

Epicurus

His philosophy

Extracts:

Philosophy

Let no one be slow to seek knowledge and understanding when they are young, nor be quick to tire of the search for wisdom when they grow old. For no age is too early or too late to be concerned with the health of the mind. And to say that the time for philosophy has not yet come, or that it is passed and gone, is like saying that the time for happiness is not yet come, or that it is gone for ever.

By the love of true philosophy every troubling and painful desire is destroyed. Vain is the discourse of that philosopher by which no human suffering is healed.

We must laugh and philosophize at the same time as we do our household chores and go about our other business, and never stop bringing out the sayings of the true philosophy.

You must become a slave to philosophy if you would gain true freedom.

Gods

First, believe that a god is a being in a state of bliss and immortal, according to the idea of gods commonly held by people. If you accept this, you cannot attribute to the gods anything that is contrary to immortality or that is inconsistent with a state of bliss. Rather, you will expect of them whatever sustains both their state of bliss and their immortality. For truly there are gods, and belief in them is obvious. But they are not such as the crowd thinks, because most people do not keep steadfastly in mind the qualities attributable to gods. The truly impious person is not the one who rejects the gods worshipped by the crowd, but the one who thinks of the gods in the way the crowd does. For the things most people say about the gods are not faithful to the attributes of gods. Instead, they are false presumptions, according to which the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good—all from the hands of the gods who, naturally, are assumed to always favor what the crowd believes are their own good qualities, taking delight in people like themselves and rejecting as damned whoever is not of their kind.

It is vain to ask the gods for what we can procure for ourselves. A blissful and eternal being is not troubled in itself and brings no trouble to any other being. So it is exempt from motives of anger and favor, for every such motive implies weakness.

Dreams have no divine character nor any prophetic power, but they originate from the inflow of sensory images.

Pleasure

We must also reflect that as far as desires are concerned, some are natural while others have no foundation; and that of the natural, some are necessary as well as natural and some are 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 distress, and some are necessary even to live. A person 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, seeing that this is the sum and end of a happy life.

For the aim of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear; and once we have attained this, all the storms of the mind are calmed, seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that

is lacking nor to look for anything else required to fulfill the good of mind and body. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure; but when we feel no pain, then we no longer stand in need of pleasure. Therefore we call pleasure the beginning and end of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and closest good. It is the starting-point of everything we accept and everything we reject, and to it we come back, as we make feeling the rule by which to evaluate the good of everything.

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 misinterpretation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking feasts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of sturgeon and other delicacies of a luxurious table that produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning—searching out the grounds for what we accept and what we reject, and banishing those beliefs through which greatest tumults take possession of the mind.

And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but frequently pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as its consequence a greater pleasure. Therefore, while all pleasure is good, because it is naturally part of us, not all

pleasure is worth choosing—just as all pain is an evil but all pain is not to be shunned. All these matters must be judged by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences.

Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Therefore, prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor, and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor, and justice that is not also a life of pleasure. For these virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.

Let us not accuse the flesh as the cause of great evils, nor should we blame our suffering on outward things. Let us rather seek the causes of this distress within our minds. Let us cut off every vain craving and hope for things which are fleeting, and let us become wholly masters of ourselves. For a person is unhappy either from fear or from unlimited and vain desires. But restraining these may secure the contentment of reason. Confront every desire with this question: What shall I gain by gratifying this desire and what shall I lose by suppressing it?

In so far as you are in distress, you are in distress because you have forgotten the nature of your humanity, for you impose upon yourself fears and desires that have no limits. It would be better for you to have no fears and lie upon a bed of straw, than to have a golden couch and lavish table, yet have a troubled mind.

Happiness

The main part of happiness is that which is under our own control. Service in the field is hard work, and others hold command. Public speaking produces a racing heart and anxiety as to whether you are convincing. Why, then, pursue activities like these that are under the control of others?

Nothing is so productive of happiness as to abstain from meddling, from engaging in difficult undertakings, and from forcing yourself to do something beyond your power. For all this throws your nature into turmoil. We must free ourselves from the prison of business and politics.

It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely, well and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely, well and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking—when, for instance, a man does not live wisely, though he lives well and justly—it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.

Our bodies cry out to be saved from hunger, thirst and cold. If we are safe from these and hope to remain so, we might rival even the gods in happiness.

Nature forces us to cry out when we groan with pain. However, to cry out in lamentation because we cannot rejoice in the ranks of the healthy and prosperous is the result of faulty reasoning.

We are born once. We cannot be born twice: for eternity we must be non-existent. But you people, who are not master of the future, put things off for "the right time". Procrastination ruins the life of all. And so, each of us is hurried and unprepared at death.

A person who is least in need of tomorrow will meet the morning most pleasantly.

Death

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness and death is the loss of all awareness. A true understanding that death is nothing to us, therefore, makes our mortal life enjoyable—not by adding an unlimited time to life, but by taking away the yearning for immortality. For life has no terrors for those convinced that there is nothing to dread when they cease to live. A person is foolish who fears death, not because of the pain of its coming, but because of dread of the state of death. Whatever causes no suffering when it is present causes only unwarranted pain in the expectation of it. Against all else it is possible to provide security, but against death we live in a city without defenses.

Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that when we exist, death has not come, and when death has come, we do not exist. It is nothing, either to the living or the dead—for the living, it is not present; and the dead exist no longer. Everyone passes out of life as if they had just been born.

Sources

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