Epicurus’ puzzle about fear and death

Today’s session will be on the badness of death—should we fear death? We will approach this question by looking at Epicurus’ arguments that death is not an evil to us, and that we have no reason to fear death. We will also look at some arguments against Epicurus, attempts to locate the reasons why one might be unpersuaded by Epicurus.

To prepare for this session, please begin with some background reading on Epicurus’ views about ethics and personal identity.

(1) Sharples, R. W. Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy. London and NY: Routledge, 1996: Ch. 3 ‘What is Reality?’ (pp. 33-43), Ch. 4 ‘What Are We?’ (pp. 59-66), Ch. 5 ‘How can I be happy?’ (pp. 82-99).

(2) Then read a selection of primary texts from Epicurus and Lucretius, a Roman follower of Epicurus. These can be found in the pdf ‘Inwood Gerson Epicurus ethics’ as well as in the pdf ‘Lucretius Englert tr. Book III’.

In Inwood and Gerson, please read:
Epicurus, Principal Doctrines (Kuriai Doxai), esp. #2, 19-21, in Diogenes Laertius 10.29-34 (= IG I-5, p. 33-35)
Epicurus, Vatican Sayings 31 (IG I-6, p. 37)
Epicurus, ‘Letter to Idomeneus’, in Diogenes Laertius 10.22 (=IG I-41, p. 76)

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things [De Rerum Natura] Book III, esp. lines 830-1094 (third and final section)

Then please read the following:

Epicureanism. Ed. James Warren. Cambridge and NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 249-65. This is very helpful for making clear that for Epicurus, the argument against the fear of death is not simply meant to make a theoretical point, or arguing for the sake of argument, but is meant seriously as a central plank of his ‘therapeutic strategies’ for living well.


Additional reading, for those who wish to explore this topic or write a paper on it:


