

Episode One Hundred Thirty-Four - The Letter to Menoecus 01- Context and Opening of the Letter

Post by “Cassius” of August 2, 2022 at 9:56 AM

Here's a test of just pasting the section, and I am not sure this works. It would really be desirable to have a link to which someone could click and see the particular page for each section. Don do you have this uploaded to Archive.org where we might be able to do that?

[Don](#) : Yes. It's now available here:

[Letter To Menoikeus: A New Translation With Commentary : Don Boozar : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

A new translation of the Letter to Menoikeus (Menoecus) by Epicurus with commentary.
archive.org

Going forward, I think we're just going to post links to the pages. But this over we'll cut and paste.

(Note: This is [Don](#) editing [Cassius](#) 's original post using by document to cut and paste like he initially asked me to do...)

122a: Μήτε νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν, μήτε γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

This sentence begins with μήτε... μήτε... meaning "Neither... nor..." so we are being set up for two things, both of which are to be negated. These two are:

1. νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν
2. γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

Epicurus echoes each line, ending them both with forms of φιλοσοφέω (philosopheō), the word meaning literally "to love wisdom" or what we know as "philosophy." Most modern translations simply use "it" in the second phrase, losing the immediacy and importance of that word. The word also implies not only "loving" but "living" what you love, talking the talk and walking the walk, practicing what you preach, and so on. Epicurus's decision to use the same word should inform your translation decision. If it was good enough for Epicurus to repeat the word, maybe it would be a good idea to continue that in translation.

Let's examine our two negated phrases closer:

νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν

- νέος (τις ὦν) "(One who is) young (neos)"

- English: prefix neo- as in Neolithic, neologism, neonatal etc.
- μελλέτω: 3rd person singular imperative active present of μέλλω
 - to think of doing, intend to do, to mean to
 - to be about to do
 - (by fate), to be destined to do, to be fated to do
 - (by the will of other men, rare)
 - (to denote a foregone conclusion)
 - (to mark a strong possibility) to be likely to do
 - (to mark mere intention, to be always going to do without ever doing) to delay, put off, hesitate
 - “(he) must intend to...”

I'll use "he" here for the 3rd person singular since the letter is specifically addressed to Menoikeus and the word νέος is masculine; however, I would urge readers to consider Epicurus's practice of welcoming all people into the Garden. He could just as readily, I believe, have used a phrase to include both young men and women with a 3rd person plural verb. But that could have been awkward and clumsy grammatically if he tried to maintain a personal letter to Menoikeus. So, readers are encouraged to remember Epicurus's unprecedented inclusivity in the Garden, to look for universally applicable themes and advice in the Letter but also to remember this is also an intimate letter to one individual that has been preserved for posterity. It was obviously preserved and passed down for its value as an epitome or summary of Epicurus's ethical teaching for the wider Epicurean community, just as the letters of the later Christian apostles to specific people (Timothy) and communities (Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, etc.) were preserved as general teachings for everyone. However, being Epicurus's letter is addressed to one person, the letter shows Epicurus's concern for each individual looking to lead a more pleasureable life. The letter is addressed to one and all at the same time.

μέλλω shows up again in 122f and 125b: διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων· (3rd person plural present active imperative of μέλλω). We'll dissect this in detail later, but we should keep in mind this sense of intention or "about to do (something)" when we reach that section, although this word comes with a wide variety of shades of meaning.

Therefore:

μήτε νέος τις ὦν μελλέτω φιλοσοφεῖν

“Neither must one who is young delay (or be about to engage in) the study and love of wisdom...”

Now, our second phrase to be negated:

γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

- γέρων (gerōn) "one who is old"
 - English: gerontology
- ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω "begin to grow weary/tired of"

ὑπάρχων has a wide variety of meanings, but here connotes beginning, coming into being, arising, springing up.

Therefore:

μήτε γέρων ὑπάρχων κοπιάτω φιλοσοφῶν.

"Nor should one who is old grow tired of studying and loving wisdom."

122b: οὔτε γὰρ ἄωρος οὐδεὶς ἐστὶν οὔτε πάρωρος πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν ὑγιαῖνον.

This sentence begins with οὔτε... οὔτε... which, similar to μήτε...μήτε..., conveys negation: "and not... and neither..." Again, we're saying "not this and not that." So, Epicurus is mirroring μήτε ... μήτε... from the first sentence thus reinforcing them both. We'll notice this parallel/mirror style in his writing throughout the Letter.

