

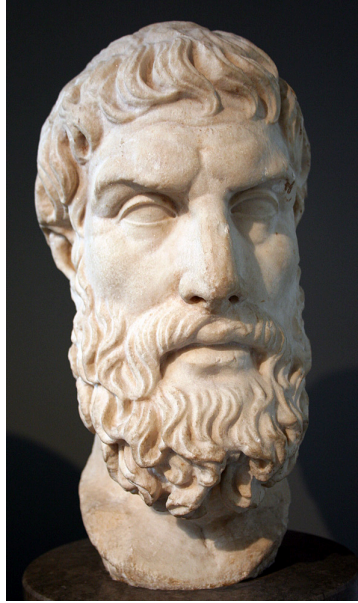
LETTER TO MENOECEUS

Epicurus

Editor's Note: The Letter to Menoecus was written by a Hellenistic philosopher by the name of Epicurus. During his time, life in Greece was turbulent and chaotic. Epicurus' aim was how to live a tranquil life, which he takes to be the greatest of all pleasures. In the letter, he gives philosophical thoughts and advice on topics that play significant roles in our mental well-being.

Epicurus (341–270 BCE) suggests that pleasure is the sole end of beings. Morality for each individual must be the art of procuring for oneself the greatest amount of personal pleasure and avoiding as much suffering as possible.¹

Epicurus denies that the gods take interest in human affairs and therefore we should not worry about divine moral precepts. Human laws are merely those rules we agree to in order to avoid harm. Morality, for Epicurus, is not following laws or the commands of the gods, but of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.²



Marble bust of Epicurus. Roman copy of Greek original, 3rd century BC/2nd century BC. On display in the British Museum, London.

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1. Felix Alcan, “The Morality of Epicurus and Its Relation to Contemporary Doctrines,” in *La Morale d’Epicure et Ses Rapports Avec Les Doctrines Contemporaines*, trans. Mitchell Abidor, 7th Edition (Paris: Kessinger Publishing, LLC), accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guyau/1878/epicurus.htm>.
 2. David Konstan, “Epicurus,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed.

Epicurus to Menoeceus: Greetings.

Let no one delay to philosophize while he is young nor weary in philosophizing when he is old, for no one is either short of the age or past the age for enjoying health of the soul. And the man who says the time for philosophizing has not yet come or is already past may be compared to the man who says the time for happiness is not yet come or is already gone by. So both the young man and the old man should philosophize, the former that while growing old he may be young in blessings because of gratitude for what has been, the latter that he may be young and old at the same time because of the fearlessness with which he faces the future. Therefore the wise plan is to practice the things that make for happiness, since possessing happiness we have everything and not possessing it we do everything to have it.

THE GODS

Both practice and study the precepts which I continuously urged upon you, discerning these to be the A B C's of the good life. First of all, believing the divine being to be blessed and incorruptible, just as the universal idea of it is outlined in our minds, associate nothing with it that is incompatible

with incorruption or alien to blessedness. And cultivate every thought concerning it that can preserve its blessedness along with incorruption. Because there are gods, for the knowledge of them is plain to see. They are not, however, such as many suppose them to be, for people do not keep their accounts of them consistent with their beliefs. And it is not the man who would abolish the gods of the multitude who is impious but the man who associates the beliefs of the multitude with the gods; for the pronouncements of the multitude concerning the gods are not innate ideas but false assumptions. According to their stories the greatest injuries and indignities are said to be inflicted upon evil men, and also benefits.

THE GODS INDIFFERENT TO WICKEDNESS

[These stories are false, because the gods], being exclusively devoted to virtues that become themselves, feel an affinity for those like themselves and regard all that is not of this kind as alien.

DEATH

Habituate yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us, because all good and evil lies in consciousness and death is the loss of consciousness. Hence a right understanding of the fact that death is nothing to us renders enjoyable the mortality

of life, not by adding infinite time but by taking away the yearning for immortality, for there is nothing to be feared while living by the man who has genuinely grasped the idea that there is nothing to be feared when not living.

So the man is silly who says that he fears death, not because it will pain him when it comes, but because it pains him in prospect; for nothing that occasions no trouble when present has any right to pain us in anticipation. Therefore death, the most frightening of evils, is nothing to us, for the excellent reason that while we live it is not here and when it is here we are not living. So it is nothing either to the living or to the dead, because it is of no concern to the living and the dead are no longer.

THE INCONSISTENCY OF PEOPLE

But the multitude of men at one time shun death as the greatest of evils and at another choose death as an escape from the evils of life. The wise man, however, neither asks quarter of life nor has he any fear of not living, for he has no fault to find with life nor does he think it any evil to be out of it. Just as in the case of food, he does not always choose the largest portion but rather the most enjoyable; so with time, he does not pick the longest span of it but the most enjoyable.

And the one who bids the young man 'Live well' and the old man 'Die well' is simple-minded, not only because of the pleasure of being alive, but also for the reason that the art of

living well and dying well is one and the same. And far worse is he who says: 'It were well never to have been born or having been born to have passed with all speed through the gates of Hades.' For if he is saying this out of conviction, why does he not take leave of life? Because this course is open to him if he has resolutely made up his mind to it. But if he is speaking in mockery, he is trifling in the case of things that do not countenance trifling.

THE FUTURE

As for the future, we must bear in mind that it is not quite beyond our control nor yet quite within our control, so that we must neither await it as going to be quite within our control nor despair of it as going to be quite beyond our control.

THE DESIRES

As for the desires, we should reflect that some are natural and some are imaginary; and of the natural desires some are necessary and some are natural only; and of the necessary desires some are necessary to happiness [he refers to friendship], and others to the comfort of the body [clothing and housing], and others to life itself [hunger and thirst].

