

Epicurus' teaching on marriage

Post by "Joshua" of August 26, 2019 at 12:54 AM

So regardless which translation one favors, there are said to be occasions when it is proper for the wise to marry, and occasions when it is proper for the wise *not* to marry. As I said above, I personally think the caution is *against* marriage and child-rearing in general.

Here's a few reasons why that might be the case--that is, why marriage and child-rearing might threaten the hedonic calculus.

It Changes Friendship from a Virtue to an Obligation

Friendship is great! The more we share it, the better it becomes. It's a hedonist's force multiplier, and you can't really have too much of it. Marriage, on the other hand, is structurally disposed toward jealousy and possessiveness. Not all marriages will succumb! But by laying claim to a person, we instantly invite suspicion towards others who share their time. Moreover, a marriage entails responsibilities that friendships don't have. Sure, marriages are enriched by joys like sex, financial stability and domestic teamwork in compensation, but by complicating the friendship in these ways we invite a huge liability exposure. Their debt is your debt. Their sickness is yours to tend. Their mistakes are yours to correct.

Grief was the Historical Norm

Nowadays children are likely to outlive their parents. This is as it should be! But historically this has not been so reliable. How many Greek sons did Alexander the Great send to their graves? How many orphans did he make? How many widows? How many plagues, shipwrecks, murders, arsons, etc. did 4th Century BC Athens endure? It was Tennyson, in his great elegy for a deceased friend, who concluded that "t'was better to have loved and lost/ then never to have loved at all". But this could not stop his long-protracted grief.

Greek Inheritance Law Caused a lot of Problems

The Greeks were a liberal (in the classical sense) and forward-thinking society. Unlike Medieval Europe, where primogeniture was the order of the day, and the first son inherited the title and estate, the Greeks divided their inheritance among all their children. Unfortunately they did this literally; the land was parceled out into smaller units generation after generation. The same problem is currently plaguing America's Native American Reservations, where the parcels become too small to use and exacerbate existing poverty.

The Greeks took a novel approach to this problem; every so often, the city-state would buy out the peasants and ship them off to a distant coastline. This they ambitiously called *Colonization*. The family of Neocles were of such a kind; their ancestors bundled up and sent from Athens to

Samos. Sometime later (while Epicurus served his mandatory military duty) they were bundled up again and sent to Lampsacus. A family man had a much harder time of it.

When Marriage Goes Bad, it Goes *Really* Bad

I've seen one sibling through a divorce. Another is going through one now. Their gender and personality are very different, but it has affected both of them the same. It's been awful. The constant stress, the uncertainty, the sense of loss, shame, depression, and failure...it all really piles on. They both lost weight to an unhealthy degree. They had no stomach for food--for weeks, and months! They lost friends. They struggled to keep the plates wobbling at work. It's an ugly, painful process.

But Sometimes it's Great!

My parents are still together after 30+ years. They are still each the others' best friend, and most reliable support system.

Conclusion

What it really comes down to for the Epicurean sage is this; "Do not spoil what you have by yearning for what you have not." I already know that I'm capable of living a happy, blessed life while single. Marriage...well, it's a huge risk. I'm not saying don't take it! But walk in with eyes wide open.

At my brother's wedding and after my sister was already engaged, my father asked me if the occasion was "giving me any ideas". After witnessing two nasty divorces, the philosopher in me is getting closer to an answer.