

Epicurus' teaching on marriage

Post by "Dubitator314" of August 25, 2019 at 2:07 PM

I'm traveling and don't have sources handy, but I have a quick question involving marriage. I've read that the passage in Diogenes Laertius is mistranslated and should read that the wise man will marry and have children. However, if we accept that, how do we explain the criticism of the schools that preceded Diogenes who criticized the supposed Epicurean teaching that the wise man will not marry and have children (except under special circumstances)?

Thanks.

Post by "Cassius" of August 25, 2019 at 3:17 PM

I would lump those into the same category as the people who said that Epicureans should avoid all politics, or that Epicureans should avoid all education, or that Epicureans should avoid all science and mathematics. The response to that given in *A Few Days In Athens* seems correct to me. And I would cite to the example in his will where Epicurus provided for the marriage of Metrodorus' daughters.

The bottom line is I would say it is a combination of (1) disinformation by enemies, based on (2) a grain of truth, which is that marriage is a very difficult-to-predict proposition where the benefits are great along with the peril of not choosing wisely.

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...

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.

Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2019 at 4:17 AM

Joshua your deep dive into the words reminds me that it is not clear to me whether Epicurus is referring here to a philosophic leader of a school, like himself, or to a more or less average person who, while wise, has not set out on a course of leading a school. I could easily imagine that the advice would differ according to these categories. Marriage might be fully appropriate for Metrodorus' daughters while not appropriate for someone dedicating them to leading a philosophic movement.

Consistent with the premises of the philosophy it is probably a guaranteed error to ever conclude that there is a "one size fits all" rule in any area of life. Only feeling itself - pleasure and pain - are entitled to the role of providing an ultimate standard - all else is contextual in support of the ultimate goal.

Post by "Dubitator314" of August 26, 2019 at 7:32 AM

Thanks for the responses.

With respect to the quotes, my knowledge of Greek is much less than a layman's (armchair student?). Be that as it may, from the articles I've read, I did feel that the conclusion you reached seemed like the most plausible one. It also provides some fuel for the critics, e.g., Epictetus, to use in their attacks against Epicurus.

I also didn't think how the culture of his time might have led to that view in a way, or at least with less force, than he might have had in our culture. I thought along those lines with respect to his admonition to avoid the public life due to the chaotic times after the death of Alexander the Great, but I also never thought of applying it with respect to the institution of marriage.

Post by "Cassius" of August 26, 2019 at 7:46 AM

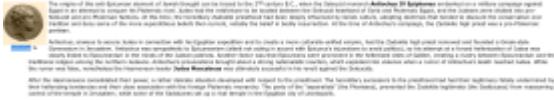
[Quote from Dubitator314](#)

I thought along those lines with respect to his admonition to avoid the public life due to the chaotic times after the death of Alexander the Great,

I think this, along with all the "crisis of confidence" generalizations about this period of Greek history, is part of the popular modern mythology that is incorrect, at least as it applies to Epicurus. There were Epicureans involved in court government (in that of Antiochus Epiphanes, for example) and there are the well known examples of Cassius Longinus personally and other Epicureans with the camps of the Roman civil war (Horace). Those men had full access to all Epicurean teachings and were by all account confirmed in their Epicurean beliefs, and they were in the center of public controversies.

As with the question that started the thread, the question is one of context, and in my view an Epicurean who sees it in his or her interest to do so can be just as involved in political affairs as anyone else. Of course if someone wants to look at this from the Stoic perspective of devoting oneself to "public service" or "the good of the state" and wants everyone to be a good political drone, they are going to look at Epicurus and be disappointed.

Even [this clip from Epicurus.net](#), while citing the example of Antiochus Epiphanes' court, wants to take the position that we today better understand Epicurus than those who lived and breathed the authentic ancient tradition.



Post by “Dubitator314” of August 26, 2019 at 7:56 AM

I understand there were Epicureans who did take an active role in politics, but does that mean that Epicurus would have approved of it, especially if they did so during the period immediately following the death of Alexander?

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2019 at 8:25 AM

My view on that, Dubitator, is on several levels:

I first ask myself - Who is likely to understand Epicurus better? We today who have only fragments plus a huge assortment of negative commentary from opposing schools? Or ancients who had full access to texts and living, competent, Epicurean teachers in the direct line of the Epicurean school? To me that answer is clear.

