

The Wise Man Will Marry and Have Children ... According To The Circumstances of His Life

Post by "Cassius" of October 28, 2019 at 9:18 AM

Cyril Bailey: [Epicurus the Extant Remains](#)

VI. LIFE OF EPICURUS

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Sexual intercourse, they say, has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him.

119 Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the *Problems* and in the work on *Nature*. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life. He will feel shame in the presence of some persons, and certainly will not insult them in his cups, so Epicurus says in the *Symposium*. Nor will he take part in public

Post by "michelepinto" of October 28, 2019 at 10:12 AM

I have never seen this before. Tel me more, please!

Post by "Cassius" of October 28, 2019 at 10:31 AM

I wish I had more to give! 😊

Michele [here is a post I made about this issue in 2011](#) with the following being the core part on this discrepancy (pasting from the earlier post).

Here is how I concluded at the time that Bailey (and the others listed here) are correct - that Epicurus DID advise marriage and children, but (like everything else) according to circumstances:

As I have discussed in earlier posts, there is a maddening discrepancy in the various translations of Diogenes Laertius in the crucial "Wise Man" sequence. CD Yonge's 1853 translation reports that Epicurus thought marriage to be a bad idea: "Marriage, they say, 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 down in his *Doubts* and in his treatises on *Nature*. Still, under certain circumstances in his life he will forsake these rules and marry."

The Loeb Classical Library version of the R.D. Hicks translation, which dates from 1931, concurs: "Nor, again, will the wise man marry and rear a family: so Epicurus says in the *Problems* and in the *De Natura*. Occasionally he may marry due to special circumstances in his life."

But Cyril Bailey in his 1926 translation says the opposite: "Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the *Problems* and in the work *On Nature*. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life."

[Selection 121](#) or type unknown

The more modern Epicurus Reader translation by Inwood and Gerson agrees with Bailey: "And

public speaker. "Sexual intercourse", they say, "never helped anyone, and one must be satisfied if it has not harmed."

119. And indeed the wise man will marry and father children, as Epicurus says in his *Problems* and in the *On Nature*. But he will marry [only] when it is indicated by the circumstances of his life at a given time. And some will be diverted from this. Nor indeed will he rant and rave while under the influence of drink, as Epicurus says in his *Symposium*. Nor will

The 1963 text by George Strodach endorses the same view: "In addition, the wise man will marry and beget children.... but he will marry according to his station in life, whatever it may be."

12. In addition, the wise man will **marry** and (119) beget children, as Epicurus tells us in *Problems* and his work *On Nature*; but he will marry according to his station in life, whatever it may be.

In my view, this question is best answered by the observation that Epicurus himself provided in his last will and testament that the child of his valued student Metrodorus be married off **to an Epicurean** when she came of age. As Yonge translates: "In the same way also, they [Amynomachus and Timocrates] shall be the guardians of the daughter of Metrodorus, and when she is of marriageable age, they shall give her to whomsoever Hermarchus shall select of his companions in philosophy, provided she is well behaved and obedient to Hermarchus."

It seems clear to me, therefore, that Epicurus held that marriage and child-bearing are natural, proper, and beneficial activities in which to engage, **so long as partners are properly educated in and devoted to Epicurean principles of living.**

It seems to me that this conclusion is also a logical extension of the very clear Epicurean principle that "friendship" is central to living a happy life. As Cicero wrote in "On Ends," Epicurus "pronounced in regard to friendship that of all the means to happiness that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none is more fruitful, none is more delightful than friendship." A happy marriage to one who is not only one's mate but also one's best friend would certainly seem to be a logical application of this principle.

We do, however, also have to consider the very strong cautions that abound in Epicurean literature against taking an unrealistic attitude toward romantic love. In addition to the admonitions stated in the Wise Man section cited above, there is the famous Vatican Saying 51, which contains what is widely regarded to be Epicurus' advice to a young man: "You tell me that the stimulus of the flesh makes you too prone to the pleasures of love. Provided that you do not break the laws or good customs and do not distress any of your neighbors or do harm to your body or squander your pittance, you may indulge your inclination as you please. Yet it is impossible not to come up against one or other of these barriers, *for the pleasures of love never profited a man and he is lucky if they do him no harm.*"

And again from Cicero's *On Ends*, we see the Epicurean advocate listing those who are "enslaved to the follies of love" as among those men whose failings "render their lives one unbroken round of misery."

And perhaps most famously of all, we have the long dissertation of Lucretius at the end of Book IV, which reminds us that the intense emotions involved in romantic love are ultimately derived from Nature's call to procreation, and that the intensity of the emotion must be kept under control if we are to live happy lives and escape misery. Lucretius abounds with practical advice in this department, reminding us to keep our emotions under control, and that we can escape the mischief of unhappy romance if we do not stand in our own way: "And yet even when you

are entangled and held fast, you may still escape the mischief, unless you stand in your own way and overlook all the defects of the mind and body of the person you woo. But men often do this, blinded by passion, and they attribute to the beloved advantages which are not really theirs.”