γὰρ. A conjunction meaning variously "for, since, because, etc." According to Liddell, Scott, and Jones' *Ancient Greek Lexicon* (LSJ), γὰρ introduces the reason or cause of what precedes it. So this sentence will provide the reason for why one is never too young or too old to love and practice wisdom.

γὰρ is required to come after the first word in the sentence in Greek but needs to be translated into English as the first word. We'll be encountering a lot of these kinds of short words and pairs of words in our exploration. They are very common in Ancient Greek. Technically, these kinds of words are called particles, enclitics, proclitics, etc., but I'll try to keep the technicalities to a minimum unless it's going to impact significantly on the meaning. They add much of the complexity and nuance to the language. Small but mighty.

ἄωρος and πάρωρος "untimely, unseasonable" from α- a- "not" + ὥρα (h)ōra (per LSJ) "any period, fixed by natural laws and revolutions, whether of the year, month, or day" or "the fitting time or season for a thing" So, literally "not the fitting time" or "not the season." πάρωρος (parōros) may convey παρα + ὥρα (para + (h)ōra) "out of season, untimely."

οὐδεὶς (oudeis) "no one, nobody, none, nothing"

πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν ὑγιαῖνον

"for the health/soundness (ὑγιαῖνον (hygiainon)) of the the mind/soul/'animating life principle' (ψυχὴν (psykhē))"

- psychēn: English psychology, psyche
- hygiainon: English hygiene

If we're discussing the health of the *psykhē*, what is the *psykhē*? The *psykhē* is often spoken of in relation to the physical body: e.g., "the health of the body (τὴν τοῦ σώματος ὑγίειαν) and the *serenity* of the *psykhē* (τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραξίαν (psykhēs ataraxian) from later in this letter). Epicurus also uses *psykhē* to refer to that which senses so there's an aspect of the mind, albeit

spread throughout one's body: καὶ μὴν ὅτι ἔχει ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς αἰσθήσεως τὴν πλείστην αἰτίαν δεῖ κατέχειν: "Further, we must keep in mind that *psykhē* has the greatest share in causing *sensation*" (from the *Letter to Herodotus*). But remember that the soul/mind or *psykhē* is composed of atoms and void just like the body but of a very subtle kind to be able to move swiftly so we can sense our sensations. So, just because translators often use the word "soul" for *psykhē*, do not bring along the semantic baggage that that word has in English. The Epicurean *psykhē* is definitely not an immortal thing that exists independent of the body that lives on after death or transmigrates to another life as expounded by almost every religion and argued vehemently against by Epicurus.

122c: ὁ δὲ λέγων ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ἢ παρεληλυθέναι τὴν ὥραν ὁμοίος ἐστὶ τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν ἢ μήπω παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν ἢ μηκέτ' εἶναι.

We're going to break this down since the combination of ἢ... ἢ... means 'either... or...' or 'whether... or...' so there are two pairs of ἢ's in that first section. Again, an example of Epicurus's mirror writing style.

ὁ δὲ λέγων "(and) one who says..."

i. ἢ μήπω τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπάρχειν ὥραν "either the season (ὥραν) to love and practice wisdom is not yet arrived"

ii. ἢ παρεληλυθέναι τὴν ὥραν, "or the season (ὥραν) has passed by"

ὁμοίος ἐστὶν τῷ λέγοντι πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν...

"is like someone who is saying [i and ii below] for eudaimonia..."

i. ἢ μὴ παρεῖναι τὴν ὥραν "either the proper time has not arrived"

ii. ἢ μηκέτι εἶναι. "or is no more." (i.e., has passed)

Note how Epicurus again - as he did in the previous section - uses ὥραν "the proper time or season for something" to drive the point home. There is no "proper" time or season to love and practice wisdom. The time is always *now*!

122d-f. ὥστε φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι, τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων, τῷ δ' ὅπως νέος ἅμα καὶ παλαιὸς ἦ διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων.

122d: ὥστε φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι,...

- ὥστε has a number of uses but here we can say that it is being used at the beginning of the sentence to mark a particularly strong conclusion and can translate it "therefore, consequently" or even "so."
- φιλοσοφητέον καὶ νέω καὶ γέροντι
 - "both young (νέω) and old (γέροντι) must pursue wisdom"

- φιλοσοφητέος is related to φιλοσοφέω and means "one must pursue wisdom"
- και...και... gives the sense of "both x and y."

