



The Epistle of Epikouros:¹ to Menoikeus

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Greeting [Menoikeus]:

Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search thereof when he is grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come, or that it is past and gone, is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is now no more. Therefore, both old and young ought to seek wisdom, the former in order that, as age comes over him, he may be young in good things because of the grace of what has been, and the latter in order that, while he is young, he may at the same

time be old, because he has no fear of the things which are to come. So *we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness*, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed toward attaining it.

Without ceasing, do all of the things I have [taught] you, exercise yourself in [them], and [believe] them to be *the elements of [a good] life*.

God Exists

First believe that God is a living being immortal and happy, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of humankind; and so believing, you shall not affirm of him anything that is foreign to his immortality or that is repugnant to his happiness. For truly there are gods, and knowledge of them is evident; but they are not such as the multitude believe, [because they are not consistent in the opinions they form about them]. [The truly impious person affirms of the gods what common people believe about them, not the person

¹Epikouros of Athens (341-270 BCE).

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who denies the gods.]³ For the [opinions of ordinary people] about the gods are not true preconceptions but [rather] *false assumptions*: that the greatest evils happen to wicked [people], and the greatest blessings happen to good [people, and all of this comes] from the hand of the gods. [Ordinary people believe] that [the gods] are always favorable to their own good qualities and [bless] people like themselves, but [these ordinary people dislike whatever is different and consider it] alien.

Death Should Not be Feared

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and *death is the privation of all awareness*; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning [for] immortality.⁴ For life has no terror; for those who thoroughly apprehend that there are no terrors for them in ceasing to live. Therefore, the person who says that he fears death, not because it will [bring] pain when it comes, but because [the thought of non-existence disturbs him], is foolish. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a *groundless pain* in the **expectation**. Death, therefore, [which ordinary people think is] the [worst] of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, [as long as we exist], death [does not], and when death [exists], we [do] not. [Thus, death] is nothing either to the living or the dead, for with the living it is not, and the dead exist no longer.

But in the world, at one time people shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time [desire] it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise person does not [devalue] life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. [Just] as people choose food, not merely and simply the larger portion, but [that which is] more pleasant, so [also] the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches [us] to live and die well. [The person who] says that it [is better] not to be born, but [if] one is born [it is better] to pass [quickly] through the gates of Hades,⁵ is foolish. For *if* he truly believes this, why does he not [kill himself]? It [would be quite] easy for a person to do so, *if* [they really believed this]. If he speaks only in [jest], his words are foolishness, for those who hear [him do not] believe him.

³ That is, it is worse to believe false things about the gods than it is to deny their existence. And, for Epikuros, the worst thing to believe about the gods is that they are responsible for the events which happen in our world, as he makes clear in the following passages.

⁴ As a materialist, Epikuros rejects both the Substance Dualism of Plato and the Formal Dualism of Aristotle. Because everything that exist is composed of atoms, the soul—which he believes exists—must also be composed of atoms, and is therefore subject to the same decomposition that affects the body. Hence, there can be no consciousness after death since it is merely an attribute of a living person (which is nothing more than a complex conglomeration of atoms). Since there is no personal identity after death, that state is not something that should be feared because there is no consciousness (i.e., self) which could perceive that state.

⁵ In Greek myth and folklore, Hades is the place beneath the earth where the souls of the dead congregate to spend eternity.