Now let us turn back to the present and to our own lives. I would be fascinated to know how many readers of the NewEpicurean blog, or any of the various Epicurus facebook pages, have been successful in finding mates who share some or most of their Epicurean viewpoints. It is certainly possible to live a happy and fulfilling life without an Epicurean romantic partner, and I can imagine few things worse than feeling trapped in a marriage where one’s mate fails to understand, or even actively deprecates, the insights of Epicurus. But in the world we live in today, it unfortunately seems that the best most students of Epicurus can realistically hope for is to find a mate who shares what some might call a basic “sense of life” compatible with Epicureanism — but even that goal will not be reachable for some, and others will not find it satisfactory.

Post by “Joshua” of October 28, 2019 at 2:40 PM

I laid out my interpretation of this passage at length in a previous thread, which I suppose I can summarize quickly;

1. The confusion stems from the system of Greek conjunctions.
2. Whichever translation you choose, the meaning doesn't really change; whether or not the wise should marry is contingent on circumstances.

Post by “Cassius” of October 28, 2019 at 3:47 PM

Joshua if you recall the thread at some point and could link it here I would appreciate it. Also, I presume you are correct, not knowing anything about Greek myself, but what do you think accounts for otherwise reputable translators deciding (at times) to make it seem clearly negative, as if marriage is never advised?

This conversation was extended further at FB by Shahob citing this:

"Interesting... According to Eric Brown, "He also counsels against contributing to the 'polis' by starting a family; marriage and children are too much trouble."

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To which I Cassius responded:

Thanks for pasting that reference, Shahab. I know nothing about Eric Brown, but I have a feeling that people frequently read into Epicurus what they *wish* to read into him. For example in that comment is the editorial addition "against contributing to the polis..." I see no reference whatsoever to that angle in the DL quotes, and that sounds like someone who is focused on the politics of child-raising and the state. And did he cite both sides of the textual issues he referenced? Or say why he comes down against Bailey and Strodach, two highly respected commentators? And even the "too much trouble" gives off an air of flippancy where none is indicated in the texts.

I don't think issues like this are small, either. This excerpt rings to me as a good example of someone who uses Epicurus to grind their own axe, rather than looking to apply a comprehensive understanding of the big picture in a way someone sympathetic to Epicurus (someone like DeWitt) would do.

For perspective on Mr. Brown's views, here are some of his viewpoints taken today from his website. <https://pages.wustl.edu/ericbrown/research>

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Even more revealing is this. With "friends" like these, Epicurus hardly needs enemies:

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Post by "Joshua" of October 28, 2019 at 10:05 PM

Well my own leaning here, Cassius, is that the negative formulation ("will not marry [...] unless [...]") is more close tonally to what Epicurus probably did mean. Whether this applies to a 'sage' or to everyone is to me the more difficult question. It's true that Metrodorus married; but it's also true that neither Hermarchus nor Epicurus himself are known to have done so.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1245-the-wise-man-will-marry-and-have-children-according-to-the-circumstances-of-his/>

I'm on the outside looking in with this question, but it seems to me that child-rearing in particular may be a profound pleasure—but it can also be a doorway to the deepest and blackest grief imaginable. Well, it would be unpleasant to dwell on such a point...

If I were scanning my own heart, and found there love and a desire to marry, I would wade with all my senses into the restless erotic energy of the *Hymn to Venus*, and hear from far centuries the echo of my own trembling soul. *Cor Cordium*; heart of hearts—what could even the very wisest have to tell me about that? And if I stop to wait for that counsel—am I even worthy?

Upon her breast repose came dropping sweet—

Her heart's rumor, her breath in swelling waves—

Ah! And her eyes—brown, deeper than the peat

That numbs my tongue¹, and lies on poets' graves.

¹(...yes. I used to drink Scotch and write bad love-poetry 😊)

Post by “Godfrey” of October 28, 2019 at 10:35 PM

Child rearing (and old age, I'm told) is not for the faint of heart. There are profound pleasures, but whoever first said that you're only as happy as your unhappiest child was quite right.

Then again, life isn't for the faint of heart! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 29, 2019 at 1:32 AM

"Whether this applies to a 'sage' or to everyone is to me the more difficult question".

I definitely agree with you there, Joshua.

And as Godfrey says, life itself is not for the faint of heart.

Another question I would throw into the mix is whether there have been major changes in family relationships that color our modern attitude. I gather that in ancient world the role of parents was much less "permissive " than today.

But the main issue for me is that with so much emphasis in places like Lucretius on observing how pleasure leads all animals to continue their kind, I cannot see Epicurus exempting humans, even "sages" (a concept itself which may be questionable from an Epicurean viewpoint - is that supposed to be someone who pursues wisdom instead of pleasure?) from the same natural order.