

# The Epicurus Reader

Selected Writings and Testimonia

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### The four-part cure

(Philodemus, Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, 4.9–14)

Don't fear god,  
Don't worry about death;  
What is good is easy to get, and  
What is terrible is easy to endure.

### Introduction

*Do you want to be happy? Of course you do! Then what's standing in your way? Your happiness is entirely up to you. This has been revealed to us by a man of divine serenity and wisdom who spent his life among us, and showed us, by his personal example and by his teaching, the path to redemption from unhappiness. His name was Epicurus.*

This is the sort of thing you might have heard an Epicurean preaching in the market square of an ancient city. If it sounds like a religious message, that is no coincidence; Epicurus was revered by his followers as though divine, a sage who had answers to all the important questions of life. What attracted converts was the prospect of personal happiness, for which Epicurus offered clear philosophical advice.

The fundamental obstacle to happiness, says Epicurus, is anxiety. No matter how rich or famous you are, you won't be happy if you're anxious to be richer or more famous. No matter how good your health is, you won't be happy if you're anxious about getting sick. You can't be happy in this life if you're worried about the next life. You can't be happy as a human being if you're worried about being punished or victimized by powerful divine beings. But you *can* be happy if you believe in the four basic truths of Epicureanism: there are no divine beings which threaten us; there is no next life; what we actually need is easy to get; what makes us suffer is easy to put up with. This is the so-called 'four-part cure', the Epicurean remedy for the epidemic sickness of human anxiety; as a later Epicurean puts it, "Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure."<sup>1</sup>

"What's good is easy to get." We need food, water, shelter from the elements, and safety from hostile animals and people. All these things lie ready to hand and can be acquired with little effort or money. We don't need caviar, champagne, palaces, or bodyguards, which are expensive and difficult to acquire and keep. People who want more than they need are making a fundamental mistake, a mistake that reduces their chances of being satisfied and causes needless anxiety. While our bodies need food, water, shelter, and safety, all that our souls need is to be confident that our bodies will get what they need. If my body is contented and my

1. Philodemus of Gadara, from a work whose title is uncertain, preserved in Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, column IV, lines 10–14.

soul is confident, then I will be cheerful, and being cheerful is the key to being happy. As long as we are cheerful it takes very little to keep us happy, but without cheerfulness we cannot really enjoy even the so-called 'pleasures' of life. Being cheerful is a state which is full of pleasure—indeed Epicurus calls it 'the limit of pleasure'—and it is a normal state, but if we suffer from anxiety we need to train ourselves to attain and maintain it. The discipline of Epicurean philosophy enables its followers to recognize how little they actually need, to enjoy possessing it, and to enjoy the confidence that they will continue to possess it. On the other hand, there is no reason not to enjoy occasional luxuries, if they happen to be easily available. There is nothing wrong with luxury in itself, but any dependence on luxuries is harmful to our happiness, as is every desire for unnecessary things.

"What's terrible is easy to endure." There is no denying that illness and pain are disagreeable, but nature has so constituted us that we need not suffer very much from them. Sickness is either brief or chronic, and either mild or intense, but discomfort that is both chronic and intense is very unusual; so there is no need to be concerned about the prospect of suffering. This is admittedly a difficult teaching to accept, especially for young people, but as people get older and more experienced in putting up with suffering, they tend to recognize its truth more and more, as did the Roman philosopher Seneca, whose health was anything but strong.<sup>2</sup> Epicurus himself died in excruciating pain, from kidney failure after two weeks of pain caused by kidney stones; but he died cheerfully, he claimed, because he kept in mind the memory of his friends and the agreeable experiences and conversations they had had together. Mental suffering, unlike physical suffering, is agony to endure, but once you grasp the Epicurean philosophy you won't need to face it again. Know the limits of what you need, recognize the limits of what your body is likely to suffer, and enjoy the confidence that your life will be overwhelmingly pleasant, unless you poison it with anxiety.

"Don't worry about death." While you are alive, you don't have to deal with being dead, but when you are dead you don't have to deal with it either, because you aren't there to deal with it. "Death is nothing to us," as Epicurus puts it, for "when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist."<sup>3</sup> Death is always irrelevant to us, even though it causes considerable anxiety to many people for much of their lives. Worrying about death casts a general pall over the

2. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* lxxviii.7–10.

3. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus* (text 4), section 125.

experience of living, either because people expect to exist after their deaths and are humbled and terrified into ingratiating themselves with the gods, who might well punish them for their misdeeds, or else because they are saddened and terrified by the prospect of *not* existing after their deaths. But there are no gods which threaten us, and, even if there were, we would not be there to be punished. Our souls are flimsy things which are dissipated when we die, and even if the stuff of which they were made were to survive intact, that would be nothing to us, because what matters to us is the continuity of our experience, which is severed by the parting of body and soul. It is not sensible to be afraid of ceasing to exist, since you already know what it is like not to exist; consider any time before your birth—was it disagreeable not to exist? And if there is nothing bad about not existing, then there is nothing bad for your friend when he ceases to exist, nor is there anything bad for you about being fated to cease to exist. It is a confusion to be worried by your mortality, and it is an ingratitude to resent the limitations of life, like some greedy dinner guest who expects an indefinite number of courses and refuses to leave the table.

