

The Maxims of Epicurus

Taken from **The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers** by Diogenes Laertius, as published on Gutenberg.org

XXXI. Let us, however, now add the finishing stroke, as one may say, to this whole treatise, and to the life of the philosopher; giving some of his fundamental maxims, and closing the whole work with them, taking that for our end which is the beginning of happiness.

1. "That which is happy and imperishable, neither has trouble itself, nor does it cause it to anything; so that it is not subject to the feelings of either anger or gratitude; for these feelings only exist in what is weak.

(In other passages he says that the Gods are speculated on by reason, some existing according to number, and others according to some similarity of form, arising from the continual flowing on of similar images, perfected for this very purpose in human form.)

2. "Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved is devoid of sensation, and that which is devoid of sensation is nothing to us.

3. "The limit of the greatness of the pleasures is the removal of everything which can give pain. And where pleasure is, as long as it lasts, that which gives pain, or that which feels pain, or both of them, are absent.

4. "Pain does not abide continuously in the flesh, but in its extremity it is present only a very short time. That pain which only just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh, does not last many days. But long diseases have in them more that is pleasant than painful to the flesh.

5. "It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, and honourably, and justly; nor to live prudently, and honourably, and justly, without living pleasantly. But he to whom it does not happen to live prudently, honourably, and justly, cannot possibly live pleasantly.

6. "For the sake of feeling confidence and security with regard to men, and not with reference to the nature of government and kingly power being a good, some men have wished to be eminent and powerful, in order that others might attain this feeling by their means; thinking that so they would secure safety as far as men are concerned. So that, if the life of[475] such men is safe, they have attained to the nature of good; but if it is not safe, then they have failed in obtaining that for the sake of which they originally desired power according to the order of nature.^[144]

7. "No pleasure is intrinsically bad: but the efficient causes of some pleasures bring with them a great many perturbations of pleasure.

8. "If every pleasure were condensed, if one may so say, and if each lasted long, and affected the whole body, or the essential parts of it, then there would be no difference between one pleasure and another.

9. "If those things which make the pleasures of debauched men, put an end to the fears of the mind, and to those which arise about the heavenly bodies, and death, and pain; and if they taught us what ought to be the limit of our desires, we should have no pretence for blaming those who wholly devote themselves to pleasure, and who never feel any pain or grief (which is the chief evil) from any quarter.

10. "If apprehensions relating to the heavenly bodies did not disturb us, and if the terrors of death have no concern with us, and if we had the courage to contemplate the boundaries of pain and of the desires, we should have no need of physiological studies.

11. "It would not be possible for a person to banish all fear about those things which are called most essential, unless he knew what is the nature of the universe, or if he had any idea that the fables told about it could be true; and therefore, it is, that a person cannot enjoy unmixed pleasure without physiological knowledge.

12. "It would be no good for a man to secure himself safety as far as men are concerned, while in a state of apprehension as to all the heavenly bodies, and those under the earth, and in short, all those in the infinite.

13. "Irresistible power and great wealth may, up to a certain point, give us security as far as men are concerned; but the security of men in general depends upon the tranquillity of their souls, and their freedom from ambition.

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14. "The riches of nature are defined and easily procurable; but vain desires are insatiable.

15. "The wise man is but little favoured by fortune; but his reason procures him the greatest and most valuable goods, and these he does enjoy, and will enjoy the whole of his life.

16. "The just man is the freest of all men from disquietude; but the unjust man is a perpetual prey to it.

17. "Pleasure in the flesh is not increased, when once the pain arising from want is removed; it is only diversified.

18. "The most perfect happiness of the soul depends on these reflections, and on opinions of a similar character on all those questions which cause the greatest alarm to the mind.

19. "Infinite and finite time both have equal pleasure, if any one measures its limits by reason.

20. "If the flesh could experience boundless pleasure, it would want to dispose of eternity.^[145]

21. "But reason, enabling us to conceive the end and dissolution of the body, and liberating us from the fears relative to eternity, procures for us all the happiness of which life is capable, so completely that we have no further occasion to include eternity in our desires. In this disposition of mind, man is happy even when his troubles engage him to quit life; and to die thus, is for him only to interrupt a life of happiness.

22. "He who is acquainted with the limits of life knows, that that which removes the pain which arises from want, and which makes the whole of life perfect, is easily procurable; so that he has no need of those things which can only be attained with trouble.

