

READING FOR LECTURES 1 AND 5

Epicurus, excerpt from *Letter to Menoeceus*, translated by Robert Drew Hicks. This text is in the public domain.

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 terror; for those who thoroughly apprehend that there are no terrors for them in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, 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 the world, at one time people shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise person 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 people choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so 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 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 with all speed through the gates of Hades. For

if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It were easy for him to do so, if once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in mockery, his words are foolishness, for those who hear believe him not.

Lucretius, excerpts from *De Rerum Natura*, translated by Cyril Bailey. This text is in the public domain.

Death, then, is naught to us, nor does it concern us a whit, inasmuch as the nature of the mind is but a mortal possession. And even as in the time gone by we felt no ill, when the Poeni came from all sides to the shock of battle, when all the world, shaken by the hurrying turmoil of war, shuddered and reeled beneath the high coasts of heaven, in doubt to which people's sway must fall all human power by land and sea; so, when we shall be no more, when there shall have come the parting of body and soul, by whose union we are made one, you may know that nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who then will be no more, or stir our feeling; no, not if earth shall be mingled with sea, and sea with sky. And even if the nature of mind and the power of soul has feeling, after it has been rent asunder from our body, yet it is naught to us, who are made one by the mating and marriage of body and soul. Nor, if time should gather together our substance after our decease and bring it back again as it is now placed, if once more the light of life should be vouchsafed to us, yet, even were that done, it would not concern us at all, when once the remembrance of our former selves were snapped in twain. And even now we care not at all for the selves that we once were, not at all are we touched by any torturing pain for them. [...]

For, if by chance there is to be grief and pain for a man, he must needs himself too exist at that time, that ill may befall him. Since death

forestalls this, and prevents the being of him, on whom these misfortunes might crowd, we may know that we have naught to fear in death, and that he who is no more cannot be wretched, and that it were no whit different if he had never at any time been born, when once immortal death hath stolen away mortal life. [...]

“Now no more shall thy glad home welcome thee, nor thy good wife and sweet children run up to snatch the first kisses, and touch thy heart with a silent thrill of joy. No more shalt thou have power to prosper in thy ways, or to be a sure defence to thine own. Pitiful thou art,” men say, “and pitifully has one malignant day taken from thee all the many prizes of life.” Yet to this they add not: “nor does there abide with thee any longer any yearning for these things.” But if they saw this clearly in mind, and followed it out in their words, they would free themselves from great anguish and fear of mind. [...]

For the old ever gives place thrust out by new things, and one thing must be restored at the expense of others: nor is any one sent down to the pit and to black Tartarus. There must needs be substance that the generations to come may grow; yet all of them too will follow thee, when they have had their fill of life; yea, just as thyself, these generations have passed away before, and will pass away again. So one thing shall never cease to rise up out of another, and life is granted to none for freehold, to all on lease. Look back again to see how the past ages of everlasting time, before we are born, have been as naught to us. These then nature holds up to us as a mirror of the time that is to come, when we are dead and gone. Is there aught that looks terrible in this, aught that seems gloomy? Is it not a calmer rest than any sleep? [...]

Nor in truth by prolonging life do we take away a jot from the time of death, nor can we subtract anything whereby we may perchance be less

long dead. Therefore you may live on to close as many generations as you will: yet no whit the less that everlasting death will await you, nor will he for a less long time be no more, who has made an end of life with today's light, than he who perished many months or years ago.