Pleasure is the Greatest Good

We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours—nor not wholly ours—so that we neither count upon it as certain, nor despair [that it may not] come. We must also [remember about] desires [that] some are [rooted in nature] while others are groundless. [Further, we must remember] [concerning] natural [desires] that some are [both] **necessary** [and] **natural**, [while others are] only natural. And of the necessary desires [we must remember that] some are necessary *if* we are [going] to be happy, some *if* the body is to be rid of [anxiety], some *if* we are [merely] to [survive].⁶ He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health [for the] body and **tranquility** [for the] mind, seeing **that this is the sum and end of a happy life**.⁷ *For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear*, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is [quieted]. Such a living creature has no need to go [searching for] something that is lacking, nor to look [for] anything by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained, then—and only then—do we feel the need of pleasure. [This is why] we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a happy life. *Pleasure is our first and [native] good*. It is the starting-point of every [desire] and of every aversion, and we come back to it, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose [any] pleasure what[so]ever, but often pass over pleasures when a greater annoyance [follows] them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a *greater pleasure*. While, therefore, all pleasure—because it is naturally akin to us—is good, *not all pleasure is worthy of choice*, just as all pain is an evil and yet *not all pain is to be shunned*. It is, however, by *measuring one against another*,⁸ and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged. Sometimes we treat the good as an evil, and the evil, on the contrary, as a good. Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as *to be contented with little* if we [do not] have much, being honestly persuaded that [people] have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only vain and worthless [pleasures] hard to win. Plain [food] gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of [desire] has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips. To habituate one's self, therefore, to [a] simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a person to meet the necessary requirements of life without [loss]; it places us in a better condition when we [occasionally] approach [fine food] and [makes] us fearless of fortune.

⁶ What Epikuros makes clear in this passage is that desire is not intrinsically good, but rather teleologically good. Therefore, all desires are not equal. He lays out a hierarchy of desire with arbitrary desires least important followed by those that are dictated by the natural order, which further divide into those necessary for existence versus those necessary for a happy existence. Understanding what kind of desire one has in mind is essential to successfully pursuing a happy life.

⁷ 'Tranquility' (translated from '*atarakteo*' and its cognates) is a central concept for both Epicureans and Stoics. For Epikuros this "undisturbed" state is attained by eliminating, as much as is possible, occurrences of pain (physical or psychological). Thus, the choices we make must always be with full awareness of the hierarchy of desires and their.

⁸ See Plato, *Protagoras* 356.

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, *we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality*, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By ‘pleasure’ we mean ***the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul***. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of [celebration], not [sex], not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is *sober reasoning*, [investigating] the [justification] of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those [opinions] through which the greatest disturbances take possession of the soul. Of all this, [practical wisdom is the goal]. For this reason [*practical wisdom*] *is a more precious thing even than the other virtues*, for a life of pleasure [without] prudence, honor, and justice [is not really pleasant]; nor [is it possible to live] a life of prudence, honor, and justice, [without] pleasure. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.

The Wise Person

Who, then, is superior in your judgment to such a person? [They] hold a [pious] belief concerning the gods, and [are] altogether free from the fear of death. [Such a person] has diligently considered the [order established] by nature, and understands how easily the limit of good things can be reached and attained, and how either the duration or the intensity of evils is [small]. Destiny—which some [people] introduce as sovereign over all things—[they laugh at] and scorn; [such a person understands] that some things happen of *necessity*, others by *chance*, others through our own *agency*. [The wise person understands] that *necessity destroys responsibility*, and chance—or ‘fortune’—is [unpredictable]. But our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame [are properly applied].⁹ It [would be] better, to accept [false stories about] the gods than to [submit oneself to what the Natural Philosophers call] [D]estiny.¹⁰ The one holds out some faint hope that we may escape if we honor the gods, while the necessity of the naturalists is deaf to all entreaties. Nor does [the wise person] hold [C]hance to be a god—as the world in general does—for in the acts of a god there is no disorder; nor [do they believe Chance is] a cause, though an uncertain one, for [the wise] believe that no good or evil is dispensed by [C]hance to people [in order] to make life happy, though it supplies the starting-point of great good and great evil. [The wise person] believes that [their own] misfortune is [superior to] the prosperity of the fool. In short, it is better [to understand that right action does] not owe its [success] to the aid of Chance.

Exercise yourself in these and [similar principles] day and night, both by yourself and [those who are likeminded]. Then [neither] in waking or dreaming, will you be disturbed; will live [like] a god among [humans]. For people lose all appearance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.



⁹ I.e., moral judgments require freedom of the will.

¹⁰ Epikuros is referring to the doctrine of determinism: the view that every action in the universe is preceded by a cause which itself is in turn preceded by a cause, none of which are examples of non-caused choice.