"Don't fear god." The gods are happy and immortal, as the very concept of 'god' indicates. But in Epicurus' view, most people were in a state of confusion about the gods, believing them to be intensely concerned about what human beings were up to and exerting tremendous effort to favour their worshippers and punish their mortal enemies. No; it is incompatible with the concept of divinity to suppose that the gods exert themselves or that they have any concerns at all. The most accurate, as well as the most agreeable, conception of the gods is to think of them, as the Greeks often did, in a state of bliss, unconcerned about anything, without needs, invulnerable to any harm, and generally living an enviable life. So conceived, they are role models for Epicureans, who emulate the happiness of the gods, within the limits imposed by human nature. "Epicurus said that he was prepared to compete with Zeus in happiness, as long as he had a barley cake and some water."<sup>4</sup>

If, however, the gods are as independent as this conception indicates, then they will not observe the sacrifices we make to them, and Epicurus was indeed widely regarded as undermining the foundations of traditional religion. Furthermore, how can Epicurus explain the visions that we receive of the gods, if the gods don't deliberately send them to us? These visions, replies Epicurus, are material images travelling through the world, like everything else that we see or imagine, and are therefore something real; they travel through the world because of the general laws

4. Aelian, *Miscellaneous Histories*, 4.13 (text 159).

of atomic motion, not because god sends them. But then what sort of bodies must the gods have, if these images are always streaming off them, and yet they remain strong and invulnerable? Their bodies, replies Epicurus, are continually replenished by images streaming towards them; indeed the 'body' of a god may be nothing more than a focus to which the images travel, the images that later travel to us and make up our conception of its nature.<sup>5</sup>

If the gods do not exert themselves for our benefit, how is it that the world around us is suitable for our habitation? It happened by accident, said Epicurus, an answer that gave ancient critics ample opportunity for ridicule, and yet it makes him a thinker of a very modern sort, well ahead of his time. Epicurus believed that the universe is a material system governed by the laws of matter. The fundamental elements of matter are atoms,<sup>6</sup> which move, collide, and form larger structures according to physical laws. These larger structures can sometimes develop into yet larger structures by the addition of more matter, and sometimes whole worlds will develop. These worlds are extremely numerous and variable; some will be unstable, but others will be stable. The stable ones will persist and give the appearance of being designed to be stable, like our world, and living structures will sometimes develop out of the elements of these worlds. This theory is no longer as unbelievable as it was to the non-Epicurean scientists and philosophers of the ancient world, and its broad outlines may well be true.

We happen to have a great deal of evidence about the Epicurean philosophy of nature, which served as a philosophical foundation for the rest of the system. But many Epicureans would have had little interest in this subject, nor did they need to, if their curiosity or scepticism did not drive them to ask fundamental questions. What was most important in Epicurus' philosophy of nature was the overall conviction that our life on this earth comes with no strings attached; that there is no Maker whose puppets we are; that there is no script for us to follow and be constrained by; that it is up to us to discover the real constraints which our own nature imposes on us. When we do this, we find something very delightful: life is free, life is good, happiness is possible, and we can enjoy the bliss of the gods, rather than abasing ourselves to our misconceptions of them.

5. This is only a suggestion; it is not easy to understand the Epicurean conception of the nature of the gods, and readers should be aware that modern scholars do not agree about the correct interpretation of the evidence.

6. He borrowed this hypothesis from Democritus, an earlier atomist, and it was borrowed in turn from Epicurus by Pierre Gassendi, who introduced the atomic theory into modern science in the seventeenth century.

To say that life is free is not to say that we don't need to observe any moral constraints. It is a very bad plan to cheat on your friends or assault people in the street or do anything else that would cause you to worry about their reactions. Why is this a bad plan? Not because god has decreed that such things are 'immoral', but because it is stupid to do anything that would cause you to worry about anything. In the view of some moral philosophers (both ancient and modern) this view makes Epicureanism an immoral philosophy, because it denies that there is anything intrinsically wrong with immoral conduct. If we could be sure that nobody would find out, then we would have no reason to worry about the consequences, and therefore no reason not to be immoral. True, admits Epicurus, but we can never be sure that nobody will find out, and so the most tranquil course is to obey the rules of social morality quite strictly. These have been developed over the centuries for quite understandable reasons, mostly to give ourselves mutual protection against hostile animals and people. The legal and moral rules of society serve a good purpose, although it is not worthwhile to exert yourself to become prominent in public affairs and have the anxiety of public office. Much more satisfying and valuable is to develop individual relationships of mutual confidence, for a friend will come to your assistance when an ordinary member of the public will not. In fact, friends are our most important defence against insecurity and are our greatest sources of strength, after the truths of Epicurean philosophy itself.

Friends and philosophy are the two greatest resources available to help us live our lives in confidence and without anxiety. Perhaps the best thing of all would be to have friends who shared our Epicurean philosophy with us; many Epicureans lived in small Epicurean communities, as did the followers of Pythagoras in earlier times. These Epicurean communities were probably modelled on the community that Epicurus established on the outskirts of Athens, called "The Garden." We know very little about the organization of these communities, except that they did not require their members to give up their private property to the commune (unlike the Pythagoreans and some modern religious cults) and that they probably involved regular lessons or discussions of Epicurean philosophy. They also included household servants and women on equal terms with the men, which was completely out of line with the social norms of the time, but Epicurus believed that humble people and women could understand and benefit from his philosophy as well as educated men, another respect in which Epicurean philosophy was well ahead of its time.