Because a correct appraisal of the desires enables us to refer every decision to choose or to avoid to the test of the health of the body and the tranquility of the soul, for this is the objective

of the happy life. For to this end we do everything, that we may feel neither pain nor fear. When once this boon is in our possession, every tumult of the soul is stilled, the creature having nothing to work forward to as something lacking or something additional to seek whereby the good of the soul and the body shall arrive at fullness. For only then have we need of pleasure when from the absence of pleasure we feel pain; and conversely, when we no longer feel pain we no longer feel need of pleasure.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END OF THE HAPPY LIFE

And for the following reason we say that pleasure is the beginning and the end of the happy life: because we recognize pleasure as the first good and connate with us and to this we have recourse as to a canon, judging every good by the reaction. And for the reason that pleasure is the first good and of one nature with us we do not choose every pleasure but at one time or another forgo many pleasures when a distress that will outweigh them follows in consequence of these pleasures; and many pains we believe to be preferable to pleasures when a pleasure that will outweigh them ensues for us after enduring those pains for a long time.

Therefore every pleasure is good because it is of one nature with us but every pleasure is not to be chosen; by the same

reasoning every pain is an evil but every pain is not such as to be avoided at all times.

EXPEDIENCY: THE CALCULUS OF ADVANTAGE

The right procedure, however, is to weigh them against one another and to scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages; for we treat the good under certain circumstances as an evil and conversely the evil as a good.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY OR CONTENTMENT WITH LITTLE

And self-sufficiency we believe to be a great good, not that we may live on little under all circumstances but that we may be content with little when we do not have plenty, being genuinely convinced that they enjoy luxury most who feel the least need of it; that every natural appetite is easily gratified but the unnatural appetite difficult to gratify; and that plain foods bring a pleasure equal to that of a luxurious diet when all the pain originating in need has been removed; and that bread and water bring the most utter pleasure when one in need of them brings them to his lips.

Thus habituation to simple and inexpensive diets not only contributes to perfect health but also renders a man unshrinking in face of the inevitable emergencies of life; and it

disposes us better toward the times of abundance that ensue after intervals of scarcity and renders us fearless in the face of Fortune. When therefore we say that pleasure is the end we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in high living, as certain people think, either not understanding us and holding to different views or willfully misrepresenting us; but we mean freedom from pain in the body and turmoil in the soul. For it is not protracted drinking bouts and revels nor yet sexual pleasures with boys and women nor rare dishes of fish and the rest – all the delicacies that the luxurious table bears – that beget the happy life but rather sober calculation, which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and expels the false opinions, the source of most of the turmoil that seizes upon the souls of men.

THE PRACTICAL REASON

Of all these virtues the source is the practical reason, the greatest good of all – and hence more precious than philosophy itself – teaching us the impossibility of living pleurably without living according to reason, honor, and justice, and conversely, of living according to reason, honor, and justice without living pleurably; for the virtues are of one nature with the pleurable life and conversely, the pleurable life is inseparable from the virtues.

DESCRIPTION OF THE HAPPY MAN

“Because who do you think is in better case than the man who holds pious beliefs concerning the gods and is invariably fearless of death; and has included in his reckoning the end of life as ordained by Nature; and concerning the utmost of things good discerns this to be easy to enjoy to the full and easy of procurement, while the utmost of things evil is either brief in duration or brief in suffering.

He has abolished the Necessity that is introduced by some thinkers as the mistress of all things, for it were better to subscribe to the myths concerning the gods than to be a slave to the Destiny of the physicists, because the former presumes a hope of mercy through worship but the latter assumes Necessity to be inexorable.

As for Fortune, he does not assume that she is a goddess, as the multitude believes, for nothing is done at random by a god; neither does he think her a fickle cause, for he does not suppose that either good or evil is dealt out to men by her to affect life's happiness; yet he does believe the starting points for great good or evil to originate with her, thinking it better to plan well and fail than to plan badly and succeed, for in the conduct of life it profits more for good judgment to miscarry than for misjudgment to prosper by chance.

THINK ON THESE THINGS

Meditate therefore by day and by night upon these precepts and upon the others that go with these, whether by yourself or in the company of another like yourself, and never will your soul be in turmoil either sleeping or waking but you will be living like a god among men, for in no wise does a man resemble a mortal creature who lives among immortal blessings.

Recommended Resources

The first two sources below give overview of Epicurus' letter and philosophy in general:

- Slattery, Luke. 2016/2017. "Epicurus For Today." In *Philosophy Now!* 117 (Dec/Jan): 24-26. https://philosophynow.org/issues/117/Epicurus_For_Today.
(Tulsa Community College students can access the reading by clicking the linked title above and entering credentials – T# & password;

those without a subscription can access a limited number of articles monthly using the URL provided.)

- *Philosophize This!* Episode 010 – The Hellenistic Age Pt. 1 – Epicurus
(Click on title above to access a written transcript and/or press play below to listen.)



An interactive HSP element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://open.ocolearnok.org/ethics/?p=52#h5p-10>

Epicurus is, in part, related to Stoicism, although there are some differences to consider. The following podcast goes into some detail about Epicurus and Stoicism.

- *Philosophize This!* Episode 011 – The Hellenistic Age Pt. 2 – Epicurus

(Click on title above to access a written transcript and/or press play below to listen.)



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://open.ocolearnok.org/ethics/?p=52#h5p-11>

For Reflection & Discussion

1. Why does Epicurus counsel his student to disregard the gods?
2. What is Epicurus' notion of true happiness? How does it differ from other notions of happiness from other philosophers, pop

- culture, your family or religion of origin, etc?
3. How should we confront the aspects of life we find unsavory?
 4. What role does practical reason play in the good life for Epicurus?
 5. If you were an Epicurean, how would your outlook and behaviors change?

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