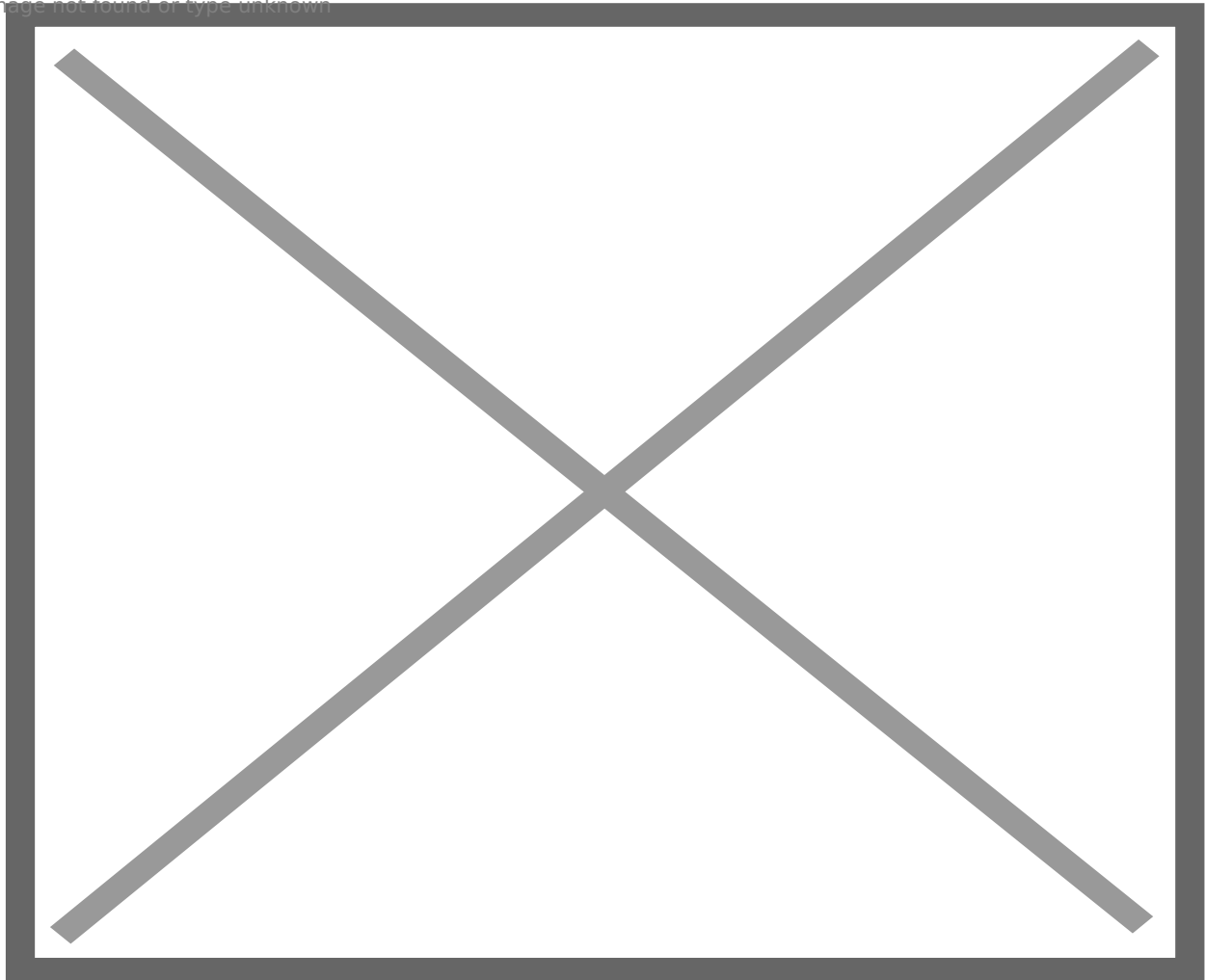


Delphic Maxims from an Epicurean Perspective

Post by "Don" of June 19, 2023 at 12:22 PM

Thought about this on my morning walk today. The three maxims said to have been inscribed on the temple of the Oracle at Delphi are probably most well known through Socrates emphasis of "know thyself." But there were three inscriptions plus 147 maxims ascribed to the Seven Sages. For a summary, check out the Wikipedia article:

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[Delphic maxims - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

What got me on my walk was thinking about the first maxim, then that led to thinking about the others.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3130-delphic-maxims-from-an-epicurean-perspective/?postID=24632#post24632>

My question to myself was "How would Epicurus have viewed or interpreted the maxims?" They were basically "common knowledge" by his time (and beyond). However, would he have seen them as part of παιδεία - the acculturation or indoctrination he urged one to escape - or would he have reinterpreted them in light of his philosophy?

Here's my attempt at reinterpretation:

Here's the three:

Γνώθι σεαυτόν "Know thyself"

Μηδὲν ἄγαν "Nothing too much"

Ἐγγύα πάρα δ' ἄτα "Give a pledge and trouble is at hand"

Γνώθι σεαυτόν "Know thyself"

This one is easy, in my opinion. Epicurus taught his students to use their feelings of pleasure and pain to guide their choices. We need to assess consequences that our choices may have on us. How else is one to do this than to know yourself, know how you react in situations, pay attention to what you're really feeling, and so on. I see no real trouble in accepting "Know thyself" in an Epicurean context.

Μηδὲν ἄγαν "Nothing too much"

I also think this maxim *can* be incorporated into an Epicurean context, but carefully. Epicurus constantly wrote about limits and that we should pay attention to them. He did not advocate mediocrity or asceticism but did talk about choosing the "best" as opposed to the "most." "Nothing too much" seems a better interpretation/translation than "Everything in moderation." The maxim is negative (nothing) not positive (everything).

Ἐγγύα πάρα δ' ἄτα "Give a pledge and trouble is at hand"

I've seen this referred to as the forgotten maxim as well as it having multiple translations due to the ambiguity of ἐγγύα. Various meanings are:

"pledge, surety, security, whether received or given; betrothal, contract for a future marriage." The idea seems to be making an obligation to another person, being required to do something. To me, this hints at Epicurus's aversion to necessity. We are not - and should not - be bound by necessity when it is possible to make a decision not to be subject to necessity: κακὸν ἀνάγκη, ἀλλ' οὐδεμία ἀνάγκη ζῆν μετὰ ἀνάγκης. "Being constrained in our choices is bad, but we are not constrained to live constrained in our choices." (my translation of VS9) If we want to help a friend, our friend should be safe in the knowledge that we would help them. No pledges or surety required.

Those are some thoughts off the top of my head. I'd be curious to hear others' thoughts on these or any of those 147 maxims from the "Seven Sages" (see the Wikipedia link above)