

Epicurus' teaching on marriage

Post by "Joshua" of August 25, 2019 at 11:33 PM

Good evening! I read your post earlier in the day, but had not the time to respond properly.

First, to begin with the Greek. The translations seem not to disagree, really, but the lack of clarity comes from the original language (which is highly unusual; Greek is an excellent language for drawing clear distinctions, and derives subtlety from a massive lexicon, which is why Lucretius laments the poverty of Latin.)

But in this passage, the Greek problem of conjunctions is a real stumbling-block. Here's the relevant clause (no accent marks);

Quote

και μηδε και γαμησειν και τεκνοποιησειν τον σοφον...

The words και and μηδε are conjunctions. If you're counting, that's *half of the words!* here's the problem; Ancient Greek uses και indiscriminately. It can mean *and, but, nor, or, either, or neither*. Which variation is meant depends on context.

In this case, we have three important context clues. First is the word μηδε; it provides the negative. So the words και μηδε here mean something like *and nor*. Following this reading, the second και most sensibly means *either*. The third και then means *or*. So a literal word for word transliteration would run something like this;

Quote

And | nor | either | will marry | or | will bear children | the | sage

The second clue is the preceding paragraph, where Diogenes is listing other things a wise man shouldn't do. This item is clearly meant to add to that list.

The third context clue is the sentence that follows. This is the sentence that mentions 'occasional circumstances' when marriage might be advisable. This sentence qualifies the clause we've been looking at, and it lacks a negative. Which is good, because the sentence it qualifies already has a negative!

My (amateur) conclusion is that the Hicks translation in the Loeb edition is accurate;

Quote

Nor, again, will the wise man marry and rear a family...Occasionally he may marry owing to special circumstances in his life.

Thanks to the Perseus Project for that bit of pencil-work. My own reply to follow...