The membership of women caused scandalous rumours, spread by hostile sources, that "The Garden" was a place for continuous orgies

and parties, rumours apparently supported by Epicurus' thesis that bodily pleasure is the original and basic form of pleasure. But Epicurus believed in marriage and the family, for those who are ready for the responsibility, and he disapproved of sexual love, because it ensnares the lover in tangles of unnecessary needs and vulnerabilities. Here's the typical pattern: first lust, then infatuation, then consummation, then jealousy or boredom. There's only anxiety and distress in this endlessly repeated story, except for the sex itself, and Epicurus regarded sex as an unnecessary pleasure, which never did anybody any real good—count yourself lucky if it does you no harm!<sup>7</sup> There is nothing intrinsically wrong with casual sex, but much more important than either love or sex is friendship, which “dances around the world, announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the remarkable features of Epicurus' philosophy is that it can be understood at several levels of subtlety. You don't need to be a philosophical genius to grasp the main points, which is why Epicurus coined slogans and maxims for ordinary people to memorize, to help them relieve their anxiety whenever it might arise. There were signet rings and hand mirrors, for example, engraved with the words ‘death is nothing’, so the faithful could be reminded while going about their daily business. Suppose, though, that you're not convinced that ‘death is nothing’, for example, and you want proof before you organize your life around that idea. For people like you, Epicurus wrote letters outlining his basic arguments, which circulated freely among those interested in the topic. Suppose, again, that you already have a philosophical education, and you want to assess Epicurus' arguments against the competing arguments, from other philosophers, for example. For this purpose he wrote elaborately careful and thorough memoranda of his arguments; his main treatise on natural philosophy ran to a staggering thirty-seven volumes. This extremely long book was given an intermediate (but still quite detailed) summary by Epicurus, and there may have been other levels of length and subtlety. If on a certain topic all our evidence seems superficial, that is probably because the more extensive discussions of that topic have not survived.

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7. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers* x.118 (text 8).

8. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* (text 6) #52; cf. *Principal Doctrines* (text 5) #27.

Modern students of Epicureanism should know the status of the available evidence. None of Epicurus' major works survives in its entirety, but of his many abbreviations and summaries, three survive because they are quoted in *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius, an otherwise unknown third-century-A.D. compiler. The most important of these is the *Letter to Menoecus* (text 4), which gives the basic outline of the Epicurean approach to personal happiness. The *Letter to Herodotus* (text 2) gives the basic outline of the Epicurean materialist philosophy of nature, and the *Letter to Pythocles* (text 3) concerns the natural phenomena of the sky (which many felt were the work of the gods). These letters can be trusted to reflect Epicurus' own views and way of arguing, as can the so-called “Principal Doctrines” (text 5), a group of forty short and pithy remarks, which were collected so that the basic principles of the Epicurean system could be easily memorized. A similar collection, the so-called “Vatican Sayings” (text 6), is a mixture of sayings from Epicurus and other Epicureans, and we print the sayings that seem likely to have come from Epicurus himself.

The picture that emerges from this evidence can be somewhat enlarged with fragments from Epicurus' works. In some cases, these are literally fragments, charred and brittle pieces of papyrus (the ancient equivalent of writing paper) excavated from a villa in Herculaneum which was engulfed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Their damaged state explains the numerous gaps (‘lacunae’) in our text of part of Book 25 of Epicurus' *On Nature* (text 34). Other fragments are small portions of Epicurus' works quoted by other Epicurean writers, such as Philodemus of Gadara, whose charred books were also found in Herculaneum. Still other fragments are small portions of Epicurus' works quoted by other ancient authors whose works survived in the ordinary way, by being copied from handwritten book to handwritten book. Sometimes the source tells us which treatise or letter he is quoting from (texts 30 to 64). In other cases we cannot know what work the quotation comes from (texts 65 to 159).

Not all quotations can be taken to be accurate, word-for-word citations from Epicurus. We have indicated, by using quotation marks, where we thought the source was purporting to quote Epicurus, but ancient standards of accuracy were not as rigorous as modern ones, especially when ancient writers were attacking their intellectual enemies. Other sources don't even purport to quote Epicurus' exact words, and we need to be yet more careful with these reports, which are referred to as ‘testimonia’. Readers should regard purported quotations as generally more reliable than testimonia, but should always prefer Epicurus' own texts to both these other kinds of evidence. Fortunately, most of the evi-

dence coheres, and it is usually possible to reach a reasonable assessment of Epicurus' views, at least on the topics where evidence is available.

We also have long discussions of Epicureanism from the pen of the well-known philosopher Cicero, who discussed Epicureanism in several of his books (texts 15 to 26). Cicero was not himself an Epicurean, and he was content to rely on Epicurean handbooks of a period close to his time. Sometimes Cicero does not really understand what he is transmitting (though that doesn't stop him from arguing against it), and in these cases especially we can be confident that he is faithfully paraphrasing his Epicurean source. But what he transmits is only what he selects from his Epicurean source, and his source is not Epicurus himself but a later (more or less orthodox) follower. Plutarch, another well-known philosopher, was a more scholarly—and a more hostile—critic, who argued against the Epicurean philosophy with all the devices of argument (legitimate and illegitimate) at his command. There are more quotations from Epicurus in Plutarch than in Cicero, but the Epicurean way of thinking is more distorted, because Plutarch's purpose is to ridicule it, by belittling it element by element. The most useful evidence from Plutarch comes in his attack on the book written by Colotes, an early follower of Epicurus (text 29), but there is evidence also in his critique of the self-effacing Epicurean life-style, *Is 'Live inconspicuously' a wise precept?*, and in his polemical essay called *It is quite impossible to enjoy life on Epicurean principles*.