122e: τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

This is the first of two parallel phrases to round out this section. We see the μὲν "on the one hand..." setting up the pair of phrases, so we then look for the δὲ "... on the other hand..." and, sure enough, we find that in 122f. This "on the one hand... on the other hand..." is a translation trope for μὲν...δε..., but it's also a handy tool when breaking down a larger passage. It doesn't always make sense in the final translation, but it's not a bad starting place. Even though both μὲν and δε must come second in their respective phrases (for grammatical reasons too complicated to get into here), they should be considered to be (in English) the introductory word of the phrase.

[μὲν] [ὅπως] τῷ γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς

- ὅπως has a number of meanings including "so, in order that" or used in comparisons "like, as."

τῷ γηράσκων (tō gēraskōn < geron) "for one who has grown old" (a dative construction, so translate as "to, for"). Consider this as not someone who is just old but someone who has experienced life and has *become* old.

νεάζῃ (neazē < neos) "to grow or become young again" (in dative to go with τῷ γηράσκων)

τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς "for the good things"

This is a significant phrase! Remember the Tetrpharmakos's third line is:

καὶ τὰγαθὸν μὲν εὐκτητόν "and, on the one hand, The Good is easy to obtain"

Note our old friend μὲν is setting us up for the δε in the last line of the Tetrpharmakos. So, τὰγαθὸν here is τ- from the definite article + ἀγαθὸν "good", so "The (greatest) good" is being conveyed, which according to Epicurus is pleasure, that to which everything else points. τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς here in the *Letter to Menoikeus* is simply the dative form. So, I strongly contend that we should translate τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς here as "for the pleasures."

...διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

διὰ is a preposition meaning "through" or "by means of."

- English diameter (διὰ (dia) + meter "measure through")

διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,..."by means of the gratitude (χάριν) of that which has happened, that which has taken place" or, to more poetically paraphrase, "by means of the grace of memories of past events."

Bailey's commentary gives "'by the grateful recollection of the past', ie. of the philosophic truths which he learnt in earlier life." I think Bailey is far too timid and narrowly-focused in his "philosophic truths" comment. Consider Vatican Sayings 17 and 19, both mentioning the "good things" that have happened in the past:

Vatican Saying 17

It is not the young man who is most blessed but the old man who has lived nobly, because, being at his very peak, the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds, but the old man has settled into old age as if in a harbor, secure in his gratitude for the good things he was once unsure of.

οὐ νέος μακαριστὸς ἀλλὰ γέρων βεβιωκῶς καλῶς· ὁ γὰρ νέος ἀκμῇ πολὺς ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἑτεροφρονῶν πλάζεται· ὁ δὲ γέρων καθάπερ ἐν λιμένι τῷ γήρᾳ καθώρμιεν, τὰ πρότερον δυσελπιστούμενα τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀσφαλεῖ κατακλείσας χάριτι.

Vatican Saying 19

The one who forgets the good things they had yesterday becomes an old man today.

τοῦ γεγονότος ἀμνήμων ἀγαθοῦ γέρων τήμερον γεγένηται.

The academic discipline of Positive Psychology has documented the benefits of practicing gratitude. Epicurus expressed this two thousand years ago in this letter and elsewhere in his writings. We should be grateful for the pleasures we have experienced in the past, and, by reliving them in our memory, gain present pleasure from them.

χάριν (accusative of χάρις) is used in Christian texts for "grace (of God)." It also carries this idea of being thankful for or having gratitude for a favor being done. It also shares a root with χαίρειν, the salutation we met at the beginning, and χαρά "joy," one of the "kinetic" pleasures listed with euphrosyne in the (in)famous passage about katastematic and kinetic pleasures.

That was a lot to work, so let's review this "on the one hand" portion that we just dissected:

122e: τῷ μὲν ὅπως γηράσκων νεάζῃ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς διὰ τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγονότων,...

A *very* literal translation would be:

"On the one hand, in order that 'one who has grown old' can be young through gratitude of the "good things" (pleasures) which have taken place in the past,..."

So that person who has grown old can look back over their life and fondly remember those pleasures - those good things - they have experienced when they were younger, literally making themselves feel young again.

122f: [δὲ] τῷ ὅπως νέος ἅμα καὶ παλαιὸς ἦ διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων.

- Here's our δε "... on the other hand..." and our second ὅπως "in order that..."

