

A Stressed College Student

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In his *Letter to Menoeceus*<sup>1</sup>, Epicurus endeavors to persuade his reader that death is nothing to us. In this paper, I will reconstruct and analyze Epicurus’ argument for this claim, provide two objections, and evaluate the validity and soundness of the argument as a whole. Epicurus’ argument is as follows:

- (1) All that is good, and all that is bad, consists in sense-experience.
- (2) Death is the “privation of sense-experience” (29).
- (3) Since death is devoid of sense-experience, it must be neither good nor bad (from 1 and 2).
- (4) When we are alive, since death is not yet present, it does not currently affect us.
- (5) When death is present, we no longer exist and so it cannot affect us (from 2).
- (6) Since death does not affect the living or the dead, it is relevant to neither (from 4 and 5).
- (7) The primary objective of life is to optimize contentment and pleasure.
- (8) Fearing death causes us “unnecessary pain” (29) in anticipation of it.
- (9) Since we do not derive pleasure in life from fearing death, we should not fear it (from 7 and 8).

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<sup>1</sup>Epicurus, Lloyd P. Gerson, Brad Inwood, and D. S. Hutchinson. “Text 4: Letter to Menoeceus.” In *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, 28–31. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1994.

**Conclusion:** If death is neither good, nor bad, nor relevant, nor something to be feared, death is nothing to us (from 3, 6, and 9).

I will first examine Epicurus' argument for death being neither good nor bad. In (1), Epicurus states, "all good and bad consists in sense-experience" (29). In this assertion, Epicurus develops the idea that the senses are governing factors for someone to experience good, bad, and everything in between. If someone were detached from their senses—and could not see, smell, taste, hear, or touch—Epicurus argues that they would lack the fundamental faculties to feel or perceive anything, regardless of its nature. Having established that good and bad are products of sensory perception, Epicurus asserts in (2) that death is the "privation of sense-experience" (29) and the detachment of the senses. According to him, death involves a total and complete inability to perceive—the total loss of sensory capabilities. If someone cannot perceive anything at all, then, in this state of anti-experience in death, they would also be unable to perceive what is good and what is bad. From (1) and (2), since death is devoid of all sense-experience, and sense-experience is required for the perception of good and bad, death thereby cannot be perceived to be either good or bad (3).

In (4), Epicurus establishes that "when we exist, death is not yet present" (29). Although seemingly straightforward, this statement first serves to underline the distinct and separate states of life and death—existence and nonexistence. This premise also serves to define the impossibility of coexisting within both states, since we can only occupy one state at a time. As a result, for those living, death is not yet present and is never present during their lives. Death thereby never affects us while we are living. On the other hand, in regard to the state of death in (5), Epicurus posits that in death, we no longer exist, and so it cannot affect us. In fact, because we do not exist in death, nothing can affect us—death included. Moreover, from (2), since death

is the privation of sensory perception, we would not even have the sensory capabilities to be affected in death. Thus, from (4) and (5), death does not affect us in the states of either life or death—in the former, death is not yet present, and when death is present in the latter, we no longer exist to be affected. Having explicated these previous premises, Epicurus concludes in (6) that death is “relevant neither to the living nor to the dead” (29).

Having already established that death is neither good, nor bad, nor relevant, Epicurus then proceeds to argue why it is not something to be feared. In (7), Epicurus argues that the primary objective in life is to optimize contentment and pleasure. In fact, Epicurus’ philosophy is grounded in the belief that we should be highly rational hedonists who seek to maximize long-term pleasure. He emphasizes, then, the inherent futility in worrying about things we cannot control or about things that have yet to be, since such fears cause undue distress that detract from the ideal life of pleasure. For instance, say a stressed college student writes an exam for his class, *Directed Studies: Philosophy*<sup>2</sup>. During the final exam, he is unable to figure out how to approach and answer several difficult short response questions. In the aftermath of the exam, the student becomes worried about his exam score, thinking that he performed poorly. In the time that it takes for Professor Greco to grade the exam, the student’s fear and anticipation of receiving a low mark for his own standards begin to adversely affect his mental space and daily activities. However, no matter how much he worries about the exam, he can no longer change anything—his score was decided the moment he submitted the exam. The distress caused by his worrying and fear about his grade (which is something that he can both no longer control and which has yet to be released) is thereby not only futile, but also unhealthy and unpleasant. It is this very

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<sup>2</sup> Greco, Daniel. *DRST 003: Directed Studies: Philosophy*. Fall 2020, courses.yale.edu

worry and fear that Epicurus denounces as “unnecessary pain” (29), undermining the pursuit of pleasure and contentment in life.

