

Euthanasia, how to live well and die well

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translated by Rachel Forides

At the 5th Symposium, our exceptional friend Professor Evangelos Protopapadakis developed his thesis on euthanasia in Epicurean philosophy, highlighting specific key aspects. I would like to expand on this after a short introduction.

The philosopher Epicurus is born and bred of the Hellene world. Epicurus had a firm grasp on all the Greek ideology of his time, selected the right ideas, elaborated on them, introduced new thoughts and carried philosophy to new heights, proving his philosophy over the passage of time.

Today, as descendants we follow, analyze and apply the philosophy proposed by the Epicureans in order to reach a blissful life.

Philosophy is an empty word, if in reality it does not lead to an enjoyable life, if it does not lead away from pain, grief and disappointment. Especially today and especially we, the people of cities, are far removed from natural life and are full of anxiety, tension and nerves. And in the midst of an economic and humanitarian crisis, in an era of technological advances and conquest of space, we as societies are allowing the return of barbaric customs.

But we move against these times. In our philosophical quest, we determine which choices to make and which to avoid, and all this in our one and only life time, we Epicureans do not avoid talking openly about topics and words that are prohibitive to others. For pleasure which is the basis of life itself, to please both body and soul. To enjoy beautiful forms and Dionysian spectacles. To benefit from friendship. We declare that the natural law is not to harm one another and not to harm ourselves. We dare to say things as they are, without fantasies and allegories. We are not afraid to expose superstitions and all that persecute us from our childhood. And of course we talk comfortably about death as this helps us not fear it, at least not as much as others. Why yes, we fear death as human beings do. But when we overcome this fear, through our mental toil and hardship, as some things need a lot of work to be conquered, then we turn to other matters of concern. On how to reach life's end and how to make it dignified so we can depart by having told stories on how we lived well for the duration of our life.

Yes it is not unfair in a society where life has value, to ponder on these issues. And to analyze and recommend solutions that ultimately have to do with the conquest of bliss. And first of all, then we say:

The most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us¹

Epicurus says *"Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness"*. *"Death, therefore, the most*

1 NON FUI, FUI, NON SUM, NON CURO - Δεν υπήρξα, υπήρξα, δεν υπάρχω, δε με νοιάζει..

awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not here, and, when death is here, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer". This is what physiology teaches us through the observation of nature. This sound knowledge leads to the moral conclusion to not fear death which in turn makes our lives more enjoyable. Next we say:

The wise person does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life

Epicurus says *"But in the world, at one time people shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise person does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life". "The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as people choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest"*.

The Epicurean philosophy has a clear position against the pessimistic perception *which says "it were good not to be born, but once born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades"*. A wise person sets an example to himself and to others, not to relinquish his/her life by committing suicide. This was true for all Epicureans of antiquity with one exception, that of Diodorus, an act praised only by the stoic Seneca.²

Taking one's life is a temporary consolation from the moment of its inception until its execution. In essence one is sowing pain and grief to himself and to all around him. Furthermore voluntary withdrawal from life is an irreversible act. We cannot regret it once acted upon. Looking back at our past, we can realize that many times we experienced bad situations where we finally overcame them, either through our own will or by the passage of time. Many of those situations now seem insignificant while at the time were wreaking havoc in our lives. However in order to achieve an optimal life one needs to know the art of living well. This is done by the following:

Understanding to "live well and die well"

Eventually as we grasp the notion that death is nothing to us, we become less afraid of living and dying. What should preoccupy us and what Epicurus prompts us to understand is to "live well", i.e. how to live well, alone, and with others. We should also understand how to "die well", as departing from life is the process of dying and as such it is an act of life.

The beginning and end of one's blessed life is procuring pleasure. Our actions are guided by an algorithm of choosing and avoiding situations wisely. More related to this issue will follow with Dimitri Liarmakopoulo's speech.