- τῷ νέος "for one who is young"
- ἄμα καὶ παλαιὸς ᾗ
 - "and at the same time be old"
 - ᾗ is a subjunctive of "to be," and παλαιὸς carries the sense of being old in years, being venerable. The subjunctive is a mood of verbs that expresses something imagined or wished for or possible.
- διὰ τὴν ἀφοβίαν τῶν μελλόντων
 - "by means of/through the fearlessness of what is intended to be done, what is to come."
 - As mentioned in 122a above, no matter how we translate μελλόντων we should keep in mind that sense of intention of what is to be done, the sense of anticipation.

Just as one who has grown old can relive past pleasures to feel young again, the one who is young can get the benefits of growing old without living the years yet by being fearless in looking ahead and weighing the consequences of their actions in the future, i.e., seeing themselves as being older and experiencing the consequences of their actions.

122g: μελετᾶν οὖν χρή τὰ ποιῶντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν, εἴ περ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν, ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- [οὖν] μελετᾶν χρή
 - "[then] one must study, meditate on."
 - χρή expresses necessity! It is essential - to study, reflect, and meditate on...
- μελετᾶν carries the sense of attending to something closely, studying it, or meditating on it. It also means "to practise an art" and is akin to the Latin word *meditari*. We see this word again in verse 123 and 135.
- τὰ ποιῶντα τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν
 - "that which produces eudaimonia."
 - We're going to leave eudaimonia untranslated for now. We'll revisit that word soon since we've encountered it twice already in just the first verse. For now, you can think of it as the woefully-inadequate English rendering of "happiness."
- εἴπερ "if indeed, if really"
 - This is a strengthened or fortified version of εἴ "if"

Note in the last two parts of 122g we again discover a μὲν...δε... pair:

εἴπερ παρούσης μὲν αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν,

ἀπούσης δὲ πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- [μὲν] εἴπερ παρούσης αὐτῆς πάντα ἔχομεν,...
 - "on the one hand, if this is present we have everything..."
- παρούσης "being present"

[δέ] [εἴπερ] ἀπούσης πάντα πράττομεν εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν.

- ἀπούσης "not being present, gone away, departed"
- "[on the other hand, if] this is not present or gone away, we do everything (πάντα πράττομεν)..."
- πάντα (panta) includes the familiar English prefix pan- "all, every, etc." in Pantheon (all gods), panacea "all cure," etc.
- πράττομεν "we do, practice, make, achieve"
- ...εἰς τὸ ταύτην ἔχειν. ".. with regards to having that (i.e., eudaimonia)."

Note πράττομεν is the present active tense: "We do, make...etc." not "we would, should, might, may do..." There's no equivocation, no hedging: if we don't have ["that which produces eudaimonia"], we do everything to have it.

A quick digression on eudaimonia is appropriate here. εὐδαιμονία is defined by LSJ as "prosperity, good fortune, opulence; true, full happiness."

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57%3Aentry%3Deu\)daimoni%2Fa](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57%3Aentry%3Deu)daimoni%2Fa)

The word is derived from εὖ- (eu-) "well, good" + δαιμονία (daimonia) "spirit, divine power." This is where English gets the word "demon" but it could be either benevolent (eudaimon) or malevolent (kakodaimon). If you have a good, benevolent in-dwelling spirit, you will lead a prosperous, healthy, flourishing, fortunate life. Socrates claimed to be listening to his daimon for guidance which was used against him at his trial as evidence of impiety. But the term generally in common parlance means what LSJ refers to. However, it encompasses a range of qualities but is often pared down in English to simply "happiness" which is woefully inadequate. It's much more than that, encompassing that and q more. Translators try to convey this with paraphrases like "complete happiness," but our comparative translations just use "happiness." Sometimes it's left untranslated and only transliterated eudaimonia, but this is somewhat of a cheat, too. A cheat I may be guilty of shortly! If you look up that word in Merriam-Webster, it gives "well-being, happiness." So you see we can go in circles. Personally, I think "well-being" is better than "happiness" since it is almost a literal translation with a twist: eu- "well" + daimon "being" (the latter having a little double entendre). So, when you see any of those -- happiness, well-being, flourishing, eudaimonia -- remember that it's that word plus a little more. That's why I advocate using eudaimonia itself. There's a rabbit hole of papers, essays, and websites that convey the deep meaning of εὐδαιμονία if you feel intrepid. Consider this a taste of what awaits you.

Which finally brings us to the end of verse 122!