

(Mis)Quoting Epicurus--An Analysis of Language in Epictetus

Post by “Joshua” of January 27, 2023 at 4:47 AM

Before we had [Don](#) with us, the perennial subject of Epicurus' advice on marriage and children came up and I was compelled to do my best with respect to the Greek. That thread is [here](#), and while I wouldn't necessarily change what I wrote I have been reading something that once again puts the subject before my eyes. In *The Discourses* of Epictetus as recorded by Arrian, the philosopher mentions Epicurus a number of times, quoting him once in a way that I find surprising:

Quote from The Discourses of Epictetus

Even Epicurus is sensible that we are by nature sociable beings; but having once placed our good in the mere outward shell, he can say nothing afterwards inconsistent with that; for again, he strenuously maintains that we ought not to admire or accept anything separated from the nature of good, and he is in the right to maintain it. But how, then, arise any affectionate anxieties, unless there be such a thing as natural affection towards our offspring? Then why do you, Epicurus, dissuade a wise man from bringing up children? Why are you afraid that upon their account he may fall into anxieties? Does he fall into any for a mouse, that feeds within his house? What is it to him, if a little mouse bewails itself there? But Epicurus knew that, if once a child is born, it is no longer in our power not to love and be solicitous for it. On the same grounds he says that a wise man will not engage himself in public business, knowing very well what must follow. If men are only so many flies, why should he not engage in it?

And does he, who knows all this, dare to forbid us to bring up children? Not even a sheep, or a wolf, deserts its offspring; and shall man? What would you have, that we should be as silly as sheep? Yet even these do not desert their offspring. Or as savage as wolves? Neither do these desert them. Pray, who would mind you, if he saw his child fallen upon the ground and crying? For my part, I am of opinion that your father and another, even if they could have foreseen that you would have been the author of such doctrines, would not have thrown you away.

ἐπινοεῖ καὶ Ἐπίκουρος ὅτι φύσει ἐσμὲν κοινωνικοί, ἀλλ' ἅπαξ ἐν τῷ κελύφει θεῖς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἡμῶν οὐκέτι δύναται ἄλλο οὐδὲν εἰπεῖν. [2] πάλιν γὰρ ἐκείνου λίαν κρατεῖ, ὅτι οὐ δεῖ ἀπεσπασμένον οὐδὲν τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ οὐσίας οὔτε θαυμάζειν οὔτ' ἀποδέχεσθαι: καὶ καλῶς αὐτοῦ κρατεῖ. [3] πῶς οὖν ὑπονοητικοί ἐσμεν, οἷς μὴ φυσικὴ ἔστι πρὸς τὰ ἔγγονα φιλοστοργία; διὰ τί ἀποσυμβουλευεῖς τῷ σοφῷ τεκνοτροφεῖν; τί φοβῆ μὴ διὰ

ταῦτα εἰς λύπας ἐμπέση; [4] διὰ γὰρ τὸν μῦν τὸν ἔσω τρεφόμενον ἐμπίπτει; τί οὖν αὐτῷ μέλει, ἂν μυίδιον μικρὸν ἔσω κατακλαίῃ αὐτοῦ; [5] ἀλλ' οἶδεν, ὅτι, ἂν ἅπαξ γένηται παιδίον, οὐκέτι ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἐστι μὴ στέργειν μηδὲ φροντίζειν ἐπ' αὐτῷ. [6] διὰ τοῦτο φησὶν οὐδὲ πολιτεύσεσθαι τὸν νοῦν ἔχοντα: οἶδεν γὰρ τίνα δεῖ ποιεῖν τὸν πολιτευόμενον: ἐπέιτοι εἰ ὡς ἐν μυῖαις μέλλεις ἀναστρέφεσθαι, τί κωλύει; [7] ἀλλ' ὅμως εἰδῶς ταῦτα τολμᾷ λέγειν ὅτι 'μὴ ἀναιρώμεθα τέκνα.' ἀλλὰ πρόβατον μὲν οὐκ ἀπολείπει τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔγγονον οὐδὲ λύκος, ἄνθρωπος δ' ἀπολείπει; [8] τί θέλεις; μωροὺς ἡμᾶς εἶναι ὡς τὰ πρόβατα; οὐδ' ἐκεῖνα ἀπολείπει. θηριώδεις ὡς τοὺς λύκους; οὐδ' ἐκεῖνοι ἀπολ [9] εἶπουσιν. ἄγε, τίς δέ σοι πείθεται ἰδὼν παιδίον αὐτοῦ κλαῖον ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πεπτωκός; [10] ἐγὼ μὲν οἶμαι ὅτι εἰ καὶ ἔμαντεύσατο ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ ὁ πατήρ, ὅτι μέλλεις ταῦτα λέγειν, οὐκ ἂν σε ἔρριψαν.

