

Reasonings about Philodemus' On Death

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The meditation of the wise man is a meditation on life, not on death.

- Wisdom 6:1, [Humanist Bible](#)

The beginning parts of the scroll *On Death* are very fragmentary and very little can be deciphered, but the scroll gets easier to read in its later portions. After studying its contents, I found it refreshing that a scroll on how [death is nothing to us](#) took such pains to dismantle the death-based cultural forms two millennia prior to Nietzsche's accusation that Christianity is a cult of death. Although Nietzsche is a post-Christian philosopher who is known for having announced the death of God, much of what we think of as Nietzschean discourse began much earlier than Nietzsche, with the Epicureans and our philosophy of life.

On the Error of Measuring Good by Time

In our considerations [On Choices and Avoidances](#) we learned about the Doctrine of the Chief Goods. We return to this doctrine. The readable portion of the scroll begins with a consideration of how men shun untimely death hoping to gain goods in additional time. Philodemus argues that it's better to have lived a young life with the things that matter than to die without finding anything naturally good.

14.2 For it is characteristic of a sensible man to yearn to live on for a certain amount of time in order that he may complete his congenital and natural desires and receive in full the most fitting way of life that .. is possible ... and consequently be filled full of good things and cast off all the disturbance that is concerned with the desires, sharing in stillness.

Epicurus said that we should live as long as we're alive. Quality of our life marks **the difference between merely existing and truly living**. This is an important precept. It is foolish to wish to extend our lifespan if we are miserable and do not know how to live. The foolish man gains nothing by living a long life as long as he lives with fear, violence, envy and other vices, instead of acquiring the things that make life worth living.

For those who live a wretched life, death is a release (21.3-6) According to Philodemus losing our life at a young age, similarly, is only bad because we may be unable to procure the things

that make life worth living, a task which requires some progress in philosophy. If we have lived a pleasant life, no one and nothing can take this away from us. When we die we won't know that we have died because we won't have our perception and awareness (19.27).

Therefore, the only thing that will have mattered is that we lived well. As we have seen, these reasonings are all consistent both with the doctrine of the principal things (kyriotatai) that truly matter and with the goal of calculated hedonism: in the end, life must be pleasant.

On Rejoicing About Death

Since the dead don't mind mockery, only the living, this is considered foolish and it generates no suffering to the person mocked when that person is dead and no longer exists. Similarly, rejoicing at the prospect of our own death is foolish if we have good. It only makes sense to rejoice at our death if it is perceived as liberation from intense suffering.

On Being Troubled by the Prospect of Death

22.1 In fact it is precisely in anticipating this while they are alive that they have the (sort of) death that has to do with them, whereas we are not troubled at any such prospect.

Because we only have perception and use of our senses while we live, the only way in which we experience our own death is indirectly as a prospect. In other words, we do not experience death when it comes. We are not there at all. Therefore, our apprehension of our future death is considered imprudent, as it is unavoidable that we will die and fearing it or losing our peace because of our future death does not change the fact of our mortality. Another way in which we trouble ourselves with death is by worrying about the extinction of our family line and about leaving a name. Because we won't be there at all after we die, both relatives and strangers will have nothing to do with us and even people who have many descendants do not add enjoyment to their lives from their progeny after they die. Philodemus also argues that there are many others who bear our same name.

On Inheritance

Philodemus recognizes that it's best to leave inheritance to our children, and that dying without offspring is naturally painful. So is leaving behind immediate family members who lack basic needs. One is to write a will to ensure that only the worthy will enjoy our inheritance. There is concern about the fruits of one's labor going to relatives who might be wicked, who would not profit from our wealth at all. On the other hand, if one does not have worthy heirs, that is truly a reason for pity: it means that we haven't lived well enough to nurture wholesome relations.

On Perturbations Due to Manner of Death

Ancient men often worried about things like dying at sea, or about dying a glorious death as a result of the belief that a better afterlife awaits those who die in battle (for instance: as heroes

in Valhalla, or as jihadists with virgin attendants in the Islamic heaven) while old ladies who die a natural death, presumably, end up in Hades with all the other ordinary dead people.

Conversely, many people who deserve glory and fame, and are remembered for having lived noble lives, died natural deaths. If only a so-called “noble death” in battle makes one glorious, then most cultural heroes of humanity would have to be deemed ignoble. Therefore, we should not deem heroic our deaths instead of our lives. Living heroically is what has value and honor, says Philodemus. A dead person can perform no glorious deeds, and whatever glorious deeds are performed happen while we’re alive.

For a sensible person, the only way that dying in battle is desireable is if we are wounded and wish to be released from terrible pain. Philodemus derisively says that **soldiers in battle die like cattle**.

These false beliefs about a noble afterlife for those who die in battle are a great moral evil and have always been promoted by warlords and governments with military interests who have profited from the carnage. We’re reminded of oil investors and investors in the military industrial complex who today benefit handsomely from the use of apocalyptic imagery by conservative Christians who legitimize military intervention abroad, as these few have become powerful and wealthy interests in Western politics. However, it’s usually the poor who die in battle.

Many Catholics used to worry excessively about baptising their newborn in fear of a belief that unbaptised babies end up in limbo. When in recent years the Catholic Church changed its mind about limbo, many Catholics began raising questions about where these spurious afterlife teachings are drawn from and how they can change.

