

Diogenes Laertius Book X - The Biography of Epicurus

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EPICURUS, son of Neocles and Chaerestrata, was an Athenian of the deme of Gargettus, and the family of the Philaidae, as Metrodorus says in his work on Nobility of Birth. Heraclides in his epitome of Sotion and others say that the Athenians having colonized Samos, Epicurus was brought up there. In his eighteenth year, as they say, he came to Athens, when Xenocrates was at the Academy and Aristotle was living in Chalcis. After the death of Alexander of Macedon, when the Athenians were driven out of Samos by Perdikkas, he went to join his father in Colophon. Having stayed there some time and gathered disciples he returned again to Athens in the archonship of Anaxicrates. For a while he joined with others in the study of philosophy, but later taught independently, when he had founded the school called after him. He tells us himself that he first made acquaintance with philosophy at the age of fourteen. Apollodorus the Epicurean in the first book of his Life of Epicurus says that he took to philosophy because he despised the teachers of literature, since they were not able to explain to him the passage about Chaos in Hesiod. Hermippus says that Epicurus was at one time a schoolmaster and then after he met with the writings of Democritus, he took eagerly to philosophy. And this is why Timon says about him:

Last and most shameless of the scientists, infant school teacher from Samos, the most stubborn of all living beings.

His three brothers, Neocles, Chaeredemus, and Aristobulus, joined him in studying philosophy at his suggestion, according to Philodemus the Epicurean in the tenth book of his Comparison of Philosophies. Also a slave called Mys, as Muronianus says in his chapters on historical coincidences.

Diotimus the Stoic, who is ill-disposed to Epicurus, has calumniated him most bitterly by producing fifty lewd letters as Epicurus' work; so has the writer who has assigned to Epicurus the collection of 'billets-doux' which were attributed to Chrysippus, and also Posidonius the Stoic and his followers, as well as Nicolaus and Sotion in the twelve books of the 'Arguments of Diocles' which are named after the Epicurean celebration of The Twentieth; also Dionysius of Halicarnassus. For they say that he used to go round from house to house with his mother reading out the purification prayers, and assisted his father in elementary teaching for a miserable pittance. They add that one of his brothers prostituted himself and kept company with Leontion, the hetaera. Also that he took Democritus' atomic theory and Aristippus' theory of pleasure and taught them as his own. Further, that he was not an Athenian born, as

Timocrates says, and Herodotus too in his book *The Youth of Epicurus*. He is also said to have used degrading flattery towards Mithres, the steward of Lysimachus, calling him in his letters both 'Saviour' and 'My lord.' Idomeneus too and Herodotus and Timocrates, who divulged his secrets, he is said to have praised and flattered all the same. And in his letters he wrote to Leontion, 'Lord and Saviour, my dearest Leontion, what a hurrahing you drew from us, as we read aloud your dear letter,' and to Themista, Leonteus' wife, "If you two don't come to me, I am capable of arriving with a hop, skip and jump, wherever you and Themista summon me.' And to Pythocles, who was young and beautiful, he writes, 'I will sit down and wait for your lovely and godlike appearance.' And again in writing to Themista he calls her (by a most flattering name), as Theodorus says in the fourth book of his attack on Epicurus. They say that he wrote to many other women of pleasure and particularly to Leontion, with whom Metrodorus was also in love; and that in the treatise *On the End of Life* he wrote, 'I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste and withdraw the pleasures of love and those of hearing and sight.'

Again in the letter to Pythocles they say he wrote 'Blest youth, set sail in your bark and flee from every form of culture.'

Epictetus moreover calls him a filthy talker and abuses him roundly. And even Timocrates, who was the brother of Metrodorus and a disciple of Epicurus, after he had abandoned the school, wrote in a book with the title *Pleasant Things* that Epicurus used to vomit twice a day owing to his luxurious living, and that he himself was scarcely able to escape from his philosophical disquisitions during the night and from the community of the initiates. He adds that Epicurus was profoundly ignorant of philosophy, and still more so of practical life, that his body was miserably weak, so that for many years he was unable to rise from his portable couch. Further, that he spent no less than a mina a day on his food, as Epicurus writes himself in the letter to Leontion and in the letters to the philosophers in Mytilene. Moreover, there were other women who lived with him and Metrodorus, named Mammarrion and Hedeia and Erotion and Nigidion. He adds that in the thirty-seven books *On Nature* he repeats himself for the most part and attacks many other philosophers in them, but Nausiphanes most of all, saying in his own words, 'Away with them all, for Nausiphanes, like many another slave, was in travail with that wordy braggart, sophistic.' He says that Epicurus himself in his letters about Nausiphanes said, 'This drove him to such a state of fury that he abused me and ironically called me "Master."'

