

Characteristics of an Epicurean Sage: A New Translation

Post by “Don” of June 5, 2020 at 9:04 AM

For anyone interested, I've put together [a website with all my notes and research along with the translation below](#). That's the page to go to for updates and additional edits on this work.

My goal in this translation was to be as literal as possible to preserve the flavor of the original lines. As Diogenes Laertius seemed to pull from disparate sources, have no real organization, and potentially had his writings rearranged by subsequent transcribers anyway, I felt at liberty to rearrange them again into thematic sections with headings. I think my favorite linguistic discovery was the single word *φιλαγρήσειν* which in one word connotes a love of the countryside and fields away from the cities and towns.

See notes below for additional commentary. Numbers in (x) are to sections in Diogenes Laertius, Book X. I hope at some point to be able to clean-up my approximately 20 pages of notes, background material, comparative translations, and research. Until then, I hope you take pleasure in reading this new take on this excerpt from Diogenes.

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The Path to Wisdom

One sage is not wiser than another, (120) and a sage will be grateful to anyone who corrects them (120) since Epicureans believe that not all errors are equal. (120) The sage will not be subject to fate or necessity (120) and will be the same person whether awake or asleep.* (120) Additionally, once the sage has become wise, they will no longer fall back into ignorance but can be exceedingly affected by the emotions (and will feel grief (119)) although this will not be a hindrance in their progress toward wisdom. (117) The sage will also enjoy themselves more than others in contemplation, speculation, and theorizing,** (120) and will declare their beliefs and not remain in doubt about them. (120) However, in the end, not every bodily constitution nor every nationality will permit someone to become a sage. (117)

Eudaimonia

The wise one will have a sense of fulfillment (eudaimonia) even on the rack, although they will moan and wail when tortured. (118) Epicureans believe there are two kinds of eudaimonia (fulfillment or happiness): the highest happiness such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be increased; and the kind that allows for the addition and subtraction of pleasures. (121)

Friendship

The Epicureans say that friendship is based on our needs. It has to be initiated, of course, just

as we have to plant a seed in the earth; but it is maintained by a shared enjoyment of life's pleasures. (120) The wise one alone knows how to feel gratitude toward their friends, both those present and those at a distance. (118) In fact, the sage will never betray a friend (120) and will be willing to die on behalf of a friend. (120) However, the Epicureans also believe that courage and bravery do not come naturally but come by reasoning which course of action incurs a benefit or is most useful. (120)

Sexual Relationships (see note below)

The wise one will not establish a sexual relationship in a way that is against the law or forbidden by custom. Epicureans generally think that the sage will never succumb to lustful desire or be overwhelmed by sexual passions. According to the school, sexual passion is not sent by any supernatural force.*** They say that having sex like animals never did anyone any good, and people should be content if it does no harm. Epicurus also said that the wise one will not marry nor raise a family (and talked about the pains involved with that life); however, under certain circumstances, the wise one will forsake these rules and decide to marry. (118, 119)

Earning a Living

If in need, the wise one will earn money, but only by their wisdom, even on occasion being in the service of a king. (120) The sage will take care of their property and provide for the future. (120) The wise one will not treat their household slaves**** harshly but rather show kindness, encourage them, and reward those of good character. (118)

Living Unknown (see note below)

The wise one will not make fine speeches, (118) but will only give public readings upon request. (120) The wise one will not get caught up in political offices nor strive to be an absolute ruler, the ultimate political office. (119) Nor will they be a Cynic nor a beggar*****. (119) Nor will the wise one be anxious about their burial (118). Additionally, the wise one will set up statues but will be indifferent to ones being set up in their honor. (120) The sage will leave behind writings like prose works, treatises, and written speeches, but will not make celebratory speeches in the public assemblies. (120) The sage will be fond of the countryside, enjoying being outside the towns and cities. (120) The wise one will also pay just enough attention to their reputation as to avoid being looked down upon. (120) Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly. (119) Only the wise man will be competent to discuss music and poetry without writing poems of their own. (120) The sage will found a school, but not in a way that attracts a crowd around themselves or plays to the mob. (120)

Health

One's health in some instances is a good, at others times it doesn't matter. (120) Even if the wise one loses their sight, they will not withdraw into themselves and avoid living their life. (119)

Injuries and Justice

Epicurus said that hatred, jealousy, and contempt are the motives behind the injuries that

people cause each other, and that the wise one can overcome all of these by their power of reason. (117) However, the Epicurean sage will be willing to seek justice in court when necessary. (119)

Notes

*the definition of the original Greek, to me, implies this is because the sage is "untroubled by dreams or thoughts of death or predictions of the future."

**Most translations place "enjoy themselves at public spectacles" here, but the Greek word used here, θεωρία, was used throughout the original text and other texts (including by Aristotle, Philodemus, and Epicurus himself) in the sense used here. Yonge also uses "speculations" in his translation.

***which could mean they believe people are responsible for their actions in this regard.

****"Household slaves" would, of course, have to be updated to employees or staff if this characteristic was modernized. I leave it here to not obfuscate the meaning of the Greek.

*****My theory for why these are linked in the original - and why I'm including them in this section - is that Cynics and beggars both live on the street, call attention to themselves by virtue of this, and, in the case of the former, accost people with their philosophy (e.g., Diogenes and his lantern, living in a wine jar in public, etc.). Additionally, the life of a Cynic or beggar is not safe or secure which is not a life advocated by the Epicureans.

Sexual Relationships: I have tried to use the most literal translations of the Greek words here for more impact. Some translations use "marriage" or "fall in love" for words in the original that are more raw or carnal. Eros is about sexual desire and even lust. That gets lost, in my opinion, when trying to soften the meanings.

Living Unknown: The Epicureans are said to have encouraged *lathe biosas*, living unknown or not calling attention to themselves. This is a controversial fragment, but Diogenes Laertius compiled several characteristics of the sage that, from my perspective, could arguably connect to this idea so that's the reason for my decision to include this as a section.

Post by "Cassius" of June 5, 2020 at 9:13 AM

Thank you Don!

Post by "Godfrey" of June 5, 2020 at 6:51 PM

Nice work Don!

I especially like "*Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly.*" Also the section on health seems to fit with what is known of Epicurus.

Post by "A_Gardner" of June 5, 2020 at 8:14 PM

Thank you Don for your work. This is a wonderful and applicable translation!

Post by "Don" of June 5, 2020 at 8:51 PM

For anyone interested, I've put together a quick website today with all my notes and research:

<https://sites.google.com/view/epicureansage/>

Post by "Cassius" of June 5, 2020 at 9:15 PM

Wow that looks great! I took a quick look at google sites and that looks to be a good resource. Looks easy to use and the results no doubt look great.