

Epicurus (and a bit of Lucretius) in words of one syllable

by Tim O'Keefe, Georgia State University. Feel free to circulate, but please give me credit if you do so. Thanks.

Hear what I say and take it to heart, and you too will have a good life.

But first we need to ask, what is there? Well, we see things—like you, me, a rock, and a cloud—that move here and there. So there must also be void space for these things to move in, or they would be still. These things can be split, and split more and more. But at some point these splits must stop, and we come to small bits of stuff that can't be split. These bits of stuff make up all else.

Why do these small bits of stuff move? They have weight, so they fall down through the void. They swerve to the side from time to time, and they crash, and bounce, and fly here and there. (And we need this swerve so that we can be free, so that what we do is not by fate.) The world is not here for some plan, or by the will of the gods. It just is. The world as a whole has no start, and no end, in time or in space. It goes on and on. But our earth had a start, and it will have an end, when the bits of stuff that make it up fly off, and then don't make up the earth. That is true of us too, and of all the things that we see.

That is why death is the end. We have a mind, and this mind moves us. We can see this when we make a choice and then we act. I think, "I want a drink," and lo! my arm picks it up. To move us, the mind must be the same kind of thing as an arm, a rock, or a cloud—made up of those small bits of stuff. And when we die, those small bits of stuff fly here and there, and the mind is no more. It dies with the rest of us; it does not go on to some place where it gets a pat on the head or a kick in the teeth for what we have done.

Like I said, the world is not due to the gods. The gods don't care for us, and they move no things in this world. If the gods made this world out of love for us, why is it so screwed up? (A child is right to cry out when at birth it enters this world, with all of the woes that wait for it.) And the gods are not mad at us, for a god who is mad would have a flaw, to be so stirred up. And gods have no flaws.

How do you find out what the world is like? Use your eyes, your ears, your nose, your tongue. They will tell you the truth. If you could not trust them, you could not act at all.

What is the good life, and how do you get it? A good life is a life where you *feel* good, where you feel pleased. From birth, all things—us, a cat, a dog, a bird, each one—strive to get what feels good to them. That is what they want for its own sake, and so, that is what is good. But does that mean you should go for each thing that feels good, that you should snort a line of coke? No! Sure, the line of coke feels good, but it screws you up, and in the long run it makes you feel a lot more pain. So don't snort the line of coke. You have to be smart in how you act, you have to pick and choose so that in the long run, for your life as a whole, you feel pleased.

And we are pleased not just by what tastes good or what gives us a thrill. When we are full, or when we are not cold, we are pleased by that. And to be free of fear, or angst, that feels good too. All in all, we are pleased not to be in pain. The main thing, if you want to have a life where you feel good, is to get peace of mind.

How do you get peace of mind? Change what you want, so that you want just the things you need, not the dumb things that they try to sell you on. You need food, if you want not to die, and not to have your guts ache. You need a coat, if you don't want to shake with cold. But you don't need a big house to have a warm place to sleep—a small one will do. If you think you need a big house, but you just have a small one, you will think, "this small house sucks," and you will feel down. How do you fix that? Don't want the big house in the first place. It's the same if you want a lot of dough, or to be a big boss man who tells folks what to do. Those things are hard to get, and when you get them, you just want more and more.

And you need to be a good dude if you want to have a good life. If you cheat some guy or screw him, folks will not like you, and it will come back to bite you. If you steal stuff, you might get caught and thrown in jail. And if you do not get caught, you will still think that you *might* get caught, and that will cause you fear. If you're smart, you are not full of hate or greed—hate and greed get in the way of your peace of mind—and so you don't want to hurt folks or steal their stuff. You're chill, and it's all good.

If you want to have a good life, you can't do it on your own—you need friends. A good friend has his friend's back, he helps out his friend in a cold world. With friends, you can face what will be with no fear—your friends will be there for you. But to have good friends, you need to be a good friend, so that they will trust you. You have to care for them, and risk great pain and death for them if it comes to that. Friends are worth it.

Fear kills our peace of mind. Folks fear the gods, and they fear death. But we can get rid of these fears if we know the way the world works. Like I said, the gods don't move a thing in this world, and they are not mad at us. So why fear them? They won't hurt us. As for death, you should keep in mind that death is the end. When you are dead, there is no 'you' there in death to be hurt. So it can't be bad for you—you are not there to be hurt. If you say, "death will not be bad for me when I am dead, but I fear it now, while I live," that is dumb. If death is not bad for you when it comes, to fear it when it has yet to come makes no sense at all. One more thing: there was a time when you had not yet been born. Think back on that time. Not so bad, was it? Well, that is what death is like. So why fear it?

Peace out. -E.