2 Σενέκας, Για μια ευτυχισμένη Ζωή", εκδόσεις ΠΑΤΑΚΗ. "Λένε επίσης ότι ο επικούρειος φιλόσοφος Διόδωρος, που τις τελευταίες μέρες έθεσε με το χέρι του τέρμα στη ζωή του, δεν ακολουθούσε τα διδάγματα του Επικούρου όταν έκοβε το λαιμό του. Μερικοί εκλαμβάνουν την πράξη του αυτή ως παραλογοισμό, άλλοι ως απερισκεψία- εκείνος όμως, ευτυχής και με πλήρη συνείδηση, έδωσε μαρτυρία για την πράξη του, καθώς αποχωρούσε από τη ζωή. Επαίνεσε τη γαλήνη των χρόνων που πέρασε αγκυροβλημένος με ασφάλεια στο λιμάνι και είπε κάποιες λέξεις που σεις ποτέ δε θα θέλατε ν' ακούσετε, σαν να ήταν να επαναλάβετε και σεις την ίδια πράξη: "έζησα: Και απόσωσα της τύχης μου το δρόμο"."

Returning "to die well", let us continue with the notion of wisdom. For while we are certain of our presence and our pursuit of "living well", we cannot exclude our notions to "die well". The future, as Epicurus says, "... is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours".

Die well

In our philosophical quest, we desire piece of mind, absence of an aching body and agitated soul, we desire blessedness i.e. katastematic hedone. As mortal beings the cessation of all our biological functions will come. The desired outcome is that katastematic hedone accompanies us to our biological end. This is possible for the wise person. I would add, in today's world it can encompass more people.

Epicurus is the example of wisdom. Biographer Diogenes Laertius says: "He retained urine from a kidney stone, and died after being ill for a fortnight". Until the last moments and while submitted to excruciating pain, his attitude was worthy of his philosophy.

At the point of death, he also wrote the following letter to Idomeneus: "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which arises from remembering our past conversations, helps me overcome my afflictions. I am asking you to care for the children of Metrodorus, in a manner befitting the devotion you have given to me and my philosophy since you were a youth."³

Laertius also writes: "*Hermippus relates that he entered a bronze bath tempered with warm water, asked for a cup of undiluted wine, and drank it. He then bade his friends to remember his doctrines, and expired*".

We have adequate information for Epicurus stance at the end of his life. First of all confirmation that he practiced what he taught: "The wise person does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life". Secondly he applies epicurean techniques in case of unpleasant situations, namely the reflection of pleasant events that occurred in the past. Thirdly, he knows this to be the last day of his life and still writes his last letter. Fourthly, he is surrounded by friends who care for him. Moreover, the evidence that his friends put Epicurus in a tub of hot water and gave him undiluted wine as he wished is an insightful piece of information i.e. he was preparing for his end, with the help of his friends. He acted upon this when he knew his end was approaching and he did this in a most relieving manner. Hot water alleviated his severe pains and relaxed his body. The undiluted wine created mental relaxation. The undiluted wine hastened his end as it reacted on an already weakened body. In other words, Epicurus perhaps did what we call today "euthanasia in the final stages of incurable disease." He acted this way just before approaching his natural end and not a moment sooner, despite his unbearable pains. He managed this due to his philosophy.

We have another example of a friend of the Epicurean philosophy and a publisher of the works of Lucretius, of Titus Pomponius Atticus, Rome, 109 - 32 bc, when he realized that his

3 Diogenes Laertius I.122, by Erik Anderson

illness reached a point that did not permit recovery but only prolonged his pain, he helped himself reach his end sooner. This excerpt is salvaged from his biographer Cornelius Nepos⁴:

"When he saw that we come, he leaned on one elbow and said: "How much care and attention I have devoted to restoring my health recently I do not need to tell at length, since I have you as witnesses. Since I have, I hope, satisfied you that I have left nothing undone that might serve to cure me, all that is left is that I now look after my own well-being. I did not wish you to be ignorant of my purpose: for I am resolved no longer to nourish the disease. For however much food I have taken in these last days, I have so prolonged my life as to increase the pain without hope of recovery. Thus I beg of you both to approve of my resolution and not to try to shake me by pointless dissuasion".