Quote from The Discourses of Epictetus

Thus also, when Epicurus would destroy the natural tie between mankind, he makes use of the very [p. 1190] thing he is destroying. For what says he? "Be not deceived; be not seduced and mistaken. There is no natural tie between reasonable beings. Believe me. Those who say otherwise mislead and impose upon you." Why are you concerned for us then? Let us be deceived. You will fare never the worse, if all the rest of us are persuaded that there is a natural tie between mankind, and that it is by all means to be preserved. Nay, it will be much safer and better. Why do you give yourself any trouble about us, sir? Why do you break your rest for us? Why do you light your lamp? Why do you rise early? Why do you compose so many volumes? Is it that none of us should be deceived concerning the gods, as if they took any care of men; or that we may not suppose the essence of good consists in anything but in pleasure? For if these things be so, lie down and sleep, and lead the life of which you judge yourself worthy, - that of a mere worm. Eat, drink, debauch, snore. What is it to you, whether others think rightly or wrongly about these things? For what have you to do with us? You take care of sheep, because they afford their milk, their wool, and at last their flesh. And would it not be a desirable thing that men might be so lulled and enchanted by the Stoics as to give themselves up to be milked and fleeced by you, and such as you? Should not these doctrines be taught to your brother Epicureans only, and concealed from the rest of the world; who [p. 1191] should by all means, above all things, be persuaded that we have a natural tie with each other, and that self-command is a good thing, in order that all may be kept safe for you? Or is this tie to be preserved towards some and not towards others? Towards whom, then, is it to be preserved,--towards such as mutually preserve, or such as violate it? And who violate it more than you, who teach such doctrines?

οὕτως καὶ Ἐπίκουρος, ὅταν ἀναιρεῖν θέλῃ τὴν φυσικὴν κοινωνίαν ἀνθρώποις πρὸς ἀλλήλους, αὐτῷ τῷ ἀναιρουμένῳ συγχρῆται. [7] τί γὰρ λέγει; μὴ ἔξαπατᾶσθε, ἄνθρωποι, μηδὲ παράγεσθε μηδὲ διαπίπτετε: οὐκ ἔστι φυσικὴ κοινωνία τοῖς λογικοῖς

