

Did Epicurus Advise Marriage or Not? Diogenes Laertius Text Difficulty

Post by “Joshua” of October 29, 2024 at 6:33 PM

Quote

The error here is the original translators' rendering of the first three words of this sentence. Some render μηδὲ, which is very clearly the oppositional word "not", whereas others render μέν, which is not oppositional and may just be reinforcing the καί

It's been a while since I looked into this, but here is the English text in the Yonge translation;

Quote

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 most common phrasing in this passage is "nor will the wise man...". The few sentences that don't start with nor instead start with 'also', 'however', or 'still', which seems to indicate that this is principally a list of what the wise man *will not do*, with the few exceptions marked off as such.

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Some render μηδὲ, which is very clearly the oppositional word "not", whereas others render μέν, which is not oppositional and may just be reinforcing the καί. This is the difference between "and will not marry" versus "and also will marry". This is a rather significant contention.

I suspect that it won't be sufficient to examine only the sentence under consideration, where the preceding and following sentences might contribute to a proper reading of the conjunctions.

That being said, the Greeks got a whole hell of a lot of mileage out of that one word καί. It's certainly beyond my powers to parse!