This attitude was not unique to the Greek and later Greco-Roman world. We have many examples of people with incurable illness or old age, with the body and mind suffering, chose the road to "die well" in the presence of many witnesses, to avoid suspicion of premeditated murder. Today we call this euthanasia, it is an ancient practice that was abandoned like many others, during the Middle Ages.

Our Times

The suggestion in the era after the Middle Ages, that society should allow patients with incurable illness to die with the doctor's assistance or to take their own life belongs to two English philosophers: Francis Bacon the modern father of empiricism and Thomas More author of humanistic Utopia.

From here onwards a great debate started which came to fruition only in modern times and indeed only in very recent years. In developed countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, France and in three US states, euthanasia is allowed in one way or another as a way to maintain dignity of human life.

But here, in the place where in ancient times the possibility existed to take your life if pain and discomfort was unbearable as Atticus or perhaps even Epicurus did, this can no longer be implemented. And not only that, but there is a justification of suffering from intolerable pain, of helplessness and misery, as pretexts and opportunities for "salvation".

In the occasion where someone is helping another end their life in their final stages of incurable disease or even if you are not stopping them from taking their life, you will be accused and prosecuted. A recent example is that of journalist Alexander Velliou who reopened this debate in our country with the "live well" and "die well" issues as he said and did.

4 Cornelius Nepos Vitae Atticus - Epitome of Roman History - Selection from Book XIV: "Atticus" by Cornelius Nepos, c. 100 BCE - c. 25 BCE English text prepared by Vincent Cook

"Hos ut venisse vidit, in cubitum innixus 'Quantam' inquit 'curam diligentiamque in valetudine mea tuenda hoc tempore adhibuerim, cum vos testes habeam, nihil necesse est pluribus verbis commemorare. Quibus quoniam, ut spero, satisfeci, me nihil reliqui fecisse, quod ad sanandam me pertineret, reliquum est, ut egomet mihi consulam. 6 Id vos ignorare nolui. Nam mihi stat alere morbum desinere. Namque his diebus quidquid cibi sumpsi, ita produxi vitam, ut auxerim dolores sine spe salutis. Quare a vobis peto, primum, ut consilium probetis meum, deinde, ne frustra dehortando impedire conemini'.

A compassionate stance

Today we have another weapon against agitation and pain. Medicine has come a long way on pain management issues. When pain decreases or disappears, quality of life increases and the need to find relief with a deliberate end may not be necessary. The laws in our country require by statute, the patient be relieved of pain whether physical or mental. The Greek Code of Medical Ethics (RLS - n. 3418/2005) Article 29 Medical decisions at the end of life states:

"1. The doctor, in case of incurable disease at its final stage must care for the patient both physically or mentally even if all medical treatment is exhausted. He/she must offer palliative care and work with the patient's carer. In any case, support the patient until the end of his/her life and tend to keep their dignity intact.

2. The physician takes into account the wishes of the patient as expressed, even if, at the time of surgery, the patient is not able to repeat them.

There are cases where the medical resources are inadequate in assisting a dignified end. But the code states that:

3. The physician must be aware that the patient's desire to die, when he/she are in the last stages does not constitute a legal justification to carry out actions aimed at speeding up their death.

So we still have to go a long way to go in our country, in order to find ourselves amongst ancient times, when humans chose to end their lives freely and safely, when incurable illness and old age only lead to increase pain and indignity.

The epicurean road as a philosophical base can bestow the "die well" notion and therefore lead us a step closer to blessedness.

To live well and die well

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Epicurus "About death"

from Letter to Menoeceus by Diogenes Laertius, Translated by Robert Drew Hicks

[124].. Συνέθιζε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηθὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον· ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν ἐν αἰσθήσει· στερήσις δὲ ἐστὶν αἰσθήσεως ὁ θάνατος.