By far the most useful body of evidence that is *not* transmitted in our *Reader* is a poem by Lucretius, a Roman Epicurean of the first half of the first century B.C. This is a long didactic poem in six books, called *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*, which sets out in Latin verse the Epicurean philosophy of nature, drawing an occasional liberating and anti-superstitious lesson. It is a classic of world literature, which impresses as much by its rich poetic qualities as by the rigour of its thought. But it is not possible to know exactly how reliable it is as a source for the views of Epicurus, since the so-called *Major Summary* (a detailed summary of Epicurus' thirty-seven-volume *On Nature*), on which it seems to have been based, has entirely perished. We print two particularly important passages which do seem to have been drawn quite directly from Epicurus' own works (texts 27 and 28), but probably most of Lucretius' poem reflects Epicurus' views equally well. A good example is Book III, lines 830–1094, which offers the arguments for believing that 'death is nothing to us'; although we cannot be certain that Lucretius is not introducing new ideas, there is nothing here that is incompatible with Epicurus' known views. A comprehensive stuffy of Epicureanism would include Lucretius among its main body of evidence, and we recommend that our readers read it in the excellent recent translation, with introduction and

notes, by Martin Ferguson Smith: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2001).

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Epicurus developed a system of philosophy and a way of living that deserve our respect and understanding, perhaps even our allegiance. This way of living claimed many thousands of committed followers, all over the ancient Mediterranean world, in cooperative communities that lasted for hundreds of years. But from the very beginning of his teaching mission, his message was opposed and distorted, first by academic philosophers and political authorities, and later by Christians. Epicureans apparently almost never switched their allegiance to other philosophical systems, whereas other schools regularly lost students to the Epicureans. Why? Perhaps because the Epicureans found that their system made excellent sense. But the explanation offered by Arcesilaus, Epicurus' rival, is typically dismissive: "You can turn a man into a eunuch, but you can't turn a eunuch into a man."<sup>9</sup> Even in modern times, the critics of Epicureanism continue to misrepresent it as a lazy-minded, shallow, pleasure-loving, immoral, or godless travesty of real philosophy. In our day the word 'epicureanism' has come to mean its opposite—a pretentious enthusiasm for rare and expensive food and drink. Please have the courage to ignore two thousand years of negative prejudice, and assess this philosophy on its own considerable merits. This book gives you the evidence you need.

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9. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers* iv.43. Arcesilaus was the Head of the Platonic Academy in Epicurus' day.

The predictive weather signs which occur in certain animals occur by a coincidental conjunction of events; for the animals do not bring any necessity to bear on the production of winter, nor does any divine nature sit around waiting for these animals to come out [of hibernation] and [only] then fulfil these signs. 116. For such foolishness would not afflict any ordinary animal, even if it were a little more sophisticated, let alone one who possessed complete happiness.

Commit all of this to memory, Pythocles; for you will leave myth far behind you and will be able to see [the causes of phenomena] similar to these. Most important, devote yourself to the contemplation of the basic principles [i.e., atoms] and the unlimited [i.e., void] and things related to them, and again [the contemplation] of the criteria and the feelings and the [goal] for sake of which we reason these things out. For if these things above all are contemplated together, they will make it easy for you to see the explanations of the detailed phenomena. For those who have not accepted these [ideas] with complete contentment could not do a good job of contemplating these things themselves, nor could they acquire the [goal] for the sake of which these things should be contemplated.

TEXT 4: *Letter to Menoeceus*: Diogenes Laertius 10.121–135

121. Epicurus to Menoeceus, greetings:

122. Let no one delay the study of philosophy while young nor weary of it when old. For no one is either too young or too old for the health of the soul. He who says either that the time for philosophy has not yet come or that it has passed is like someone who says that the time for happiness has not yet come or that it has passed. Therefore, both young and old must philosophize, the latter so that although old he may stay young in good things owing to gratitude for what has occurred, the former so that although young he too may be like an old man owing to his lack of fear of what is to come. Therefore, one must practise the things which produce happiness, since if that is present we have everything and if it is absent we do everything in order to have it.

123. Do and practise what I constantly told you to do, believing these to be the elements of living well. First, believe that god is an indestructible and blessed animal, in accordance with the general conception of god commonly held, and do not ascribe to god anything foreign to his indestructibility or repugnant to his blessedness. Believe of him everything which is able to preserve his blessedness and indestructibility. For gods do exist, since we have clear knowledge of them. But they are not such as the many believe them to be. For they do not adhere to their own views

about the gods. The man who denies the gods of the many is not impious, but rather he who ascribes to the gods the opinions of the many. 124. For the pronouncements of the many about the gods are not basic grasps but false suppositions. Hence come the greatest harm from the gods to bad men and the greatest benefits [to the good]. For the gods always welcome men who are like themselves, being congenial to their own virtues and considering that whatever is not such is uncongenial.

