DRST 004: Directed Studies Philosophy
Professor Zoltan Szabo

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Enza Jonas-Giugni

Epicurus, Death, and Indifference: Is Death Really "Nothing to Us"?

by Enza Jonas-Giugni '25

In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus makes the radical claim that "death is nothing to us" (124)[1]. Because the fear of death is omnipresent, woven into almost every dimension of human life, this claim is especially controversial: on an individual level, the fear of death is a part of our daily routines every time we look both ways when crossing the street; on a societal level, the field of medicine aims to prevent death for as long as possible by healing the sick and warding off ailments; and on a spiritual level, religions across history have conceptualized undesirable afterlives, ranging from Christianity's hellish inferno to the desolate Fields of Asphodel depicted in Greek mythology. How, then, can death be nothing to us if the vast majority of people seem to agree that it is something — something to ward off with the utmost effort? While Epicurus agrees that life can be blessed, as one can experience pleasure and happiness while alive, he contends that "the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death" (126). Epicurus argues that "death is nothing to us" because death is the privation of experience, and as "all good and bad consists in sense-experience" (125), death is value-neutral and thus there is no rational basis to fear it. However, the Epicurean argument is weakened by its reliance on egoistic hedonism in addition to its failure to consider the value of death relative to the value of life, and ultimately fails to be persuasive as death deprives a person of the pleasure they would have experienced if they had continued to live, thus providing a rational basis for fear.

[1]Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader,* trans. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gersen

In order to understand the Epicurean argument, it is first necessary to clarify what Epicurus means by death, as the term is ambiguous. When people say they fear death, they often mean that they fear suffering during the process of dying, a process that may be painful. However, when Epicurus refers to death, he refers to the state of being dead in which a person no longer experiences sense-perception. The distinction between dying and being dead is necessary to make as sense-perception remains intact while the person is still alive and dying, and as such, Epicurus does not maintain that death in the sense of the process of dying is nothing to us.

Epicurus's argument for why death, or the state of being dead, is nothing to us can be broken down into six premises: 1) What is good for a person are pleasurable experiences, and what is bad for a person are painful experiences; 2) The dead are deprived of sensation; 3) There is nothing good or bad for someone who is dead; 4) If nothing is good or bad for the dead, then death cannot be considered bad for someone who is dead; 5) If something is not bad when it is present, then it is irrational to anticipate its future presence with fear; and 6) Because death is not bad when it is present, then it is irrational for people to fear their future death.

Epicurus establishes P1 by writing, "all good and bad consists in sense-experience," revealing that his argument is predicated on hedonism, a view that posits the ultimate good to be pleasurable experiences. Epicurus's assertion that "death is the privation of sense-experience" establishes P2. Although Epicurus does not justify this claim in *Letter to Menoeceus*, it hinges on the Epicurean belief that sense-perception arises from the union of the body and soul. As his disciple, Lucretius, elucidates in *On the Nature of Things*, "Body and soul are co-partners in life; and it is evident that neither of them is capable of experiencing sensation independently, without the help of the other: rather it is by the united motions of both together that sensation is kindled and fanned into flame in every part of our flesh" (*On the Nature of Things,* 335-338)[2]. As

[2]Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things,* trans. Martin Ferguson Smith

Epicurean materialists conceptualize death as the dissolution of unity between mind and body (*On the Nature of Things,* 425-444), then in death a person no longer possesses sense-perception according to Epicurean logic. P3 follows from P1 and P2, and P4 follows from P3 because if nothing is good or bad for the dead, then the state of being dead is value-neutral and thus cannot be characterized as something bad for someone who is dead. As it is only rational for people to fear that which is bad for them, Epicurus establishes P5, writing, "For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated" (125). P6 clarifies P5 by substituting the specific example of death into P5, a substitution which is possible as it had already been established in P4 that death is not something bad for someone who is dead.