ὅθεν γνῶσις ὀρθὴ τοῦ μηθὲν εἶναι πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὸν θάνατον ἀπολαυστὸν ποιεῖ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς θνητόν, οὐκ ἄπειρον προστιθεῖσα χρόνον ἀλλὰ τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας ἀφελομένη πόθον.

οὐθὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ζῆν δεινὸν τῷ κατειληφότι γνησίως τὸ μηθὲν ὑπάρχειν ἐν τῷ μὴ ζῆν δεινόν· ὥστε μάταιος ὁ λέγων δεδιέναι τὸν θάνατον οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσει παρῶν ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλων. ὁ γὰρ παρὸν οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖ προσδοκώμενον κενῶς λυπεῖ.

τὸ φρικωδέστατον οὖν τῶν κακῶν ὁ θάνατος οὐθὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἐπειδὴ περ ὅταν μὲν ἡμεῖς ὦμεν, ὁ θάνατος οὐ πάρεστιν· ὅταν δ' ὁ θάνατος παρῆ, τόθ' ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐσμέν. οὔτε οὖν πρὸς τοὺς ζῶντάς ἐστὶν οὔτε πρὸς τοὺς τετελευτηκότας, ἐπειδὴ περ περὶ οὓς μὲν οὐκ ἔστιν, οἱ δ' οὐκέτι εἰσίν.

ἀλλ' οἱ πολλοὶ τὸν θάνατον ὅτε μὲν ὡς μέγιστον τῶν κακῶν φεύγουσιν, ὅτε δὲ ὡς ἀνάπαυσιν τῶν ἐν τῷ ζῆν <κακῶν αἰροῦνται. ὁ δὲ σοφὸς οὔτε παραιτεῖται τὸ ζῆν> οὔτε φοβεῖται τὸ μὴ ζῆν· οὔτε γὰρ αὐτῷ προσίσταται τὸ ζῆν οὔτε δοξάζεται κακὸν εἶναι τι τὸ μὴ ζῆν. ὥσπερ δὲ τὸ σιτίον οὐ τὸ πλεῖον πάντως ἀλλὰ τὸ ἥδιστον αἰρεῖται, οὕτω καὶ χρόνον οὐ τὸν μήκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζεται.

ὁ δὲ παραγγέλλων τὸν μὲν νέον καλῶς ζῆν, τὸν δὲ γέροντα καλῶς καταστρέφειν εὐήθης ἐστὶν οὐ μόνον διὰ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς ἀσπαστόν, ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὸ τὴν αὐτὴν εἶναι μελέτην τοῦ

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness;

therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality.

For life has no terror; for those who thoroughly apprehend that there are no terrors for them in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation.

Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.

But in the world, at one time people shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life.

The wise person does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil.

And even as people choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest.

And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once

καλῶς ζῆν καὶ τοῦ καλῶς ἀποθνήσκειν. πολὺ δὲ χείρων καὶ ὁ λέγων καλὸν μὲν μὴ φῦναι, φύντα δ' ὅπως ὤκιστα πύλας Αἴδαο περῆσαι.

εἰ μὲν γὰρ πεποιθῶς τοῦτο φησι, πῶς οὐκ ἀπέρχεται ἐκ τοῦ ζῆν; ἐν ἐτοίμῳ γὰρ αὐτῷ τοῦτ' ἔστιν, εἶπερ ἦν βεβουλευμένον αὐτῷ βεβαίως· εἰ δὲ μωκώμενος, μάταιος ἐν τοῖς οὐκ ἐπιδεχομένοις. "Μνημονευτέον δὲ ὡς τὸ μέλλον οὔτε ἡμέτερον οὔτε πάντως οὐχ ἡμέτερον, ἵνα μήτε πάντως προσμένωμεν ὡς ἐσόμενον μήτε ἀπελπίζωμεν ὡς πάντως οὐκ ἐσόμενον.

teaches to live well and to die well.

Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades.

For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It were easy for him to do so, if once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in mockery, his words are foolishness, for those who hear believe him not.

We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.