

# Article By Dr. Emily Austin - "Epicurus And The Politics Of The Fear Of Death"

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Superficially, I'm not sure I like the idea of identifying "fear" as the motivating factor behind preventing preventable death, versus, perhaps, *rational avoidance*. Then again, we practice avoidance to prevent non-constructive pain, and fear is definitely painful ... but is it constructive? In that regard, fear is a fellow actor on the stage of wisdom, but, playing the role of an antagonist? So I think I hesitate to place "fear" in a positive context. But it is natural, so... I'm not sure.

Regardless, I **really** enjoyed the approach Professor Austin took in terms of reviewing *the response to the fear of death* as a thing that can be "politically managed", beyond cultivating impassiveness. Contextualizing civic engagement as an approach to satisfying our natural and necessary desires, I believe, is the right way to discuss the field of politics from an Epicurean perspective, and I'm definitely going to spend some time thinking about modern politics from this view.

Truly, we all live in a city without walls when it comes to the true, universal antagonists of human history, those being disease and natural disasters. We have to find a way to tolerate those things. We're all faced with the death of our parents, and the deaths of friends. We're all faced with infirmity. Someone will suffer our own absence. One, measly volcano popped 70k years ago, and (SLAM) our species dropped below 10,000 individuals. One, tiny mutation occurs in one, little microbe, and (SLAM) 20 million people die. Human beings have (perhaps until the modern era) no capacity to mitigate those events; but on the spectrum of *Choice-to-Fate*, some threats are more "fate", and some are more "choice". We can't stop volcanic eruptions. *Maybe* we can learn to re-direct a planet-hungry asteroid? Still, by comparison, we can **definitely** mitigate political violence and civic unrest (even if our ability to influence it is *very, very* small: that freedom exists).

And, given that, coherent with the Epicurean project, I think it's correct to be pissed when good law is violated, when friends engage in betrayal, and when children die of political violence. Should we "fear" those things? ... maybe? ... I *think* I ultimately agree with Professor Austin. I'm not sure if we *should*, or if we *can* justify that Epíkouros thought so, but I certainly do fear.

There's a lot here, but what I **can** say for sure, is that, personally, I fear dying **before** I have the opportunity to enjoy the same privileges of the rest of my family. I observe my parents' generation, and all of my older cousins, *all of them*, both educated and uneducated, blue collar and white collar, academic, industrial, commercial, casual, formal ... *all of them* had kids, bought cars, owned homes, invested in the market, and *half* of them advanced their economic

class. In history books, I learn that they enjoyed several decades of historically-unique social advances. From childhood, I remember my parents enjoying unemployment and supplemental income. In middle management, my dad was afforded a company car, and a company phone, and robust health insurance on top of his competitive salary that only required a general B.A. from WVU in the 70s. All of those people in my life were presented with the opportunity to choose to go to school, or apprentice with a professional, or take a risk investing in a business, or start their own with modest resources. Every one of them could provide the name of a general physician ... because they had one.

All of those things fulfilled their natural and necessary desires. They weren't just *privileges*, or *luxuries*. None of those things were pursued for entertainment, or to diversify their pleasures. Those were rungs on the ladder of meeting their ability to gain employment, make money, eat food, and grow. In the modern era, access to education and technology are as much a necessity as food and water. Or maybe not? Maybe that's up for debate? ... you can infer where I stand.

I observe that my role as a civilian, consumer, and taxpayer (which *at least* used to provide safety) is being re-oriented toward legally-indentured-servitude. We know it now. I'm living it. This isn't speculation. We will not buy a home. I cannot participate in the market. My vote has never counted. Owning a car is about to become a luxury. We will be leasing our next vehicle. I am going without healthcare next year so my wife gets her life-necessary meds. By the way, our insulin just tripled in price. We can no longer save money. We're skipping groceries. My education and experience cannot guarantee employment. The majority of the population is now leasing their living needs, and not from life, but from other individual members of our society who have measurably violated the pact to neither harm nor be harmed among other members of their society. We are being affected by measurably psychopathic personalities who do not recognize our role as moral, human agents. All of this is a violation of pacts that were put in place by my grandparents to preserve our future. I'm pissed, and politically active, because the peaceful pact to neither harm nor be harmed is being politically violated, and nothing less than a political response is appropriate to satisfy my natural and necessary desires. Me do anything less right now seem like Stoic surrender to apathy.

Everyone around me seems surprised that I'm angry. "Trust God" they tell me. "Things have a way of working themselves out" they say. Well, not in Gaza. Not in Kashmir. Not in the projects. Santa Claus tends to prefer neighborhoods with property values. God helps some people win Super Bowls, but gives kids cancer. There are limits to happiness. After all, as Epíkouros observed, "a person cannot become wise with every physical condition, nor in every cultural context" (10.117). Those limits were not set by measles and hurricanes. *People* did that. *People* who are our neighbors, who have measurably violated the pacts my grandparents formulated to secure a peaceful society. *People* are withholding education in a technologically advanced society. *People* are proliferating our streets with weapons of war. *People* are responsible for these problems, because of violations.

Fear of *being dead*, *death*, and *dying* is one thing, but fear of losing your life, or losing the life of a friend as a result of betrayal, wrath, or a violation of justice is another thing. Hermarkhos

attests that the creation of *law*, in the first place, is a necessary act for wise people to prevent future harm. So we need to engage law as though it is as real as a rainstorm. Epíkouros explains that society, in the first place, naturally developed because it is advantageous to individuals, so a stable society is part of the prescription Nature provides for humans. Furthermore, he explains that all individuals, in all societies cannot become wise and enjoy pure pleasure, because, if for no other reason, you don't have time to study nature. A variety of severe, physiological conditions eliminate the possibility of uninterrupted pleasure. I think it is fair to propose that *ataraxia* is an impossibility for anyone living in a warzone right now, and no amount of spiritual rearrangement is going to prevent bombs from continuing to drop, and spiritual confusion is not the problem, the bombs are.

I don't know. While I'm afraid I'll never be able to provide my family with the basic living necessities that previous generations have defined as requirements for our society, I think, when I take a breath, and just accept that my life will look more like my great-great grandparents, than anyone living ... I think, then, I calm down, I lose my fear, and I just respond to situations rationally, to the best of my ability, with the hope that I'm learning from my mistakes, and growing, despite failure. In that regard, I'm more motivated by the pleasure of hope and confidence than the fear of death.

I don't really have a point. That was mostly pontificating. Overall, great paper!