

Is Death Nothing To Us?

Post by “Michael” of January 25, 2020 at 3:13 AM

I've seen some criticisms of what are taken to be the main Epicurean arguments for the view that death isn't harmful (though non-Epicureans use them now too). First there is the argument since that one is gone at death, they can't be harmed. The criticism here is that we can be harmed by things we're not aware of (an example is malicious things said behind your back which you don't learn about). Second is the view that, just as we did not exist prior to our birth, the state past death will be the same. Pre-existence held no harm, so this should be the same. However, it is objected that the anticipation death holds, with the concurrent loss of pleasure from life, is indeed harmful. The first criticism to me seems weak, but the second less so. Anyway, what do you think? Obviously, you may think neither are authentic Epicurean statements too-I know how there's contention about that.

Post by “Charles” of January 25, 2020 at 3:59 AM

I think the view is less of death being painful than it is about the fear of death and the actions that fear leads to. The reasons why we shouldn't *fear death* stem from and come as a result of the observations and explanations behind the physics of Epicurean Philosophy, namely the monistic and materialist nature of the universe, and the lack of an afterlife and immortality of the soul, which having established that basis it then becomes natural that death itself is a painless experience, but of course the process in which somebody dies is up to circumstance in a given time and area, and nobody will deny that being bashed over the head with a rock a few times is painful, its the concept of death that acts as nothing to us. Here are a few quotes from Julien Offray de la Mettrie, who I believe is outwardly Epicurean:

"Those who defined cold as a "privation of fire" said what cold was not and not what it was. Death is not the same; to say what it is not, to say that it is a privation of air which makes all movement, all heat and all feeling stop, is to declare well enough what it is. Nothing positive. Nothing. Less than nothing, if that could be imagined. No, nothing real, nothing that concerns us, nothing that belongs to us, as Lucretius said very well. Death in the nature of things is only

what zero is in arithmetic." (Paragraph 55 in The System of Epicurus)

"I saw thousands of soldiers die (a sorry sight!) in those great military hospitals of which I was in charge in Flanders during the last war. Pleasant deaths such as those I have just depicted seemed to me much rarer than painful deaths. The most frequent ones happen unawares. We leave the world as we come into it, without realising it." (Paragraph 70)

Post by "Cassius" of January 25, 2020 at 4:07 AM

Good to hear from you Michael.

My personal take on this is that there are at least a couple of very important points that need to be considered separately:

(1) We know from pretty reliable sources that the Epicureans advised people to "think about death," so the meaning of the phrase is not "death is totally irrelevant to us so don't even think about it." Given how much of Epicurean advice is about dealing with reality and overcoming fear that is unjustified, it would not be consistent for the Epicureans to hold that the subject is totally irrelevant, and in fact Lucretius (and thus Epicurus in On Nature) devoted a lot of time to exploring the subject.

(2) To me personally, the heart of the issue has always been better stated in English as something like "the state of being dead is nothingness." The starting point is that all good and evil is experienced through sensation, and there is no sensation after we die, so there is no way to experience anything good or evil, or to experience anything at all, after we are dead. I think that is the main point of the doctrine, and as a result it emphasizes not only the absence of any reason to fear being dead, it also emphasizes the importance of using our time wisely so as to experience the most pleasurable life that we can while we are alive.

(3) We know that Epicurus had a will and that he planned for what would happen after he died. This was not a contradiction of PD2 but shows us how to apply it reasonably and in full context of the rest of the philosophy. By planning for his inevitable death he minimized the kind of present worry and concern that you mention in your question.

Post by "Michael" of January 27, 2020 at 12:57 AM

Good clarifications, thanks both of you.