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality. 125. For there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist. But the many sometimes flee death as the greatest of bad things and sometimes choose it as a relief from the bad things in life. 126. But the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad. And just as he does not unconditionally choose the largest amount of food but the most pleasant food, so he savours not the longest time but the most pleasant. He who advises the young man to live well and the old man to die well is simple-minded, not just because of the pleasing aspects of life but because the same kind of practice produces a good life and a good death. Much worse is he who says that it is good not to be born, "but when born to pass through the gates of Hades as quickly as possible."<sup>18</sup> 127. For if he really believes what he says, why doesn't he leave life? For it is easy for him to do, if he has firmly decided on it. But if he is joking, he is wasting his time among men who don't welcome it. We must remember that what will happen is neither unconditionally within our power nor unconditionally outside our power, so that we will not unconditionally expect that it will occur nor despair of it as unconditionally not going to occur.

One must reckon that of desires some are natural, some groundless; and of the natural desires some are necessary and some merely natural;

18. Theognis 425, 427.

and of the necessary, some are necessary for happiness and some for freeing the body from troubles and some for life itself. 128. The unwavering contemplation of these enables one to refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from disturbance, since this is the goal of a blessed life. For we do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. As soon as we achieve this state every storm in the soul is dispelled, since the animal is not in a position to go after some need nor to seek something else to complete the good of the body and the soul. For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure.

And this is why we say that pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly. 129. For we recognized this as our first innate good, and this is our starting point for every choice and avoidance and we come to this by judging every good by the criterion of feeling. And it is just because this is the first innate good that we do not choose every pleasure; but sometimes we pass up many pleasures when we get a larger amount of what is uncongenial from them. And we believe many pains to be better than pleasures when a greater pleasure follows for a long while if we endure the pains. So every pleasure is a good thing, since it has a nature congenial [to us], but not every one is to be chosen. Just as every pain too is a bad thing, but not every one is such as to be always avoided. 130. It is, however, appropriate to make all these decisions by comparative measurement and an examination of the advantages and disadvantages. For at some times we treat the good thing as bad and, conversely, the bad thing as good.

And we believe that self-sufficiency is a great good, not in order that we might make do with few things under all circumstances, but so that if we do not have a lot we can make do with few, being genuinely convinced that those who least need extravagance enjoy it most; and that everything natural is easy to obtain and whatever is groundless is hard to obtain; and that simple flavours provide a pleasure equal to that of an extravagant life-style when all pain from want is removed, 131. and barley cakes and water provide the highest pleasure when someone in want takes them. Therefore, becoming accustomed to simple, not extravagant, ways of life makes one completely healthy, makes man unhesitant in the face of life's necessary duties, puts us in a better condition for the times of extravagance which occasionally come along, and makes us fearless in the face of chance. So when we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misin-

terpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. 132. For it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men's souls.

Prudence is the principle of all these things and is the greatest good. That is why prudence is a more valuable thing than philosophy. For prudence is the source of all the other virtues, teaching that it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably, and justly, and impossible to live prudently, honourably, and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues are natural adjuncts of the pleasant life and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.

133. For who do you believe is better than a man who has pious opinions about the gods, is always fearless about death, has reasoned out the natural goal of life and understands that the limit of good things is easy to achieve completely and easy to provide, and that the limit of bad things either has a short duration or causes little trouble?

As to [Fate], introduced by some as the mistress of all, <he is scornful, saying rather that some things happen of necessity,> others by chance, and others by our own agency, and that he sees that necessity is not answerable [to anyone], that chance is unstable, while what occurs by our own agency is autonomous, and that it is to this that praise and blame are attached. 134. For it would be better to follow the stories told about the gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosophers. For the former suggests a hope of escaping bad things by honouring the gods, but the latter involves an inescapable and merciless necessity. And he [the wise man] believes that chance is not a god, as the many think, for nothing is done in a disorderly way by god; nor that it is an uncertain cause. For he does not think that anything good or bad with respect to living blessedly is given by chance to men, although it does provide the starting points of great good and bad things. And he thinks it better to be unlucky in a rational way than lucky in a senseless way; 135. for it is better for a good decision not to turn out right in action than for a bad decision to turn out right because of chance.

Practise these and the related precepts day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend, and you will never be disturbed either when awake or in sleep, and you will live as a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal goods is in no respect like a mere mortal animal.

pleasure  
is  
starting  
point

simple  
needs

prudence

on  
necessity  
and  
chance



TEXT 5: *The Principal Doctrines*: Diogenes Laertius 10.139–154

I What is blessed and indestructible has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone else, so that it is not affected by feelings of anger or gratitude. For all such things are a sign of weakness.<sup>19</sup>

II Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us.

III The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together.

IV The feeling of pain does not linger continuously in the flesh; rather, the sharpest is present for the shortest time, while what merely exceeds the feeling of pleasure in the flesh lasts only a few days. And diseases which last a long time involve feelings of pleasure which exceed feelings of pain.

V It is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably, and justly and impossible to live prudently, honourably, and justly without living pleasantly. And whoever lacks this cannot live pleasantly.

VI The natural good of public office and kingship is for the sake of getting confidence from [other] men, [at least] from those from whom one is able to provide this.

VII Some men want to become famous and respected, believing that this is the way to acquire security against [other] men. Thus if the life of such men is secure, they acquire the natural good; but if it is not secure, they do not have that for the sake of which they strove from the beginning according to what is naturally congenial.