He used to call Nausiphanes 'The mollusk,' 'The illiterate,' 'The cheat,' 'The harlot.' The followers of Plato he called 'Flatterers of Dionysus,' and Plato himself 'The golden man,' and Aristotle 'The debauchee,' saying that he devoured his inheritance and then enlisted and sold drugs. Protagoras he called 'Porter' or 'Copier of Democritus,' saying that he taught in the village schools. Heraclitus he called 'The Muddler,' Democritus [he called] Lerocritus ('judge of nonsense'), Antidorus he called Sannidorus ('Maniac'), the Cynics [he called] 'Enemies of Hellas,' the Logicians [he called] 'The destroyers,' and Pyrrho [he called] 'The uneducated fool.'

But these calumniators are all mad. For Epicurus has witnesses enough and to spare to his unsurpassed kindness to all men. There is his country which honoured him with bronze statues,

his friends so numerous that they could not even be reckoned by entire cities, and his disciples who all remained bound forever by the charm of his teaching, except Metrodorus, son of Stratoniceus, who went over to Carneades, overweighted perhaps by Epicurus' excessive goodness. There is also the permanent continuance of the school after almost all the others had come to an end, and that though it had a countless succession of heads from among the disciples. There is again his grateful devotion to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, and his gentleness towards his servants, of whom the most notable was Mys, already mentioned, as is proved by his will and the part they took in his philosophical discussions. In short, there is his benevolence to all.

Of his reverence towards the gods and his love of his country it would be impossible to speak adequately. But from excess of modesty he would not take any part in politics. Yet although Greece was at that time in great straits, he continued to live there, and only once or twice made a voyage to Ionia and the neighborhood to see his friends. But they came to him from all quarters, and took up their abode with him in the garden, as Apollodorus says [who adds that he bought it for eighty minae. Diocles in the third book of his Course in Philosophy confirms this], living a most frugal and simple life. Indeed, he says, they were satisfied with half a pint of wine, and for the most part drank water. He adds that Epicurus did not recommend them to put their belongings into a common stock, as did Pythagoras, who said that 'Friends have all in common.' For to do so implied distrust: and distrust could not go with friendship. Epicurus himself says in his letters that he was content with nothing but water and a bit of bread.

'Send me,' he says, 'some preserved cheese, that when I like I may have a feast.' Such was the man who taught that the end is pleasure. Athenaeus sings his praise in an epigram:

Men toil at mean pursuits, for love of gain,
Insatiate they welcome war and strife;
Their idle fancies lead on endless paths,
But nature's wealth is set in narrow bounds.
This truth the prudent son of Neocles
Learnt from the Muses or Apollo's shrine.

The truth of this we shall know better as we go on from his own words and teaching.

Diocles says that of the earlier philosophers he showed most sympathy with Anaxagoras, though on certain points he opposed him, and with Arclielaus, the master of Socrates. And, he adds, he used to practice his disciples in getting his writings by heart. Apollodorus in his Chronicles asserts that he listened to the teaching of Nausiphanes and Praxiphanes. Epicurus himself denies this in his letter to Eurylochus, and says he was his own teacher. And indeed both Epicurus and Hermarchus deny that there ever was such a philosopher as Leucippus, whom Apollodorus the Epicurean and others say was the master of Democritus. Demetrius of Magnesia says that he was also a follower of Xenocrates.

He uses current diction to expound his theory, but Aristophanes the grammarian censures it as being too peculiar. But he was clear in expression, Just as in his book On Rhetoric he insists on clearness above everything. In his letters he used to say 'Prosper' or 'Live well,' instead of the conventional introduction 'Be happy.'

Ariston in his Life of Epicurus says that he borrowed The Canon from the Tripod of Nausiphanes, whose pupil he says he was, as well as being a disciple of Pamphilus the Platonist in Samos. He states that Epicurus began philosophy at the age of twelve, and was at the head of his School at thirty-two.

He was born, says Apollodorus in the Chronicles, in the third year of the 109th Olympiad in the archonship of Sosigenes on the seventh day of the month Gamelion, seven years after the death of Plato. When he was thirty-two he started his school, first for five years at Mitylene and Lampsacus, and then he migrated to Athens. There he died in the second year of the 127th Olympiad in the archonship of Pytharatus, at the age of seventy-two. Hermarchus of Mitylene, son of Agemortus, succeeded to the headship of the school. Epicurus died of a stone in the bladder, as Hermarchus also says in his letters, after an illness of fourteen days. Hermippus tells us that as he was dying he got into a bronze bath filled with hot water, and asked for a cup of unmixed wine, which he gulped down. Then, having adjured his friends to remember his teaching, he expired. I have composed the following epigram on him:

'Farewell, remember my sayings.' Thus spake at his death Epicurus,
These the last words as he died spake he aloud to his friends.
Then in a hot bath he laid him, a goblet of wine he demanded,
Quaffed it, and soon the cold air quaffed he of Hades below.'

Such was Epicurus' life and such his death.