I next ask myself - What is more consistent with the basic Epicurean view of the universe? If this life we have is the only one we will ever have, does it not make the most sense to live this life to the fullest? Would any sane person knowing that this is his only opportunity for pleasure willingly sacrifice himself to oppression when alternatives are available? To me that answer is clear too.

And I also ask myself - When there are alternative ways of interpreting the existing texts, why would one not interpret them consistently with the examples from the past and the Epicurean view of the universe? The passivist/quietist viewpoint can certainly be supported by taking some texts and elevating them outside of their original context. But the full context of all Epicurus' writings makes clear that "pleasure" and not quietism or even tranquillity is the goal. It is only by adopting a non-intuitive definition of "pleasure" that people can say with a straight face that Epicurus advocated tranquillity as the goal of life when he was also saying that ***“I know not how to conceive the good, apart from the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form.”***

Again citing back to your original question, I myself conclude that in an atomistic universe where there are no absolute guideposts but only contextual pleasure and pain, no position can be construed to be consistent with that starting point which attempts to assert ANY absolute guideline but looking to the ultimate result of the action and judging it in terms of pleasure and pain. That is what Epicurus said over and over and that is what makes sense based on his starting point.

And Epicurus also said over and over that [death is nothing to us](#) because it is the absence of feeling. The logical implication of that is that life is all about feeling, and that means feeling the rewards of pleasure and the negative aspects of pain. "Feeling" is something we all understand, just like all young animals do before they are perverted -- I am of course citing here from the opening of the Torquatus narrative of "On Ends." There is no way in my mind that feeling - based on the bedrock of sensation which is again stressed over and over - can be reasonably mutated into quietism / passivism / meditation-above-all-things.

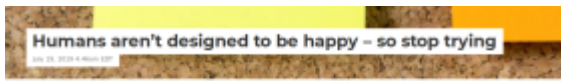
And to close this particular post I would cite Torquatus' question that describes the ultimate life. This is not a life of withdrawal and resignation but one of active pleasure:

The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

I have collected cites that support this argument in this article: [The Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure Model](#)

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2019 at 8:32 AM

I just happened to come across this following link in my morning reading due to a link from Elayne:



A huge happiness and positive thinking industry, estimated to be worth US\$1 billion a year, has helped to create the fantasy that happiness is a realistic goal. Chasing the happiness dream is a very American concept, exported to the rest of the world through popular culture. Indeed, "the pursuit of happiness" is one of the USA's "unalienable rights". Unfortunately, this has helped to create an expectation that real life unashamedly refuses to deliver.

<https://theconversation.com/humans-arent-d...p-trying-119262>

I cite it here because I believe THIS is the real issue we are discussing here. We are discussing a conflict between basic views of life in which one side is arguing that there are no gods and no ideal forms, and the in fact only the feeling of pleasure is given us by nature for purposes of us learning to live happy life. The other side, exemplified by Stoicism but also by most of the rest of Greek and non-Greek religion and philosophy, rejects happiness as the goal and asserts something else. They aren't any smarter than you or anyone else is -- they just want you to "stop trying." Sheep who "stop trying" are much easier to slaughter.

The redefinition of "pleasure" as "tranquillity" is in my mind just another arrow in the quiver of opponents of Epicurus. The world is full of ascetics preaching resignation and withdrawal and the impossibility of happiness. I don't believe Epicurus would ever have emerged from all that muck to make the mark that he did if in fact he did not rebel against every single bit of that.