VIII No pleasure is a bad thing in itself. But the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasures.

19. Scholiast: "Elsewhere he says that the gods are contemplated by reason, and that some exist 'numerically' [i.e., are numerically distinct, each being unique in kind] while others are similar in form, because of a continuous flow of similar images to the same place; and that they are anthropomorphic."

IX If every pleasure were condensed and were present, both in time and in the whole compound [body and soul] or in the most important parts of our nature, then pleasures would never differ from one another.

X If the things which produce the pleasures of profligate men dissolved the intellect's fears about the phenomena of the heavens and about death and pains and, moreover, if they taught us the limit of our desires, then we would not have reason to criticize them, since they would be filled with pleasures from every source and would contain no feeling of pain or distress from any source—and that is what is bad.

XI If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us, and, moreover, if not knowing the limits of pains and desires did not trouble us, then we would have no need of natural science.

XII It is impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters. So it is impossible to receive unmixed pleasures without knowing natural science.

XIII It is useless to obtain security from men while the things above and below the earth and, generally, the things in the unbounded remained as objects of suspicion.

XIV The purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many, although a certain degree of security from other men does come by means of the power to repel [attacks] and by means of prosperity.

XV Natural wealth is both limited and easy to acquire. But wealth [as defined by] groundless opinions extends without limit.

XVI Chance has a small impact on the wise man, while reasoning has arranged for, is arranging for, and will arrange for the greatest and most important matters throughout the whole of his life.

XVII The just life is most free from disturbance, but the unjust life is full of the greatest disturbance.

XVIII As soon as the feeling of pain produced by want is removed, pleasure in the flesh will not increase but is only varied. But the limit of mental pleasures is produced by a reasoning out of these very pleasures [of the flesh] and of the things related to these, which used to cause the greatest fears in the intellect.

XIX Unlimited time and limited time contain equal [amounts of] pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning.

XX The flesh took the limits of pleasure to be unlimited, and [only] an unlimited time would have provided it. But the intellect, reasoning out the goal and limit of the flesh and dissolving the fears of eternity, provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited

time. But it [the intellect] did not flee pleasure, and even when circumstances caused an exit from life it did not die as though it were lacking any aspect of the best life.

XXI He who has learned the limits of life knows that it is easy to provide that which removes the feeling of pain owing to want and make one's whole life perfect. So there is no need for things which involve struggle.

XXII One must reason about the real goal and every clear fact, to which we refer mere opinions. If not, everything will be full of indecision and disturbance.

XXIII If you quarrel with all your sense-perceptions you will have nothing to refer to in judging even those sense-perceptions which you claim are false.

XXIV If you reject unqualifiedly any sense-perception and do not distinguish the opinion about what awaits confirmation, and what is already present in the sense-perception, and the feelings, and every application of the intellect to presentations, you will also disturb the rest of your sense-perceptions with your pointless opinion; as a result you will reject every criterion. If, on the other hand, in your conceptions formed by opinion, you affirm everything that awaits confirmation as well as what does not, you will not avoid falsehood, so that you will be in the position of maintaining every disputable point in every decision about what is and is not correct.

XXV If you do not, on every occasion, refer each of your actions to the goal of nature, but instead turn prematurely to some other [criterion] in avoiding or pursuing [things], your actions will not be consistent with your reasoning.

XXVI The desires which do not bring a feeling of pain when not fulfilled are not necessary; but the desire for them is easy to dispel when they seem to be hard to achieve or to produce harm.

XXVII Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one's whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship.

XXVIII The same understanding produces confidence about there being nothing terrible which is eternal or [even] long-lasting and has also realized that security amid even these limited [bad things] is most easily achieved through friendship.

XXIX Of desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary, and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as a result of a groundless opinion.<sup>20</sup>

20. Scholiast: "Epicurus thinks that those which liberate us from pains are natural and necessary, for example drinking in the case of thirst; natural and not

XXX Among natural desires, those which do not lead to a feeling of pain if not fulfilled and about which there is an intense effort, these are produced by a groundless opinion and they fail to be dissolved not because of their own nature but because of the groundless opinions of mankind.

XXXI The justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor be harmed.

XXXII There was no justice or injustice with respect to all those animals which were unable to make pacts about neither harming one another nor being harmed. Similarly, [there was no justice or injustice] for all those nations which were unable or unwilling to make pacts about neither harming one another nor being harmed.

XXXIII Justice was not a thing in its own right, but [exists] in mutual dealings in whatever places there [is] a pact about neither harming one another nor being harmed.

XXXIV Injustice is not a bad thing in its own right, but [only] because of the fear produced by the suspicion that one will not escape the notice of those assigned to punish such actions.

XXXV It is impossible for someone who secretly does something which men agreed [not to do] in order to avoid harming one another or being harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if in current circumstances he escapes detection ten thousand times. For until his death it will be uncertain whether he will continue to escape detection.

XXXVI In general outline justice is the same for everyone; for it was something useful in mutual associations. But with respect to the peculiarities of a region or of other [relevant] causes, it does not follow that the same thing is just for everyone.

XXXVII Of actions believed to be just, that whose usefulness in circumstances of mutual associations is supported by the testimony [of experience] has the attribute of serving as just whether it is the same for everyone or not. And if someone passes a law and it does not turn out to be in accord with what is useful in mutual associations, this no longer possesses the nature of justice. And if what is useful in the sense of being just changes, but for a while fits our basic grasp [of justice], nevertheless it was just for that length of time, [at least] for those who do not disturb themselves with empty words but simply look to the facts.

necessary are those which merely provide variations of pleasure but do not remove the feeling of pain, for example expensive foods; neither natural nor necessary are, for example, crowns and the erection of statues."

XXXVIII If objective circumstances have not changed and things believed to be just have been shown in actual practice not to be in accord with our basic grasp [of justice], then those things were not just. And if objective circumstances do change and the same things which had been just turn out to be no longer useful, then those things were just as long as they were useful for the mutual associations of fellow citizens; but later, when they were not useful, they were no longer just.

XXXIX The man who has made the best arrangements for confidence about external threats is he who has made the manageable things akin to himself, and has at least made the unmanageable things not alien to himself. But he avoided all contact with things for which not even this could be managed and he drove out of his life everything which it profited him to drive out.

XL All those who had the power to acquire the greatest confidence from [the threats posed by] their neighbours also thereby lived together most pleasantly with the surest guarantee; and since they enjoyed the fullest sense of belonging they did not grieve the early death of the departed, as though it called for pity.

TEXT 6: *The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings*<sup>21</sup>

4. Every pain is easy to despise. For [pains] which produce great distress are short in duration; and those which last for a long time in the flesh cause only mild distress.

7. It is hard to commit injustice and escape detection, but to be confident of escaping detection is impossible.

9. Necessity is a bad thing, but there is no necessity to live with necessity.

11. In most men, what is at peace is numbed and what is active is raging madly.

14. We are born only once, and we cannot be born twice; and one must for all eternity exist no more. You are not in control of tomorrow and yet you delay your [opportunity to] rejoice. Life is ruined by delay and each and every one of us dies without enjoying leisure.

15. We value our characters as our own personal possessions, whether they are good and envied by men or not. We must regard our neighbours' characters thus too, if they are respectable.

21. Some of the maxims in this collection are identical to some Principal Doctrines; some are attributed to Epicurus' followers rather than to the master himself. The Sayings selected by Arrighetti (in *Epicuro: Opere*) are translated here and his text is used.

16. No one who sees what is bad chooses it, but being lured [by it] as being good compared to what is even worse than it he is caught in the snare.

17. It is not the young man who is to be congratulated for his blessedness, but the old man who has lived well. For the young man at the full peak of his powers wanders senselessly, owing to chance. But the old man has let down anchor in old age as though in a harbour, since he has secured the goods about which he was previously not confident by means of his secure sense of gratitude.

18. If you take away the chance to see and talk and spend time with [the beloved], then the passion of sexual love is dissolved.

19. He who forgets the good which he previously had, has today become an old man.

21. One must not force nature but persuade her. And we will persuade her by fulfilling the necessary desires, and the natural ones too if they do not harm [us], but sharply rejecting the harmful ones.

23. Every friendship is worth choosing<sup>22</sup> for its own sake, though it takes its origin from the benefits [it confers on us].

24. Dreams have neither a divine nature, nor prophetic power, but they are produced by the impact of images.

25. Poverty, if measured by the goal of nature, is great wealth; and wealth, if limits are not set for it, is great poverty.

26. One must grasp clearly that both long and short discourses contribute to the same [end].

27. In other activities, the rewards come only when people have become, with great difficulty, complete [masters of the activity]; but in philosophy the pleasure accompanies the knowledge. For the enjoyment does not come after the learning but the learning and the enjoyment are simultaneous.

28. One must not approve of those who are excessively eager for friendship, nor those who are reluctant. But one must be willing to run some risks for the sake of friendship.

29. Employing frankness in my study of natural philosophy, I would prefer to proclaim in oracular fashion what is beneficial to men, even if no one is going to understand, rather than to assent to [common] opinions and so enjoy the constant praise which comes from the many.

31. (= Metrodorus fr. 51) One can attain security against other things, but when it comes to death all men live in a city without walls.

22. This is an emendation for the mss' 'a virtue'; we regard the emendation as virtually certain, though the transmitted text has been defended.

32. To show reverence for a wise man is itself a great good for him who reveres [the wise man].

33. The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For if someone has these things and is confident of having them in the future, he might contend even with <Zeus> for happiness.

34. We do not need utility from our friends so much as we need confidence concerning that utility.

35. One should not spoil what is present by desiring what is absent, but rather reason out that these things too [i.e., what we have] were among those we might have prayed for.

37. Nature is weak in the face of the bad, not the good; for it is preserved by pleasures and dissolved by pains.

38. He is utterly small-minded for whom there are many plausible reasons for committing suicide.

39. The constant friend is neither he who always searches for utility, nor he who never links [friendship to utility]. For the former makes gratitude a matter for commercial transaction, while the latter kills off good hope for the future.

40. He who claims that everything occurs by necessity has no complaint against him who claims that everything does not occur by necessity. For he makes the very claim [in question] by necessity.

41. One must philosophize and at the same time laugh and take care of one's household and use the rest of our personal goods, and never stop proclaiming the utterances of correct philosophy.

42. In the same period of time both the greatest good and the dissolution <of bad> are produced.

43. It is impious to love money unjustly, and shameful to do so justly; for it is unfitting to be sordidly stingy even if one is just.