23. "But as to the subsisting end, we ought to consider it with all the clearness and evidence which we refer to whatever we think and believe; otherwise, all things will be full of confusion and uncertainty of judgment.

24. "If you resist all the senses, you will not even have anything left to which you can refer, or by which you may be able to judge of the falsehood of the senses which you condemn.

25. "If you simply discard one sense, and do not distinguish between the different elements of the judgment, so as to know^[477] on the one hand, the induction which goes beyond the actual sensation, or, on the other, the actual and immediate notion; the affections, and all the conceptions of the mind which lean directly on the sensible representation, you will be imputing trouble into the other sense, and destroying in that quarter every species of criterion.

26. "If you allow equal authority to the ideas, which, being only inductive, require to be verified, and to those which bear about them an immediate certainty, you will not escape error; for you will be confounding doubtful opinions with those which are not doubtful, and true judgments with those of a different character.

27. "If, on every occasion, we do not refer every one of our actions to the chief end of nature, if we turn aside from that to seek or avoid some other object, there will be a want of agreement between our words and our actions.

28. "Of all the things which wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship.

29. "The same opinion encourages man to trust that no evil will be everlasting, or even of long duration; as it sees that, in the space of life allotted to us, the protection of friendship is most sure and trustworthy.

30. "Of the desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural, but not necessary, and some are neither natural nor necessary, but owe their existence to vain opinions."

(Epicurus thinks that those are natural and necessary which put an end to pains, as drink when one is thirsty; and that those are natural but not necessary which only diversify pleasure, but do not remove pain, such as expensive food; and that these are neither natural nor necessary, which are such as crowns, or the erection of statues.)

31. "Those desires which do not lead to pain, if they are not satisfied, are not necessary. It is easy to impose silence on them when they appear difficult to gratify, or likely to produce injury.

32. "When the natural desires, the failing to satisfy which is, nevertheless, not painful, are violent and obstinate, it is a proof that there is an admixture of vain opinion in them; for then energy does not arise from their own nature, but from the vain opinions of men.

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33. "Natural justice is a covenant of what is suitable, leading men to avoid injuring one another, and being injured.

34. "Those animals which are unable to enter into an argument of this nature, or to guard against doing or sustaining mutual injury, have no such thing as justice or injustice. And the case is the same with those nations, the members of which are either unwilling or unable to enter into a covenant to respect their mutual interests.

35. "Justice has no independent existence; it results from mutual contracts, and establishes itself wherever there is a mutual engagement to guard against doing or sustaining mutual injury.

36. "Injustice is not intrinsically bad; it has this character only because there is joined with it a fear of not escaping those who are appointed to punish actions marked with that character.

37. "It is not possible for a man who secretly does anything in contravention of the agreement which men have made with one another, to guard against doing, or sustaining mutual injury, to believe that he shall always escape notice, even if he have escaped notice already ten thousand times; for, till his death, it is uncertain whether he will not be detected.

38. "In a general point of view, justice is the same thing to every one; for there is something advantageous in mutual society. Nevertheless, the difference of place, and divers other circumstances, make justice vary.

39. "From the moment that a thing declared just by the law is generally recognized as useful for the mutual relations of men, it becomes really just, whether it is universally regarded as such or not.

40. "But if, on the contrary, a thing established by law is not really useful for the social relations, then it is not just; and if that which was just, inasmuch as it was useful, loses this character, after having been for some time considered so, it is not less true that, during that time, it was really just, at least for those who do not perplex themselves about vain words, but who prefer, in every case, examining and judging for themselves.

41. "When, without any fresh circumstances arising, a thing which has been declared just in practice does not agree with the impressions of reason, that is a proof that the thing[479] was not really just. In the same way, when in consequence of new circumstances, a thing which has been pronounced just does not any longer appear to agree with utility, the thing which was just, inasmuch as it was useful to the social relations and intercourse of mankind, ceases to be just the moment when it ceases to be useful.

42. "He who desires to live tranquilly without having any thing to fear from other men, ought to make himself friends; those whom he cannot make friends of, he should, at least, avoid rendering enemies; and if that is not in his power, he should, as far as possible, avoid all intercourse with them, and keep them aloof, as far as it is for his interest to do so.

43. "The happiest men are they who have arrived at the point of having nothing to fear from those who surround them. Such men live with one another most agreeably, having the firmest grounds of confidence in one another, enjoying the advantages of friendship in all their fulness, and not lamenting, as a pitiable circumstance, the premature death of their friends."

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