

Epicurus on Death

Commentary for September 16, 2007 — Sometimes Pagans Got Things Right

A few years ago my wife and I attended the exhibition "Body Worlds 2" at the Museum of Natural History in Chicago. "[Body Worlds 3](#)" is currently being exhibited here in Portland at OMSI, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry through October 7. Body Worlds bills itself as "**The Anatomical Exhibition of real human bodies.**" Parts of human cadavers are separated into components (muscles, sinews, veins and arteries, etc.), the parts are "plasticized," which is a process of coating the parts with a translucent plastic, and presented in various displays showing movement. In a sense bodies are shown from the inside out.¹

At the end of Body Worlds 2 in Chicago there was a text display with a short quotation from the writings of [Epicurus](#), a long-haired Greek philosopher who taught in the period during and just after Alexander the Great in 321 B.C.E. He founded the philosophical school of [Epicurianism](#), a materialistic philosophy. Epicurus wrote about dying and death:

"Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life a limitless time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality.

For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the man 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 men shun death as the greatest of all evils, and at another time choose it as a respite from the evils in life. The wise man 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. ...

Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why

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1. Some may feel this is an improper use and display of the dead. However, de-fleshed skeletons of real people have been used for centuries for education in Western cultures. Educational use of human organs displayed in jars is common in university science laboratories around the world. Body Worlds is also designed to educate. Volunteers donate their bodies to be used by Body Worlds after death. Perhaps our discomfort with such exhibitions is a cultural bias based on traditions not informed by the Bible. Embalming is mentioned several times without comment in the Bible. One is reminded of Joseph's embalming so his body could be transported to be buried with his fathers (Genesis 50:26 and Exodus 13:19). Even Christ's body was anointed and the women intended to further prepare His body with spices in some manner (Matthew 27:58-61, 28:1; Mark 15:45, 16:1; Luke 23:52-24:1; and John 19:38-42). Jesus' resurrection from the dead took place before the women could perform their task.

does he not depart from life? It would be easy for him to do so once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in jest, his words are foolishness as those who hear him do not believe."

• Epicurus, [*Letter to Menoecus*](#)

Was Epicurus informed by the Old Testament Scriptures? We cannot know, but I doubt it. He makes no reference to any authority, and his comments reflect observations of everyday life. Epicurus' observations are in accord with biblical statements (Job 14:7–12; Psalm 6:5, 30:9, 49:8–12, 88:10–12, 115:17; Ecclesiastes 2:15–16, 3:19–22, 9:5–6, 10; and Isaiah 26:14, 38:18) which indicate that in death there is no further consciousness or existence until God returns us to life in a resurrection at some future time. Until that time death is a state of nonexistence.

One portion of the words of Epicurus ("**he who says that it were good not to be born**") echo those of Job, Solomon (Ecclesiastes 6:3), and even Christ Himself in a different context ("**good were it for that man if he had never been born**," Mark 14:21, referring to Himself). Epicurus is wrong when he says "**Foolish, therefore, is the man who says he fears death.**" Death is an enemy and it is not surprising that we would fear our enemies. Our last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). King David admonishes us to have courage and to comfort ourselves in God's protections and God's sequel to death:

**"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
[Why?] for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me."**

• *Psalm 23:4*

The apostle Paul, the author of Hebrews, writes that death enslaves us for life, but Christ delivers us from the slavery of death and its power over us.

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [Christ] also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [slavery]."

• *Hebrews 2:14–15*

So even though Epicurus for the most part understood the true nature of death and the state of the dead (that they are dead, not immortal in soul or spirit, and not living in a disembodied existence somewhere), Epicurus did not teach about the sequel to death that will occur, and it will occur eventually for all children of Adam. All shall eventually become Children of God:

"So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written,

'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?' [combining Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14]

The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

• *1 Corinthians 15:54–57*

The Body Worlds exhibitions celebrate the wonders of the human body and educate people about their bodies. Your body is a great and wondrous creation of God. In the resurrection we will be given a spiritual body even more marvelous, composed of flesh and bone (but not blood, Luke 24:39–40 and Ephesians 5:30) and energized by the Spirit of the Living God. Instead of blood and lymph fluids moving through your body now, the Spirit of God without measure shall flow through your spiritual body. This is your future, and mine. As the King James Version phrases it poetically: "**Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD!**" (Psalm 150:6).

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