the well-being of the soul. The man who says that the season for this study has not yet come or is already past is like the man who says it is too early or too late for happiness. Therefore, both the young and the old should study philosophy, the former so that as he grows old he may still retain the happiness of youth in his pleasant memories of the past, the latter so that although he is old he may at the same time be young by virtue of his fearlessness of the future. We must therefore study the means of securing happiness, since if we have it we have everything, but if we lack it we do everything in order to gain it.

II. Basic Teachings

A. THE GODS

The gods exist; but it is impious to accept the common beliefs about them. They have no concern with men

Practice and study without ceasing that which I was always teaching you, being assured that these are the first principles of the good life. After accepting god as the immortal and blessed being depicted by popular opinion, do not ascribe to him anything in addition that is alien to immortality or foreign to blessedness, but rather believe about him whatever can uphold his blessed immortality. The gods do indeed exist, for our perception of them is clear; but they are not such as the picture of the gods that they first

receive. It is not the man who destroys the gods of popular belief who is impious, but he who describes the gods in the terms accepted by the many. For the opinions of the many about the gods are not perceptions but false suppositions. According to these popular suppositions, the gods send great evils to the wicked, great blessings (to the righteous), for they, being always well disposed to their own virtues, approve those who are like themselves, regarding as foreign all that is different.

B. DEATH

Philosophy, showing that death is the end of all consciousness, relieves us of all fear of death. A life that is happy is better than one that is merely long.

Accustom yourself to the belief that death is of no concern to us, since all good and evil lie in sensation and sensation ends with death. Therefore the true belief that death is nothing to us makes a mortal life happy, not by adding to it an infinite time, but by taking away the desire for immortality. For there is no reason why the man who is thoroughly assured that there is nothing to fear in death should find anything to fear in life. So, too, he is foolish who says that he fears death, not because it will be painful when it comes, but because the anticipation of it is painful; for that which is no burden when it is present gives pain to no purpose when it is anticipated. Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist. It is therefore nothing either to the living or to the dead since it is not present to the living, and the dead no longer are.

But men in general sometimes flee death as the greatest of evils, sometimes (long for it) as a relief from (the evils) of life. (The wise man neither renounces life) nor fears its end; for living does not offend him, nor does he suppose that not to live is in any way an evil. As he does not choose the food that is most in quantity but that which is most pleasant, so he does not seek the enjoyment of the longest life but of the happiest.

He who advises the young man to live well, the old man to die well, is foolish, not only because life is desirable, but also because the art of living well and the art of dying well are one. Yet much worse is he who says that it is well not to have been born, but once born, be swift to pass through Hades' gates.

If a man says this and really believes it, why does he not depart from life? Certainly the means are at hand for doing so if this really be his firm conviction. If he says it in mockery, he is regarded as a fool among those who do not accept his teaching.

Remember that the future is neither ours nor wholly not ours, so that we may neither count on it as sure to come nor abandon hope of it as certain

not to be.

III. The Moral Theory

A. PLEASURE AS THE MOTIVE

The necessary desires are for health of body and peace of mind; if these are satisfied, that is enough for the happy life.

You must consider that of the desires some are natural, some are vain, and of those that are natural, some are necessary, others only natural. Of the necessary desires, some are necessary for happiness, some for the ease of the body, some for life itself. The man who has a perfect knowledge of this will know how to make his every choice or rejection tend toward gaining health of body and peace (of mind), since this is the final end of the blessed life. For to gain this end, namely freedom from pain and fear, we do everything. When once this condition is reached, all the storm of the soul is stilled, since the creature need make no move in search of anything that is lacking, nor seek after anything else to make complete the welfare of the soul and the body. For we only feel the lack of pleasure when from its absence we suffer pain; (but when we do not suffer pain,) we no longer in need of pleasure. For this reason we say that pleasure is the beginning and the end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and natural good; starting from pleasure we accept or reject; and we return to this as we judge every good thing, trusting this feeling of pleasure as our guide.

