

Letter to Menoeceus: Textual Analysis and Commentary, with PD's/VS's Cross-Referenced

Examination of Letter to Menoeceus, using Bailey and other translations, and with a commentary --by Kalosyni -- and including relevant PD's, VS's, etc.

Sections of Ancient Greek text in the commentary come from: <https://monadnock.net/epicurus/letter.html>

*** This is currently a work in progress***

Text	Commentary
[122] Let no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away. Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come. We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it.	It is important to note that here in this opening paragraph we see the word ?????????? (eudaimonian), and Epicurus says that when it (well-being and a "good spirit") is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it. This brings forward a new take on the philosophical idea of a "telos" -- it reframes it into "that which we strive for in life", and so when we have it, it brings about an internal sense of having a complete life.
[123] The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life.	"We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness,..." ????????? ??? ??? ?? ?????????? ??? ?????????????? ????????? (melet?n) - to practice, to meditate on, or to care for ????????? (poiounta) - making, producing, or bringing about ??????????????? (eudaimonian) - long-term happiness, well-being, or flourishing

First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many.

See Principal Doctrine 1 - ([PD01](#))

[124] For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods. For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien.

Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality.

[125] For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.

[126] But the many at one moment shun death as the greatest of evils, at another (yearn for it) as a respite from the (evils) in life. (But the wise man neither seeks to escape life) nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.

And he who counsels the young man to live well, but the old man to make a good end, is foolish, not merely because

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/entry/175-letter-to-menoceus-textual-analysis-and-commentary-with-pd-s-vs-s-cross-referen/>

of the desirability of life, but also because it is the same training which teaches to live well and to die well. Yet much

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We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.

???????????? (eudaimonian) – long-term happiness and well-being

???????????? (aochl?sian) – freedom from pain / freedom from disturbance

---> And of the natural (desires), some are necessary, while others are natural only; and of the necessary (desires), some are **necessary for happiness**, others for the **freedom of the body** from disturbance, and others for life itself."

[PD29](#). Among desires, some are natural (and necessary, some natural) but not necessary, and others neither natural nor necessary, but due to idle imagination.

[128] The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body. For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure.

[PD03](#). The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once.

[PD30](#). Wherever, in the case of desires which are physical, but do not lead to a sense of pain if they are not fulfilled, the effort is intense, such pleasures are due to idle imagination; and it is not owing to their own nature that they fail to be dispelled, but owing to the empty imaginings of the man.

VS59. It is not the stomach that is insatiable, as is generally said, but the false opinion that the stomach needs an unlimited amount to fill it.

[129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.

And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over

many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided.

[130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

VS21. We must not force Nature but persuade her. We shall persuade her if we satisfy the necessary desires, and also those bodily desires that do not harm us, while sternly checking those that are harmful.

PD08. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.

And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard. And so plain savours bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed; and bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips.

[131] To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes a man alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries disposes us better towards them, and fits us to be fearless of fortune.

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind.

[132] For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit.

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????????????? (synethízein) to become accustomed / to habituate

????????? (haplaís) simple / plain

????????????? (polytelesi) – expensive / lavish

????????? (áoknon) untiring / unhesitating / ready

????????? (chréseis) uses / duties / tasks

"Therefore, becoming accustomed to simple and not lavish diets both fully completes health and makes a person hesitantless regarding the necessary uses of life."

----> This is actually advice based on the work "On Ancient Medicine" by Hippocrates, Part 14 — praise of ordinary, simple, well-mixed foods over intense or luxurious combinations.

Please see the Internet Classics Archive:

<https://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/ancimed.14.14.html>

PD10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.

PD18. The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind.

Of all this the beginning and
the greatest good is prudence.
Wherefore prudence is a more
precious thing even than
philosophy: for from prudence
are sprung all the other
virtues, and it teaches us that
it is not possible to live
pleasantly without living
prudently and honorably and
justly, (nor, again, to live a life
of prudence, honor, and
justice) without living
pleasantly. For the virtues are
by nature bound up with the
pleasant life, and the pleasant
life is inseparable from them.

[133] For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.

[134] For, indeed, it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation. As to chance, he does not regard it as a god as most men do (for in a god's acts there is no disorder), nor as an uncertain cause (of all things) for he does not believe that good and evil are given by chance to man for the framing of a blessed life, but that opportunities for great good and great evil are afforded by it.

[135] He therefore thinks it better to be unfortunate in reasonable action than to prosper in unreason. For it is better in a man's actions that what is well chosen (should fail, rather than that what is ill chosen) should be successful

"...has reasoned out the end ordained by nature" ---> this would be eudaimonia

owing to chance.

Meditate therefore on these things and things akin to them night and day by yourself; and with a companion like to yourself, and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like unto a mortal being.