

For Me Personally, The Most Fundamental Attitudinal Adjustment That Comes From Epicurean Philosophy: "Live Like You Were Dying"

Post by "Cassius" of September 26, 2023 at 7:55 AM

Almost two years ago [I made a post](#) which included this song reference, but it was included in a larger "music" thread, and I would like to pull out the idea for more emphasis. For me, there is no way that Epicurean philosophy can be understood properly without always keeping in mind this core idea: that we are mortal and that we need to "live like we are dying" - because we are.

Below are the original cites I included in the first post, but now I have an additional one to add, from Lucretius Book 3:

[B-3:1053] If only men, even as they clearly feel a weight in their mind, which wears them out with its heaviness, could learn too from what causes that comes to be, and whence so great a mass, as it were, of ill lies upon their breast, they would not pass their lives, as now for the most part we see them; knowing not each one of them what he wants, and longing ever for change of place, as though he could thus lay aside the burden. The man who is tired of staying at home, often goes out abroad from his great mansion, and of a sudden returns again, for indeed abroad he feels no better. He races to his country home, furiously driving his ponies, as though he were hurrying to bring help to a burning house; he yawns at once, when he has set foot on the threshold of the villa, or sinks into a heavy sleep and seeks forgetfulness, or even in hot haste makes for town, eager to be back. In this way each man struggles to escape himself: yet, despite his will he clings to the self, which, we may be sure, in fact he cannot shun, and hates himself, because in his sickness he knows not the cause of his malady; but if he saw it clearly, every man would leave all else, and study first to learn the nature of things, **since it is his state for all eternity, and not for a single hour, that is in question, the state in which mortals must expect all their being, that is to come after their death.**

I'll repeat my earlier caveat that I don't particularly care for much "country" music, and this song has a line in it implying that we will be around for an eternity thinking about how we spent his life, which is wrong. And this clip brings in a Bible picture which is totally off (I need a better version of the video with the text without the religious reference.)

But if you excise those references, the rest comes into harmony: it is your state for all eternity that you need to consider as the basis for how you spend your time. Not everyone is going to want to spend their time "skydiving" or in the kind of activities the song includes, although many of the examples do follow more standard Epicurean advice. Regardless of what activities float your boat, mental, physical, or a combination, you better take advantage of the time that you have and pursue what brings you pleasure, and not run around mindlessly confused about

how much time you have and how you want to spend that time.

It's mainly because of this position that I have such little patience with the "ascetic" interpretation of measuring pleasure as the absence of pain. At this point in my reading of Epicurus (Torquatus makes this crystal clear), I see an obvious common sense interpretation of this idea. Once you accept the position given the dearness of life that every experience of life should be considered to be pleasurable unless it involves some specific mental or bodily pain then you explode any implication of asceticism or esotericism or mysticism or darkness in these words. Cicero can employ his rhetoric to insist that pleasure is limited to "sex drugs and rock and roll," but that is the opinion of a theist or virtue signaler who wants to put you in a box of complying with his morality. When you open up the definition of "pleasure" to include the privilege of being alive - to all experiences mental and bodily which are not specifically painful -- then you get a direct "live like you are dying" attitude where you cherish and appreciate every moment of life that you have, and you find ways to put up with every kind of pain which isn't truly unendurable. And add to that that there is no necessity to tolerate anything truly terrible or unendurable when you see that there is nothing terrible or unendurable in no longer being alive.

If someone truly wants to spend the short time that they have "minimizing" their experiences, living in a proverbial desert and detached from the world and all the many pleasures that are possible, and they truly enjoy that, then more power to them. I have no right and would never attempt to substitute my judgment for theirs on how they should spend their time. It's entirely possible that some people are born that way and truly want to spend their lives that way from start to finish.

But from my point of view, as to the way I read the Greek and Roman Epicureans, that attitude is totally foreign to the way Nature leads every other living being to conduct itself, and thus that view is counter to the thrust of Epicurean philosophy. Does it really make sense that someone who truly accepts that they exist for a relative moment, and that they will not exist for an eternity after death, wants to spend their lives detaching and minimizing their engagement in life? To each his own, but that is not for me - we can leave that to the Stoics and to the religionists who think that they will find their reward elsewhere.

So while we don't seem to spend too much time here emphasizing a "You Only Live Once" attitude, but I think we should spend more on it. I don't think there is any more important core attitude to have given the nature of the way things are.

- **Live like you are dying (because you are).**

1. Song possibilities

1. "live like you were dying" (Tim McGraw)

1. Edit: This is a better version of the lyrics where it's easier to imagine that the "good book" is Lucretius: <https://youtu.be/OJejCUfdnCM>

2. Texts:

1. [PD02. Death is nothing to us](#), for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.

2. [VS10](#). Remember that you are mortal, and have a limited time to live, and have devoted yourself to discussions on Nature for all time and eternity, and have seen “things that are now and are to come and have been.”
3. VS14. We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination, and each one of us dies while occupied.
4. VS30. Some men, throughout their lives, spend their time gathering together the means of life, for they do not see that the draught swallowed by all of us at birth is a draught of death.
5. VS47. "I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and I have closed off every one of your devious entrances. And we will not give ourselves up as captives, to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who cling to it maundering, we will leave from life singing aloud a glorious triumph-song on how nicely we lived."
6. VS60. "Every man passes out of life as though he had just been born."