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2019 at 4:56 PM

Dubitator I have one more recommendation on this issue. Probably the best academic presentation of the views I am advocating is contained in Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks On Pleasure." Here are two clips that summarize their view:

19.0.4. The kind of view we wish to oppose holds that it was an important feature of Epicureanism to insist on dividing pleasures into two sorts, sensory ones on the one hand, and katastematic ones, of which lack of disturbance of mind (*ataraxia*) and lack of pain (*aponia*) are the important examples, on the other. The distinction was important to Epicurus because it was the latter which he wished to put forward as the good in life, and he needed the contrast in order to defend himself against the charge that he was advocating a life of debauchery. He can be seen doing this in the *Letter to Menoeceus* (DL X.131-2) where he says that when we call pleasure the goal we do not mean the pleasures of profligates, but to be without pain of body or distress of mind. The pleasures of profligates are obviously the sensory pleasures, and Epicurus is making it clear that he is putting forward something else as our goal. There are four objections which such views have to meet (see 19.0.6-9).

graph, and follow

And here is their positive statement of the correct construction of what Epicurus taught:

aponia and ataraxia whereby aponia is a condition of having sensory pleasures but with no accompanying pain, and ataraxia is a state of confidence that one may acquire such sensory pleasures with complete absence of pain. This confidence is itself a positive state. However unadulterated by pain one's sensory pleasures may be, one's pleasure is all too likely to be spoiled by various misapprehensions. These will be false beliefs about death, about the gods, about fancy diet, about the limits of bodily pleasure, about the desirability of long life and so on. These erroneous beliefs disturb the mind (cf. *PD* 10-12, 18-22) and their removal is required for *ataraxia* (cf. passages just referred to and also *DL* X.81-2, 124-6, 130-2). But for *ataraxia* more than the absence of false beliefs is needed: they have to be replaced by true ones. It is these that give confident expectation of a pleasant life, and so constitute the removal of anxiety. In short, those ancient critics who complained that Epicurus laid great emphasis on bodily pleasures would on this view be right: what is important is to get a life of sensory pleasure un-
tainted by pain; ataraxia is itself geared to aponia, and joy of mind generally is a matter of memory and expectation of unadulterated pleasure, based on true belief. The objection to the pleasures of profligates (*DL* X.131-2) and perhaps the only objection Epicurus has (cf. *PD* 10), is that they fail to remove anxiety. The point with profligates is, presumably, that they erroneously believe fine food to be necessary, fail to see when desire is satisfied, and so pursue their objectives to the point of consequent distress, and so foolishly fear, as threats to their good, things which should not be feared.

The [full chapter can be read here](#).

Post by “Dubitator314” of August 27, 2019 at 12:14 AM

Thanks a lot for taking the time to provide the extra sources. I read it quickly as I'm in the field this week working long hours. I'll ponder it further when I get back. It is an interesting perspective that I haven't encountered before.

Post by "Cassius" of August 27, 2019 at 4:48 AM

It may be of help for me to say that I do not perceive this to be a view I have personally developed myself. I don't claim any creativity on my own. I attribute the line of thought mainly to Norman DeWitt having started in the 30's his "Epicurus and His Philosophy" (where he himself gives credit to some non-English works). Then the line is developed in Gosling & Taylor's more recent "The Greeks on Pleasure," to which Boris [Nikolsky](#) gives credit in his article "Epicurus on Pleasure" which alleges that the katastematic/kinetic distinction is not even Epicurean at all. The same conclusions are reached from a somewhat other direction in Wenham's article "On Cicero's Interpretation of Katastematic Pleasure in Epicurus." And to a lesser extent similar views are implicit or explicit in Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens" as endorsed by Thomas Jefferson. All of these are linked at various places here on the forum but if you have any trouble finding them I can provide direct links in this thread.

The problem I see over and over is that people who start their education in Epicurus with Okeefe or many of the internet articles or frankly almost any of the British authorities (I exempt Sedley from this). Those who read that group naturally end up obsessing on the contention that "pleasure doesn't mean pleasure but katastemic pleasure / absence of pain," which I think is close to the root of the problem. Going off in that direction most of that group then give slight attention to the physics and the epistemology, which would have made their error impossible if they had started off with those, as does Lucretius.

Had I not started my study of Epicurus with Norman Dewitt when I started ten years ago, I would have given up on Epicurus as a hopeless ascetic/quietist almost immediately. I think this line of thought best represent what the ancient Greeks and Romans saw in Epicurus, and explains why it became so popular in the ancient world. On the contrary its the emergence of the "modern" academic consensus following Cicero rather than correct Epicurean principles that explains why Epicurean interest has been in the doldrums for many many years. And to paint with a very broad brush, I sense that the problem has been developed and located geographically more in Britain, where Stoicism seems to be in the water, than anywhere else.