LETTER TO MENOECEUS

By
Epicurus
Introduction
As a matter of principle the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) sought to “live unnoticed,” considering a life of quiet happiness to be better than the pursuit of wealth and power. He founded his philosophical school and lived with his friends in his "garden" in Athens when the city was witnessing the rise of Macedonian dominance. While Greek politics reflected the ongoing crisis which was occurring in values and virtues, many thinkers felt the growing need for intellectual conservatism and voluntary withdrawal to secure a life of imperturbability or “ataraxia” (freedom from “disturbance”)
The philosophy of Epicurus was a complete and interdependent system. It included:

1. A conception of the goal of human life: eudaimonia or the sort of happiness that results from the absence of physical pain and mental disturbance;

2. An empiricist epistemology: that sensations, together with the perception of pleasure and pain are infallible criteria for knowledge;

3. A description of nature—as well as a metaphysics—that was based on atomistic materialism;

4. And a naturalistic account of evolution, from the formation of the world to the emergence of human societies.

Anxiety and the Fear of Death
Epicurus believed that, on the basis of a radical materialism—one which dispensed with transcendent entities such as the Platonic Ideas or Forms—he could disprove the possibility of the soul's survival after death, and hence the prospect of punishment in the afterlife. Epicurus regarded the unacknowledged fear of death and punishment in the afterlife as a primary cause of anxiety and perturbation among human beings and anxiety, in turn, as the
source of extreme and irrational desires. The elimination of these fears and their corresponding desires would leave people free to pursue the pleasures, both physical and mental, to which they are naturally drawn and to enjoy the peace of mind that is achieved upon the regular satisfaction of those desires.

The Bodily Nature of the Soul
Having established the physical basis of the world, Epicurus' metaphysics proceeds to explain the corporeal (bodily) nature of the soul, which is distributed like so many atoms throughout the body. Because an incorporeal entity could neither act on nor be moved by bodies, the soul must be corporeal—for the soul is conscious of what happens to the body, and it initiates physical movement.

The corporeal nature of the soul has several crucial consequences for Epicureanism, but important to note here is that the bodily nature of the soul is the basis of Epicurus' demonstration that the soul does not survive the death of the body. Epicurus argued that the soul's texture is too delicate to exist independently of the body that contains it, and in any case, the connection with the body is necessary for sensation to occur. From this it follows that there can be no punishment or pain after death, nor any regrets for the life that has been lost.

In other words, as a materialist, Epicurus 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 material decomposition that affects the body. Hence, there can be no consciousness after death since the soul 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., a self) which could perceive that state.

The Function of the Mind and Reason
The function of the human mind—the part of the soul that is located in our chest\(^1\)—is not to seek higher things or spend life seeking philosophical enlightenment. Rather, the function of the mind is to reason about how best to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. That is its entire objective. Of course, the risk (a substantial one) is that it may miscalculate, since it is subject to false beliefs and errors in cognitive processes.

Desire, Fear, and Anxiety
For Epicurus, there are some fears that are perfectly legitimate; so too are some desires. Epicurus offers a classification of desires into three types: some are natural, others are empty, and of the natural desires there are two sorts: those that are necessary and those that are merely natural.

1. Natural and necessary desires are those that look to happiness, physical well-being, or to life itself;

2. Unnecessary but natural desires are for pleasant things, like good-tasting food and drink, and various other pleasurable activities;

3. Empty desires are those that have as their objects things designated by “empty sounds,” or meaningless notions, such as immortality, which cannot exist for human beings and does not correspond to any genuine need.

Empty Desires and Empty Fears
The desires for great wealth or for marks of fame—such as desiring statues erected in one’s honor—are also such empty

\(^1\) This analysis of the nature of the soul and its location in the body was common among the Greeks.
desires, for they cannot provide the security that is the genuine object of the desire in such a longing. Such desires, accordingly, can never be satisfied, any more than the corresponding empty fears. The fear of death is a prime example of this. The fear of death can never be alleviated, since the fear does not refer to anything genuine—that is, the presence of death can never genuinely be something harmful to us, for when it is present, we do not exist.

