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## Death Be Not... Fearful

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# Death Be Not Fearful

by Matt Caminiti

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“Death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist” (I-2 125). ~Epicurus

The Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus arrives at this view of death through the application of the two major schools of thought to which his philosophy subscribes: hedonism and materialism. His goal is to demonstrate the true nature of death so that mankind should not be excessively worried about its arrival and in the process, we can attain the state of *ataraxia*, the high pleasure characterized by the freedom from worries and pain.

Hedonism holds that pleasure, which is maintained through sense perception, is the highest and the only good. As Epicurus states in his letter to Menoeceus: “We say that pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly. For we recognized this as our first innate good, and this is our starting point for every choice and avoidance and we come to this by judging every good by the criterion of feeling” (I-4 128-129). On the contrary, for something to be considered an evil, sense perception is also required as a necessary condition for something being an evil is that it causes the subject displeasure, and it is impossible to experience displeasure without sense perception.

Epicureanism’s dismissal of the idea that one should fear death hinges on its views of pleasure. Firstly, Epicurus is adamant in the dismissal of the possibility of an after-life and believes that death is followed by an eternity of nothingness. Thus, if we are to experience pure nothingness after death, it is impossible for death to be a misfortune or the object of fear, for to claim something is either of these things it must be characterized as an evil and that is impossible. Death cannot be an evil, for in death one has no sense perception with which to experience whatever displeasure it could provide.

To avoid the potential worry of an after-life existing, Epicurus subscribes to the philosophy of materialism, which believes that the “soul” is contained within the physical body and incapable of existing without it. In his letter to Herodotus, Epicurus outlines this materialist view of the body and the soul, “The soul is a body made up of fine parts distributed throughout the entire aggregate [body]... One must hold firmly that the soul is most responsible for sense perception. But [the soul] would not have acquired this power if it were not somehow enclosed by the rest of the aggregate” (I-2 63-64). Thus, Epicurus is able to conclude that when the individual perishes, their soul, the experiential component of the individual, perishes alongside the body. As a result, a state of nothingness

ensues after death as the essential elements that are responsible for sense perception are no longer, “Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us” (I-5 II).”

Furthermore, this Epicureanism can also guard itself from any objection relating to the conservation of mass on the topic of death. Epicureanism also believes strongly in the theory of atomism, which not only believes that atoms are the key component in the makeup of all physical life, but also that they are constantly in flux. As a result, the atoms that made up one’s physical body would be dispersed among the universe, and not destroyed, in the instance of one’s death.

It is important to clarify that although Epicurus is generally translated as referring solely to “death,” many more contemporary supporters of his, including Stephen Rosenbaum, understand “death” in this context to mean “the state of being dead,” rather than merely “death” or “dying.” Whereas dying entails the passage of time during one’s life, and is clearly not what Epicurus intended when he wrote of “death,” “death” is the “portal between the land of the living and the land of the dead” (Rosenbaum 121). Since it is unclear whether “death” is part of one’s lifetime and whether it takes time, it seems as though Epicurus was referring to “the state of being dead” when discussing death.

As aforementioned, Epicureanism dismisses the notion that anyone should be fearful of death mainly through highlighting the irrelevance that death holds both to the living and to the dead. As Epicurus posits earlier in his letter to Menoeceus, “For there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when still to come” (I-4 125). Thus, it seems as though death should be viewed largely indifferently, for if death is not something to fear and is indeed painless when it comes, it should also be nothing to fear and painless when it is yet to come.

It is also important to clarify that Epicureanism does not mean to suggest that one should view life with indifference. In fact, it suggests quite the opposite. Since pleasure is the highest good, and one must obviously be alive to experience pleasure, it must then follow that being alive has the potentiality of providing for goodness, and therefore, life is not to be viewed with indifference. One of the main goals of life, according to Epicurus, is the attainment of *ataraxia*, and crucial in this attainment is the abandonment of the fear of death, which Epicurus hopes his followers can do as he simply intends to demonstrate the truth about death and why we should not be troubled by it.

The most common objection that is leveled against Epicurus' conception of death is called the deprivation argument, which claims that death can and should be viewed as an evil since it deprives us of pleasure we would have otherwise experienced had our deaths not occurred when they did. This is clearly a legitimate worry for Epicurus, but I do not feel as if it is crippling to his philosophy and is not sufficient to say that death should be feared or a subject of major concern for humanity. In responding to this objection, I would advocate for the usage of L.S. Sumner's definition of "loss" (or "deprivation"), which reads, "The only condition essential to any loss is that there is a subject who suffers it" (Sumner 127). However, in death, no subject exists; *you* are not present to suffer your loss. Thus, death cannot be viewed as a deprivation or an evil of any sort.

The deprivation is a valiant effort indeed by the pessimists to dis-rail our attainment of pleasure, but it seems it was not quite good enough. These views on death do take some effort to accept and grow accustomed to, but the end result certainly makes these efforts worthwhile as Epicurus provides his followers a path to abandon any fear of the most feared subject in human history. Hukana Matata, my friend. Live long, live well, and have fun! □

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