πρὸς ἀλλήλους: πιστεύσατέ μοι. οἱ δὲ τὰ ἕτερα λέγοντες ἔξαπατῶσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ παραλογίζονται. [8] τί οὖν σοι μέλει; ἄφες ἡμᾶς ἔξαπατηθῆναι. μή τι χεῖρον ἀπαλλάξεις, ἂν πάντες οἱ ἄλλοι πεισθῶμεν, ὅτι φυσική ἐστὶν ἡμῖν κοινωνία πρὸς ἀλλήλους καὶ ταύτην δεῖ παντὶ τρόπῳ φυλάσσειν; καὶ πολὺ κρεῖσσον καὶ ἀσφαλέστερον. [9] ἄνθρωπε, τί ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν φροντίζεις, τί δι' ἡμᾶς ἀγρυπνεῖς, τί λύχνον ἄπτεις, τί ἐπανίστασαι, τί τηλικαῦτα βιβλία συγγράφεις; μή τις ἡμῶν ἔξαπατηθῆ̄ περιθεῶν ὡς ἐπιμελουμένων ἀνθρώπων ἢ μή τις ἄλλην οὐσίαν ὑπολάβῃ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἢ ἡδονῆς; [10] εἰ γὰρ οὕτως ταῦτα ἔχει, βαλὼν κάθειυδε καὶ τὰ τοῦ σκώληκος ποιεῖ, ὣν ἄξιον ἔκρινας σεαυτόν: ἔσθιε καὶ πῖνε καὶ συνουσίαζε καὶ ἀφόδευε καὶ ῥέγκε. [11] τί δὲ σοὶ μέλει, πῶς οἱ ἄλλοι ὑπολήφονται περὶ τούτων, πότερον ὑγιῶς ἢ οὐχ ὑγιῶς; τί γὰρ σοὶ καὶ ἡμῖν; τῶν γὰρ προβάτων σοὶ μέλει, ὅτι παρέχει ἡμῖν αὐτὰ καρησόμενα καὶ ἀμελχθησόμενα καὶ τὸ τελευταῖον κατακοπησόμενα; [12] οὐχὶ δ' εὐκταῖον ἦν, εἰ ἐδύναντο οἱ ἄνθρωποι κατακληθέντες καὶ ἐπασθέντες ὑπὸ τῶν Στωικῶν ἀπονυστάζειν καὶ παρέχειν σοὶ καὶ τοῖς ὁμοίοις καρησομένους καὶ ἀμελχθησομένους ἑαυτούς; [13] πρὸς γὰρ τοὺς Συνεπικουρείους ἔδει σε ταῦτα λέγειν, οὐχὶ δὲ πρὸς ἐκείνους † ἀποκρύπτεσθαι, πολὺ μάλιστ' ἐκείνους πρὸ πάντων ἀναπεῖθαι, ὅτι φύσει κοινωνικοὶ γεγόναμεν, ὅτι ἀγαθὸν ἢ ἐγκράτεια, ἵνα σοὶ πάντα τηρῆται; [14] ἢ πρὸς τινὰς μὲν δεῖ φυλάττειν ταύτην τὴν κοινωνίαν, πρὸς τινὰς δ' οὐ; πρὸς τινὰς οὖν δεῖ τηρεῖν; πρὸς τοὺς ἀντιτηροῦντας ἢ πρὸς τοὺς παραβατικῶς αὐτῆς ἔχοντας; καὶ τίνες παραβατικώτερον αὐτῆς ἔχουσιν ὑμῶν τῶν ταῦτα διειληφόντων;

I don't have anything like the kind of facility for the Greek language that would be useful in evaluating the quotation underlined above, but I am capable of following a few hints. What I want to propose is that the words underlined above do not sound in their diction like something Epicurus would actually say. To begin with the part that caught my attention: "[Believe me.](#)" ?

Believe me? I couldn't think of I single time in any surviving writing when Epicurus started or finished a sentence with *believe me*. It seems to me to be a phrase so foreign to his style that I could hardly believe he wrote it. So here is the phrase in Greek; πιστεύσατέ μοι--pisteusate moi. It is a phrase that was used in the ancient world, though not earlier than the late first and early second century AD that I can find. Dio Cassius, the Roman historian, uses it. The church father Ignatius of Antioch uses it. [Edit to add: The 1st century Roman/Jewish Historian Josephus also uses this word] Epictetus, blissfully unaware of the irony, uses it earnestly in his own words:

Quote from The Discourses of Epictetus

Why then do you impose upon yourselves, and play tricks with others? Why do you put on a dress not your own, and walk about in it, mere thieves and pilferers of names and things which do not belong to you? I am now your preceptor, and you come to be instructed by me. And indeed my aim is to secure you from being restrained, compelled, hindered; to make you free, prosperous, happy; looking to God upon every occasion, great or small. And you come to learn and study these things. Why then do

you not finish your work, if you have the proper aims, and I, besides the aim, the proper qualifications? What is wanting? When I see an artificer, and the materials lying ready, I await the work. Now here is the artificer; here are the materials; what is it we want? Is not the thing capable of being taught? It is. Is it not in our own power, then? The only thing of all others that is so. Neither riches nor health nor fame nor, in short, anything else is in our power except a right use of the semblances of things. This alone is, by nature, not subject to restraint, not subject to hindrance. Why then do not you finish it? Tell me the cause. It must be my fault, or yours, or from the nature of the thing. The thing itself is practicable, and the only thing in our power. The fault then must be either in me or in you, or, more truly, in both. Well, then, shall we at length begin to carry such an aim with us? Let us lay aside all that is past. Let us begin. Only believe me, and you shall see.