B. PLEASURES AND PAINS

Pleasure is the greatest good; but some pleasures bring pain, and in choosing, we must consider this.

For the very reason that pleasure is the chief and the natural good, we do not choose every pleasure, but there are times when we pass by pleasures if they are outweighed by the hardships that follow; and many pains we think better than pleasures when a greater pleasure will come to us once we have undergone the long-continued pains. Every pleasure is a good since it has a nature akin to ours; nevertheless, not every pleasure is to be chosen. Just so, every pain is an evil, yet not every pain is of a nature to be avoided on all occasions. By measuring and by looking at advantages and disadvantages, it is proper to decide all these things; for under certain circumstances we treat the good as evil, and again, the evil as good.

C. SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The truly wise man is the one who can be happy with a little.

We regard self-sufficiency as a great good, not so that we may enjoy only a few things, but so that, if we do not have many, we may be satisfied with the few, being firmly persuaded that they take the greatest pleasure in luxury who regard it as least needed, and that everything that is natural is

easily provided, while vain pleasures are hard to obtain. Indeed, simple sauces bring a pleasure equal to that of lavish banquets if once the pain due to need is removed; and bread and water give the greatest pleasure when one who is in need consumes them. To be accustomed to simple and plain living is conducive to health and makes a man ready for the necessary tasks of life. It also makes us more ready for the enjoyment of luxury if at intervals we chance to meet with it, and it renders us fearless against fortune.

D. TRUE PLEASURE

The truest happiness does not come from enjoyment of physical pleasures but from a simple life, free from anxiety, with the normal physical needs satisfied.

When we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasure of the profligate or that which depends on physical enjoyment — as some think who do not understand our teachings, disagree with them, or give them an evil interpretation — but by pleasure we mean the state wherein the body is free from pain and the mind from anxiety. Neither continual drinking and dancing, nor sexual love, nor the enjoyment of fish and whatever else the luxurious table offers brings about the pleasant life; rather, it is produced by the reason which is sober, which examines the motive for every choice and rejection, and which drives away all those opinions through which the greatest tumult lays hold of the mind.

E. PRUDENCE

Prudence or practical wisdom should be our guide.

Of all this the beginning and the chief good is prudence. For this reason prudence is more precious than philosophy itself. All the other virtues spring from it. It teaches that it is not possible to live pleasantly without at the same time living prudently, nobly, and justly, (nor to live prudently, nobly, and justly) without living pleasantly; for the virtues have grown up in close union with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life cannot be separated from the virtues.

IV. Conclusion

A. PANEGYRIC ON THE PRUDENT MAN

Whom then do you believe to be superior to the prudent man: he who has reverent opinions about the gods, who is wholly without fear of death, who has discovered what is the highest good in life and understands that the highest point in what is good is easy to reach and hold and that the extreme of evil is limited either in time or in suffering, and who laughs at that which some have set up as the ruler of all things, (Necessity? He thinks that the chief power of decision lies within us, although some things come about by

necessity,) some by chance, and some by our own wills; for he sees that necessity is irresponsible and chance uncertain, but that our actions are subject to no power. It is for this reason that our actions merit praise or blame. It would be better to accept the myth about the gods than to be a slave to the determinism of the physicists; for the myth hints at a hope for grace through honors paid to the gods, but the necessity of determinism is inescapable. Since the prudent man does not, as do many, regard chance as a god (for the gods do nothing in disorderly fashion) or as an unstable cause (of all things), he believes that chance does (not) give man good and evil to make his life happy or miserable, but that it does provide opportunities for great a good or evil. Finally, he thinks it better to meet misfortune while acting with reason than to happen upon good fortune while acting senselessly; for it is better that what has been well-planned in our actions (should fail than that what has been ill-planned) should gain success by chance.

B. FINAL WORDS TO MENOECEUS

Meditate on these and like precepts, by day and by night, alone or with a like-minded friend. Then never, either awake or asleep, will you be dismayed; but you will live like a god among men; for life amid immortal blessings is in no way like the life of a mere mortal.