In a similar vein, fearing death in anticipation of it also causes us unnecessary pain (8). Epicurus’ belief that we should not worry about things we cannot control or that have yet to be is epitomized in this argument: for the living, death is certainly one of these things. We cannot control death, nor can it affect us while we are presently living (4). Epicurus thereby comments, “There is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life” (29). Like with the case of the college student’s exam score, fear and distress in the present life associated with the anticipation of death in the future is not only futile, but also unpleasant and detrimental to the pursuit of contentment that is one of the pillars of Epicureanism. Having established (7) and (8), Epicurus thereby argues in (9) that since we do not derive pleasure in life from fearing death, we should not fear it. Thus, from (3), (6), and (9), since death is neither good, nor bad, nor relevant, nor something to be feared, we can conclude that death is nothing to us.

Having established and reconstructed Epicurus’ argument that death is nothing to us, let us now examine its validity and soundness. The steps of his argument, (1) – (3), (4) – (6), and (7) – (9), all sensibly follow one another and logically lead to the conclusion, so his argument is valid. However, the soundness of some steps is less convincing. In (2), Epicurus asserts that death is the privation of sense-experience; however, this is only a postulation of the nature of death since Epicurus has himself never experienced what death entails. His assumption may be true, and it is certainly a plausible one for the sake of his argument, but it is still an assumption as it can never truly be proven (unless, of course, we are able to return from the state of death and recount our experiences, or lack thereof, during this state). Perhaps death is a perpetual state of

bliss, or a perpetual state of pain—so it may be difficult to say that death is neither good nor bad. However, in not knowing for certain what death is, the phrase “death is nothing to us” (29) is paradoxically bolstered in a different sense. Since the nature of death is unknown by all who live, we cannot define death, so it literally means nothing to us—in this sense, it is devoid of meaning for human understanding. This adds a nuanced interpretation to the Epicurean phrase that death is nothing to us, allowing the reader to probe deeper into the meaning of his conclusion. Despite the plausible assumption made in (2), Epicurus’ overall argument—that death is nothing to us and that we should not be afraid by or worried about it—still stands.

In (4), Epicurus’ argument that death does not affect, and is not relevant to, the living in any way may also be unsound. For instance, if we knew that we had one year left to live, after which death from an irreversible condition is inevitable, wouldn’t this change the way we spent the remaining time in our lives? What if it were a month left instead of a year, or even just 24 hours? This would undoubtedly change our approach to life in terms of what we prioritize—the people we would spend more time with, the places we have always wanted to see, the projects that have been at the center of our life’s work, the risks we would regret not taking, and much more. Even though we would still be living, not yet in the grasps of death, the very imminence of looming death would change and affect our priorities and activities. The prospect of death, then, and the loss of pleasure (and pain) along with future desires and experiences, is certainly relevant to the living who undergo the ultimate fear of missing out—a feeling greatly amplified by the inexorable ticking of the countdown timer. To refute this counterargument, Epicurus may have argued that it is the state of death—not the consequences that death entails—that is irrelevant to us when we are alive, since the state of death is truly not present and has no effect on us. Yet this refutation is limited: just because the state of death itself does not affect us does not mean that

death is not relevant to the living—in fact, the imminent nature of a looming death has a significant effect on our daily activities and how we live.

Despite its limitations, Epicurus' multifaceted argument—that death is nothing to us and that we should not fear or worry about it—has a noble intent. In the context of Epicureanism, this argument forms one of the pillars of his four-part cure with the ultimate end of overcoming human anxiety in order to optimize personal happiness and pleasure in life.