Quote from The Discourses of Epictetus

Καὶ νῦν ἐγὼ μὲν παιδευτῆς εἰμι ὑμέτερος, ὑμεῖς δὲ παρ' ἐμοὶ παιδεύεσθε. κάγω μὲν ἔχω ταύτην τὴν ἐπιβολὴν, ἀποτελέσαι ὑμᾶς ἀκωλύτους, ἀναναγκάστους, ἀπαραποδίστους, ἐλευθέρους, εὐροοῦντας, εὐδαιμονοῦντας, εἰς τὸν θεὸν ἀφορῶντας ἐν παντὶ καὶ μικρῶ καὶ μεγάλῳ· ὑμεῖς δὲ ταῦτα μαθησόμενοι καὶ μελετήσοντες πάρεστε. διὰ τί οὖν οὐκ ἀνύετε τὸ ἔργον, εἰ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔχετε ἐπιβολὴν οἷαν δεῖ κάγω πρὸς τῆ ἐπιβολῆ καὶ παρασκευὴν οἷαν δεῖ; τί τὸ λειπὸν ἐστίν; ὅταν ἴδω τέκτονα, ὅτω ὕλη πάρεστιν παρακειμένη, ἐκδέχομαι τὸ ἔργον. καὶ ἐνθάδε τοίνυν ὁ τέκτων ἐστίν, ἡ ὕλη ἐστίν· τί ἡμῖν λείπει; οὐκ ἔστι διδακτὸν τὸ πρᾶγμα; διδακτὸν. οὐκ ἔστιν οὖν ἐφ' ἡμῖν; μόνον μὲν οὖν τῶν ἄλλων πάντων. οὔτε πλοῦτός ἐστιν ἐφ' ἡμῖν οὔθ' ὑγίεια οὔτε δόξα οὔτε ἄλλο τι ἀπλῶς πλὴν ὀρθῆ χρῆσις φαντασιῶν. τοῦτο ἀκώλυτον φύσει μόνον, τοῦτο ἀνεμπόδιστον. διὰ τί οὖν οὐκ ἀνύετε; εἴπατέ μοι τὴν αἰτίαν. ἢ γὰρ παρ' ἐμὲ γίνεται ἢ παρ' ὑμᾶς ἢ παρὰ τὴν φύσιν τοῦ πράγματος. αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα ἐνδεχόμενον καὶ μόνον ἐφ' ἡμῖν. λοιπὸν οὖν ἢ παρ' ἐμὲ ἐστίν ἢ παρ' ὑμᾶς ἢ, ὅπερ ἀληθέστερον, παρ' ἀμφοτέρους. τί οὖν; θέλετε ἀρξώμεθά ποτε τοιαύτην ἐπιβολὴν κομίζειν ἐνταῦθα; τὰ μέχρι νῦν ἀφῶμεν. ἀρξώμεθα μόνον, πιστεύσατέ μοι, καὶ ὄψεσθε.

It must be admitted that πιστεύσατέ is a rare formulation of πιστεύετε, again a form of πιστεύω, which derived from πίστις; this is a root of words that Epicurus does use frequently, and which were very common in philosophical writings of the ancient Greece.

πίστις

1. trust in others, faith
2. belief in a higher power, faith
3. the state of being persuaded of something: belief, confidence, assurance
4. trust in a commercial sense: credit

5. faithfulness, honesty, trustworthiness, fidelity
6. that which gives assurance: treaty, oath, guarantee
7. means of persuasion: argument, proof
8. that which is entrusted

Quote from The Letter to Herodotus

"Next, keeping in view our perceptions and feelings (for so shall we have the surest grounds for belief) [...]"

--οὕτω γὰρ ἡ βεβαιοτάτη πίστις ἔσται,--

Quote from The Letter to Pythocles

"In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm conviction."

"Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν μὴ ἄλλο τι τέλος ἐκ τῆς περὶ μετεώρων γνώσεως εἶτε κατὰ συναφὴν λεγομένων εἶτε αὐτοτελῶς νομίζειν εἶναι ἢπερ ἀταραξίαν καὶ πίστιν βέβαιον, καθάπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν."

Quote from The Principle Doctrines

35. It is impossible for the man who secretly violates any article of the social compact to feel confident that he will remain undiscovered, even if he has already escaped ten thousand times ; for right on to the end of his life he is never sure he will not be detected.

35. Οὐκ ἔστι τὸν λάθρα τι κινουῦντα ὧν συνέθεντο πρὸς ἀλλήλους εἰς τὸ μὴ βλάπτειν μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι, πιστεύειν ὅτι λήσει, κἂν μυριάκις ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος λανθάνῃ. μέχρι γὰρ καταστροφῆς ἀδηλον εἰ καὶ λήσει.