44. When the wise man is brought face to face with the necessities of life, he knows how to give rather than receive—such a treasury of self-sufficiency has he found.

45. Natural philosophy does not create boastful men nor chatterboxes nor men who show off the 'culture' which the many quarrel over, but rather strong and self-sufficient men, who pride themselves on their own personal goods, not those of external circumstances.

46. We utterly eliminate bad habits like wicked men who have been doing great harm to us for a long time.

48. [We should] try to make the later stretch of the road more important than the earlier one, as long as we are on the road; and when we get to the end [of the road], [we should] feel a smooth contentment.

52. Friendship dances around the world announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness.

53. One should envy no one. For the good are not worthy of envy, and the more good fortune the wicked have, the more they spoil it for themselves.

54. One must not pretend to philosophize, but philosophize in reality. For we do not need the semblance of health but true health.

55. Misfortunes must be cured by a sense of gratitude for what has been and the knowledge that what is past cannot be undone.

56–57. The wise man feels no more pain when he is tortured <than when his friend is tortured, and will die on his behalf; for if he betrays> his friend, his entire life will be confounded and utterly upset because of a lack of confidence.

58. They must free themselves from the prison of general education and politics.

59. The stomach is not insatiable, as the many say, but rather the opinion that the stomach requires an unlimited amount of filling is false.

60. Everyone leaves life as though he had just been born.

61. The sight of one's neighbours is most beautiful if the first meeting brings concord or [at least] produces a serious commitment to this.

62. For if parents are justifiably angered at their children, it is surely pointless to resist and not ask to be forgiven; but if [their anger] is not justifiable but somewhat irrational, it is ridiculous for someone with irrationality in his heart to appeal to someone set against appeals and not to seek in a spirit of good will to win him over by other means.

63. There is also a proper measure for parsimony, and he who does not reason it out is just as badly off as he who goes wrong by total neglect of limits.

64. Praise from other men must come of its own accord; and we must be concerned with healing ourselves.

65. It is pointless to ask from the gods what one is fully able to supply for oneself.

66. Let us share our friends' suffering not with laments but with thoughtful concern.

67. A free life cannot acquire great wealth, because the task is not easy without slavery to the mob or those in power; rather, it already possesses everything in constant abundance. And if it does somehow achieve great wealth, one could easily share this out in order to obtain the good will of one's neighbours.

68. Nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little.

69. The ingratitude of the soul makes an animal greedy for unlimited variation in its life-style.

70. Let nothing be done in your life which will cause you to fear if it is discovered by your neighbour.

71. One should bring this question to bear on all one's desires: what will happen to me if what is sought by desire is achieved, and what will happen if it is not?

73. Even some bodily pains are worthwhile for fending off others like them.

74. In a joint philosophical investigation he who is defeated comes out ahead in so far as he has learned something new.

75. This utterance is ungrateful for past goods: look to the end of a long life.

76. As you grow old, you are such as I would praise, and you have seen the difference between what it means to philosophize for yourself and what it means to do so for Greece. I rejoice with you.

77. The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom.

78. The noble man is most involved with wisdom and friendship, of which one is a mortal good, the other immortal.

79. He who is free from disturbance within himself also causes no trouble for another.

80. A young man's share in salvation comes from attending to his age and guarding against what will defile everything through maddening desires.

81. The disturbance of the soul will not be dissolved nor will considerable joy be produced by the presence of the greatest wealth, nor by honour and admiration among the many, nor by anything which is a result of indefinite causes.

## Doxographical reports

TEXT 7: *Introductory report of his views*: Diogenes Laertius 10.29–34

29. . . . So philosophy is divided into three parts: canonic, physics, ethics. 30. Canonic provides procedures for use in the system and it is contained in one work entitled *The Canon*. Physics comprises the entire study of nature and it is contained in the 37 books of the *On Nature* and in outline form in the letters. Ethics comprises the discussion of choice and avoidance and it is contained in the book *On Ways of Life* and in the letters and in *On the Goal of Life*. They are accustomed, however, to set out canonic together with physics and they describe it as dealing with the criterion and with the basic principle, and as being fundamental. And physics is about generation and destruction, and about nature. And ethics is about things worth choosing and avoiding and about ways of life and about the goal of life.

31. They reject dialectic as being irrelevant. For it is sufficient for natural philosophers to proceed according to the utterances made by the facts. So, in *The Canon* Epicurus is found saying that sense-perceptions, basic grasps, and feelings are the criteria of truth, and the Epicureans add the applications of the intellect to presentations. He says this also in the epitome addressed to Herodotus and in the *Principal Doctrines*. "For," he says, "every sense-perception is unreasoning and incapable of remembering. For neither is it moved by itself nor can it add or subtract anything when moved by something else. Nor is there anything which can refute sense-perceptions. 32. For a perception from one sense cannot refute another of the same type, because they are of equal strength; nor can a perception from one sense refute one from a different sense, because they do not judge the same objects. Nor indeed can reasoning [refute them]; for all reasoning depends on the sense-perceptions. Nor can one sense-perception refute another, since we attend to them all. And the fact of our awareness of sense-perceptions confirms the truth of the sense-perceptions. And it is just as much a fact that we see and hear as that we feel pain; hence, it is from the apparent that we must infer about the non-evident. Moreover, all ideas are formed from sense-perceptions by direct experience or by analogy or by similarity or by compounding, with reasoning also making a contribution. And the appear-