

Diogenes Laertius on Epicurean Ethics

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 13, 2026 at 2:54 PM

And from Diogenes Laertius Book 10, on Epicureans (these are section excerpts appearing before, between, and after the Letters:

Quote

XXIII. They say that there are two passions, pleasure and pain, which affect everything alive. And that the one is natural, and the other foreign to our nature; with reference to which all objects of choice and avoidance are judged of. They say also, that there are two kinds of investigation; the one about facts, the other about mere words. And this is as far as an elementary sketch can go—their doctrine about division, and about the criterion.

XXVI. Such are his sentiments on the heavenly phænomena. But concerning the rules of life, and how we ought to choose some things, and avoid others, he writes thus. But first of all, let us go through the opinions which he held, and his disciples held about the wise man.

He said that injuries existed among men, either in consequence of hatred, or of envy, or of contempt, all which the wise man overcomes by reason. Also, that a man who has once been wise can never receive the contrary disposition, nor can he of his own accord invent such a state of things as that he should be subjected to the dominion of the passions; nor can he hinder himself in his progress towards wisdom. That the wise man, however, cannot exist in every state of body, nor in every nation. That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally[467] whether they are present or absent. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture. Nor will he marry a wife whom the laws forbid, as Diogenes says, in his epitome of the Ethical Maxims of Epicurus. He will punish his servants, but also pity them, and show indulgence to any that are virtuous. They do not think that the wise man will ever be in love, nor that he will be anxious about his burial, nor that love is a passion inspired by the Gods, as Diogenes says in his twelfth book. They also assert that he will be indifferent to the study of oratory. Marriage, say they, is never any good to a man, and we must be quite content if it does no harm; and the wise man will never marry or beget children, as Epicurus himself lays it down, in his Doubts and in his treatises on Nature. Still, under certain circumstances of life, he will forsake these rules and marry. Nor will he ever

indulge in drunkenness, says Epicurus, in his Banquet, nor will he entangle himself in affairs of state (as he says in his first book on Lives). Nor will he become a tyrant. Nor will he become a Cynic (as he says in his second book about Lives). Nor a beggar. And even, though he should lose his eyes, he will still partake of life (as he says in the same book).

The wise man will be subject to grief, as Diogenes says, in the fifth book of his Select Opinions; he will also not object to go to law. He will leave books and memorials of himself behind him, but he will not be fond of frequenting assemblies. He will take care of his property, and provide for the future. He will like being in the country, he will resist fortune, and will grieve none of his friends. He will show a regard for a fair reputation to such an extent as to avoid being despised; and he will find more pleasure than other men in speculations.

All faults are not equal. Health is good for some people, but a matter of indifference to others. Courage is a quality which does not exist by nature, but which is engendered by a consideration of what is suitable. Friendship is caused by one's wants; but it must be begun on our side. For we sow the earth; and friendship arises from a community of, and participation in, pleasures. Happiness must be understood in two senses; the highest happiness, such as is that of God, which admits of no increase; and another kind, which admits of the addition or abstraction of pleasures. The wise man may raise statues if it suits his inclination, if it does not it does[468] not signify. The wise man is the only person who can converse correctly about music and poetry; and he can realise poems, but not become a poet.

It is possible for one wise man to be wiser than another. The wise man will also, if he is in need, earn money, but only by his wisdom; he will propitiate an absolute ruler when occasion requires, and will humour him for the sake of correcting his habits; he will have a school, but not on such a system as to draw a crowd about him; he will also recite in a multitude, but that will be against his inclination; he will pronounce dogmas, and will express no doubts; he will be the same man asleep and awake; and he will be willing even to die for a friend.

These are the Epicurean doctrines.

XXVIII. Now, he differs with the Cyrenaics about pleasure. For they do not admit that to be pleasure which exists as a condition, but place it wholly in motion. He, however, admits both kinds to be pleasure, namely, that of the soul, and that of the body, as he says in his treatise on Choice and Avoidance; and also in his work on the Chief Good; and in the first book of his treatise on Lives, and in his Letter against the Mitylenian Philosophers. And in the same spirit, Diogenes, in the seventeenth book of his Select Discourses, and Metrodorus, in his Timocrates, speak thus. "But when pleasure is

understood, I mean both that which exists in motion, and that which is a state....” And Epicurus, in his treatise on Choice, speaks thus: “Now, freedom from disquietude, and freedom from pain, are states of pleasure; but joy and cheerfulness are beheld in motion and energy.”

XXIX. For they make out the pains of the body to be worse than those of the mind; accordingly, those who do wrong, are punished in the body. But he considers the pains of the soul the worst; for that the flesh is only sensible to present affliction, but the soul feels the past, the present, and the future. Therefore, in the same manner, he contends that the pleasures of the soul are greater than those of the body; and he uses as a proof that pleasure is the chief good, the fact that all animals from the moment of their birth are delighted with pleasure, and are offended with pain by their natural instinct, and without the employment of reason. Therefore, too, we, of our own inclination, flee from pain; so that Hercules, when devoured by his poisoned tunic, cries out:—

Shouting and groaning, and the rocks around

Re-echoed his sad wails, the mountain heights

Of Locrian lands, and sad Eubœa’s hills. [\[143\]](#)

XXX. And we choose the virtues for the sake of pleasure, and not on their own account; just as we seek the skill of the physician for the sake of health, as Diogenes says, in the[474] twentieth book of his Select Discourses, where he also calls virtue a way of passing one’s life (διαγωγή). But Epicurus says, that virtue alone is inseparable from pleasure, but that every thing else may be separated from it as mortal.

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