40. Those who were best able to provide themselves with the means of security against their neighbours, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee, passed the most agreeable life in each other's society ; and their enjoyment of the fullest intimacy was such that, if one of them died before his time, the survivors did not lament his death as if it called for commiseration.

40. Ὅσοι τὴν δύναμιν ἔσχον τοῦ τὸ θαρρεῖν μάλιστα ἐκ τῶν ὁμορουντων παρασκευάσασθαι, οὕτω καὶ ἐβίωσαν μετ' ἀλλήλων ἡδιστα τὸ βεβαιοτάτον πίστωμα ἔχοντες, καὶ πληρεστάτην οικειότητα ἀπολαβόντες οὐκ ὠδύραντο ὡς πρὸς ἔλεον τὴν τοῦ τελευτήσαντος προκαταστροφὴν.

It should be clear from these, and from a general reading of the surviving writings of Epicurus that he does not consider "belief" or confident knowledge to rest on his own authority, but in each case he explains the real foundation of that confidence--and this will rely on the canon, or on nature, or on some kind of observation or direct reasoning which he quickly lays forth. Take one controversial example: "First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind". Epicurus does not say "God is a living being immortal and blessed. Believe me." Instead, he says that the gods have those properties, and immediately gives the reader the foundation for thinking so; in this case, "the common sense of mankind". This sets the general pattern, which he follows pretty rigidly. Another example: "Accustom thyself to believe that [death is nothing to us](#), for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience ; therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an illimitable time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality." He spends a quarter of the sentence making a claim, and the next the quarters of the same sentence explaining the foundation of the claim.

So much for "believe". Now let's look at "me". I won't go into the Greek here with the word $\mu\omicron\iota$, as I think a review of the translations shall be sufficient for this. It would be easy not to notice that this a word Epicurus very rarely uses--one might say he uses it only a very particular context. When Epicurus refers to himself, he is generally the *subject* of the sentence. "Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this, have prepared for you just such an epitome and manual of the doctrines as a whole."

The genuine irony is that on those occasions when Epicurus makes himself the object of a sentence, he is doing his utmost to highlight the affection, the "social ties" between himself and his friends. It is precisely on this point that Epictetus maligns him! He does this most particularly in three places--in the introduction of his letter to Pythocles, in his Will, and in his letter to Idomeneus.

Quote from The Introduction to the Letter to Pythocles

CLEON brought me a letter from you in which you continue to express a kindly feeling towards me, which is a just return for my interest in you, and you attempt with some success to recall the arguments which lead to a life of blessedness. You ask me to send you a brief argument about the phenomena of the sky in a short sketch, that you may easily recall it to mind. For you say that what I have written in my other works is hard to remember, even though, as you state, you constantly have them in your hands. I was glad to receive your request and felt constrained to answer it by pleasant expectations for the future.

Quote from The Will of Epicurus

And from the revenues made over by me to Amynomachus and Timocrates let them to the best of their power in consultation with Hermarchus make separate provision for the funeral offerings to my father, mother, and brothers, and for the customary celebration of my birthday on the tenth day of Gamelion in each year, and for the meeting of all my School held every month on the twentieth day to commemorate Metrodorus and myself according to the rules now in force. Let them also join in celebrating the day in Poseideon which commemorates my brothers, and likewise the day in Metageitnion which commemorates Polyaeus, as I have done previously.

[...]

Let them make Hermarchus trustee of the funds along with themselves, in order that everything may be done in concert with him, who has grown old with me in philosophy and is left at the head of the School. And when the girl comes of age, let Amynomachus and Timocrates pay her dowry, taking from the property as much as circumstances allow, subject to the approval of Hermarchus. Let them provide for Nicanor as I have done previously, so that none of those members of the school who have rendered service to me in private life and have shown me kindness in every way and have chosen to grow old with me in the School should, so far as my means go, lack the necessaries of life.

Quote from The Letter to Idomeneus

On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus.

In conclusion: I cannot say whether the quotation attributed to Epicurus by Epictetus is wholly fabricated; but I say that it does not bear the stamp of Epicurus' own style; that it uses language which was not current in Epicurus' time; and that it is, at best, a badly rephrased and reworded quotation, if a genuine quotation at all. It bears repeating that Epictetus wrote nothing himself that survives--that what he had to say was delivered orally, and written down by a student--and that he lived several centuries after Epicurus, in a time when the reliability of Epicurus' critics is deeply questionable.