One way in which Epicurus fails to be persuasive is that his argument does not consider the possibility that the third-party implications of a person's death may present a rational basis for people to fear death. As revealed in P1, Epicureanism is a form of egoistic hedonism which defines the good and the bad solely in terms of what is good or bad for oneself. Epicurus's argument follows that, since death is neither good nor bad for oneself, death is value-neutral for oneself and thus one should not fear it. The jump from the premise that "death is value-neutral for oneself" to the premise that "one should not fear death" is worrisome in that it fails to consider that, while one's death may be value-neutral to oneself, it is "bad for" the people who are dependent upon and love the person who dies. The central issue with relying on egoistic hedonism is that because it solely defines what is good and bad in selfish terms, hedonism misconstrues fear to be something that only has a rational basis when it is motivated by self-protection, and neglects to consider how fear can rationally arise from a desire to protect the well-being of others. In the case of death, even though the person who dies will no longer have sense-perception to experience their death in a negative way or perceive the grief of their loved

ones, their loved ones will suffer. The foreknowledge one possesses during their lifetime that their death will cause suffering to those whom they love provides a rational basis to fear death, even if death releases the person from having to experience that suffering for themselves.

Nonetheless, this critique of the argument does not seem to identify the central flaw with the Epicurean argument, as those who fear death do so out of fear for themselves: while the effect of one's death on their loved ones may be a consideration, it is not the most pressing one. The central flaw with the Epicurean argument, then, is not that egoistic hedonism fails to consider the third party ramifications of a person's death, but that the Epicurean argument fails to consider the value of death relative to the value of life. This critique takes issue with P6, which states that because death is value-neutral (and cannot be considered bad) when present, then death is nothing to us and there is no rational basis for fearing it. This claim is problematic in that it only considers the value of death as an isolated entity without considering the value of death in relation to the value of life. If life has a net-positive value, then it would be preferred to the value-neutrality of death, and thus it would be rational to fear death on the basis that death is an undesirable alternative to life. The Epicureans may contend that because life contains both pleasurable and painful experiences, then life cannot be said to have an unmitigated, net-positive value which would make it preferable to death — the very logic that Epicurus employs when he states that "the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death" (126).

However, the fact that life contains painful experiences is not enough to buttress the claim that death is nothing to us, as oftentimes people who are enduring a period in their lives that contains more painful experiences than pleasurable ones still prefer suffering while alive to the non-existence of death. While it appears true that the state of being dead is devoid of both painful and pleasurable experiences, it is the privation of experience itself that people fear. As a

person approaches death, what they fear is the fact that death prohibits them from ever being able to do the things that bring them joy again: once someone dies, they will never be able to eat chocolate croissants again, or visit the ruins of Rome again, or fall in love again. The reason why people fight to live, even when enduring hardship, is because being alive means having the potential to experience pleasure again. This potentiality is what brings those who experience suffering hope, and makes painful living preferable to death in which the potentiality for future pleasurable experiences ceases to exist. Thus, death is not nothing to us because death deprives a person of the pleasures they would have experienced if they had continued to live and extinguishes the possibility of future pleasurable experiences. Those who fear death do so rationally: although the dead can experience nothing negative, they may have experienced something positive if they had not died, which makes death negative in the sense that it has deprived them of a positive experience.

Epicurus argues that death is nothing to us because if pleasure is what is good and pain is what is bad, and death is the privation of sense-experience, then death is value-neutral and thus there is no rational basis to fear it. However, the Epicurean argument's failure to consider how the grief a person's loved ones will suffer as a result of their death constitutes a rational basis for fear, in addition to its failure to examine the value of death relative to the value of life combine to undermine his argument. Ultimately, the argument fails to be persuasive as death deprives a person of the pleasure they would have experienced if they had continued to live and eliminates the potentiality of future pleasurable experiences, making death an undesirable alternative to life. Although Epicurus's argument may appear deceptively simple, it is necessary to thoroughly examine it, as the notion that death is nothing to us can have dangerous implications. If death is truly nothing to us, then why look both ways before crossing the street? Why invest in hospitals

and medical care? Why work so hard to prevent death? In a society that believes that the preservation of life is essentially good, one must work to defend that claim.