As for dying at sea, or in a bathtub or jacuzzi or pool for that matter, the scroll compares worrying about this to worrying about whether one’s corpse will be “eaten by fish or by maggots”. It won’t make a difference.

Some argued in antiquity that it was fortunate or noble to die in battle at sea, as if dying at sea for the sake of visiting friends or for the sake of learning was less noble. If anything is ignoble about dying at sea, it’s if one dies in search of profit or vain pursuits, but it is one’s life that’s wretched in this case, not one’s death.

Another matter attended in the scroll is the death of Socrates and other innocent victims that are either executed by miscarriages of justice, or justly executed. If one is guilty, this is pitiable not because of the manner of death, but because of how one lived. If one is innocent, then the most one can do is attempt to endure nobly and to be moderately troubled, as if it was an illness.

This portion is perhaps the least convincing in the entire scroll, which is otherwise powerful and cogent. We know in our day that there are countries where the innocent are put to death for apostasy, for being gay, or sometimes the punishment is not proportionate to the crime as in the case of stoning adulterers and women who wish to choose their husbands in Islamic

societies. As Muslims move to Western countries, we are hearing more of “honor” killings of daughters by their own fathers or brothers, and even of “honor rapings” of women who do not cover their bodies “properly”.

These practices are certainly a great evil and the moral problem raised by Philodemus concerning the execution of the innocent is very complicated. It is difficult, we must concede, to remain unperturbed. As to those who worry about sudden death, Philodemus argues that all death is sudden. There is nothing extraordinary about sudden death, on the contrary, we should be surprised to live exceptionally long lives.

Unfinished Business

We all have projects that we would like to see concluded. Many people feel that they wish to leave a lasting legacy, but Philodemus says that very few great men achieve this and that this is an empty and vain desire. If fame while alive is empty, then fame after one is dead is even less of a source of true pleasure.

Sometimes it's not death, but necessity or fortune that impedes us from achieving our goals in life and materializing our plans. Therefore, if we are concerned about dying prior to seeing one of our goals achieved, we should apply the same consolations that we apply in life to these troubles. If we know what matters (the chief goods), we're unaffected and enjoy the good things in life, the things that make life worth living, unperturbed. It is here that Philodemus speaks of how the prudent man lives ready for his burial.

38.14 The sensible man, having received that which can secure the whole of what is sufficient for a happy life ... goes about laid out for burial, and he profits by (each) day as if would by eternity.

One naturally feels concern for those close to us that have problems or who lack an art of living and haven't learned to be happy. But these are things that are outside our control. Philodemus argues that the man who has lived well should not lament others' miseries after he has escaped his own: he should go to his death happy that he lived well.

On Funeral Planning

There is another way in which people concern themselves too much with death and its cult. It is foolish to worry about the appearance of our corpse at the wake. Philodemus argues against those who are disgusted by the bad appearance of the corpse, or who worry about beauty, saying that all who die—beautiful or not—become skeletons within a short amount of time. He also argues against planning lavish burials as a waste of time and resources.

We are reminded of many of the practices associated with kings and chiefs, which incorporated not only the inclusion of material goods in the tomb but even such evil practices as burial of live slaves and widows with them. These traditions persisted in most continents for millenia.

Burials, if they are to be celebrated, are for the living, not for the dead. They help with closure. Philodemus praises decent burial practices that were emerging during his lifetime, where the expenditure that used to go toward lavish burials of wealthy senators were instead being spent on the living:

31.5 Among lawgivers, too, those who made dispositions naturally and well can be seen actually to have prevented excessive expenditure at funerals on the grounds that the living were being deprived of services: many give orders to do away with their property precisely because they begrudge this.

A lavish burial won't fix a life lived wretchedly. On the other hand, a pleasant life well lived among friends can not be taken away from us if we don't get a proper burial: this does not take away in the least from our happiness while we lived. Many great people have died without a burial. The scroll also argues convincingly against pitying the dead, for instance, if we happen to come across an unnamed tomb (32.24), saying that it is unintelligent to pity the dead.

32.20 Who is there who, on considering the matter with a clear head, will suppose that it makes the slightest difference, never mind a great one, whether it is above ground or below ground that one is unconscious?

The pain of not being remembered at all after death seems natural, but if one is friendless and has nothing good, then we get no relief from being remembered well or even as blessed. If, on the other hand we have many friends and live well, then being remembered or not after we die, again, takes nothing from that.

On the other hand, if our friends die before we do, then we might as well mourn everyone who was and ever will be. After we're all dead, there won't be anyone to remember us. Therefore, the issue of being remembered (or reviled, for that matter) after one dies should not be a source of perturbances. Instead, one should worry about living well.

Live Well, Die Well

It is important to understand that living well and dying well are the same thing. Philodemus criticizes rich men who think they won't get old and die, don't even write a will (an act which indicates some level of coming to terms with our own end), and are perplexed to see an old king as if power and old age were mutually exclusive. He says that they are attached to life out of fear of death, not because they live pleasantly. One should live while one is alive, but peacefully and prudently accept one's mortality and natural limits.

The above reasonings were inspired by [Philodemus: On Death \(Writings from the Greco-Roman World 29\)](#) (Greek and English Edition) by Philodemus and W. Benjamin Henry.

Further Reading:

[Is it moral to respect the wishes of the dead, above the living?](#)

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