Such empty fears and desires are based on what Epicurus calls *kenodoxia* (or empty belief). And they are themselves the main source of perturbation and pain in civilized life (where more elementary dangers have been brought under control) since they are the reason why people are driven to strive for limitless wealth and power, subjecting themselves to the very dangers they imagine they are avoiding.

In this letter below, Epicurus summarizes his ethical doctrines including his critique of the fear of death.

Greetings Menoeceus,
Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search of it when he has 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 alike 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 towards attaining it.

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

God Exists

First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the common sense of mankind; and so believing, you shall not affirm of him anything that is foreign to his immortality or that is repugnant to his blessedness. Believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. It is not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them—he is the truly impious one.² For the utterances of the multitude about the gods

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² That is, it is worse to believe false things about the gods than it is to deny their existence. And, for Epicurus, the worst thing to believe about
are not true conceptions but false assumptions; hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, seeing that they are always favorable to their own good qualities and take pleasure in men like themselves, but reject as alien whatever is not of their kind.

**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 after immortality. For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will bring pain when it comes, but because the prospect itself is painful. Whatever causes no disturbance when it is present, causes only a meaningless pain in the expectation of it. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.

But in this world, men will shun death as the greatest of all evils at one time, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise man, however, does not deprecate 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. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but that which is more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is

the gods is that they are responsible the events which happen in our world.
most pleasant and not merely that which is longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to have a good death speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches us to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not kill himself already? It would be easy for him to do so once he became firmly convinced. If he speaks only in jest, his words are foolishness as those who hear him do not believe.

**Pleasure is the Greatest Good**

We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.

We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless and empty; and that of the natural desires, some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live. He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquility of mind (*ataraxia*), seeing that this is the sum and end of a happy life. For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the violent storm in the soul is quieted—seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure. Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every desire and of every aversion, and to it we come back,
inasmuch as we make its feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.

And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but will often pass over many pleasures when a greater disturbance results from 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 should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned. It is, however, by measuring one against another, 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 being independent of many outward things and possessions as a great good, not so that, in every case we use the littlest amount, but so that we can be perfectly content with little if we have not much. Here we are honestly assured that we receive the sweetest enjoyment of luxury, precisely because we stand least in need of it. And whatever is natural to desire is easily procured; only the vain and worthless objects of desire are hard to win. Plain food gives as much pleasure as an expensive diet, 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 man to meet the necessary requirements of life without loss, and it places us in a much better condition when we approach, on occasion, expensive foods, and renders us fearless of fortune.

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 accused of 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 sexual lust, nor the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table that produce a pleasant life. It is, rather, sober reasoning, investigating the basis of every desire and avoidance, and banishing those opinions through which the greatest disturbance take possession of the soul. Of all this, the beginning and the greatest good is **practical wisdom**. Therefore practical wisdom is a more precious thing even than theoretical philosophy and the other virtues; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. 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 of such a man? 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 attained and how either the duration or the intensity of evils is but slight. Fate—which some people introduce as sovereign over all things—the wise scorns and mocks, affirming rather that some things happen of necessity, others by chance, and others still through our own agency. For he sees that necessity [determinism] destroys our responsibility and that chance, or “fortune,” is inconstant and unpredictable. But our own actions are autonomous, and it is to them that praise and blame are properly applied. It would be better, indeed, to accept the false stories told

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3 In other words, moral right or morally wrong actions (and thus moral judgments) require freedom of the will.
about the gods than to submit beneath that yoke of fate than to submit to what the natural philosophers have called destiny.\textsuperscript{4} The one holds out some faint hope that we may escape if we honor the gods, while the determinism of the natural philosophers is deaf to all entreaties. Nor does the wise person hold chance to be a god, as the world in general does, for in the acts of a god there is no disorder. Nor does the wise person believe chance is a determining cause, though an uncertain one, for the wise believe that no good or evil is dispensed by accidental to people in order to make life happy, though chance 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 related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with one who is like-minded; then never, either in waking or in dream, will you be disturbed, but will live as a god among humans. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.

Epicurus

\textsuperscript{4} Epicurus is referring to the doctrine of determinism: the view that every action in the universe is preceded by a cause, which itself is preceded by a cause. Causes determine effects; thus there are no non-caused—non-determined—choices. Destiny, or fate, is deterministic and rules every action, leaving no room for free choice or free will.
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