

Should An Epicurean Marry?

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2018 at 7:59 AM

One of the most troublesome translation issues is the passage in Diogenes Laertius in which Epicurus either advises "for" or "against" marriage, depending on the translator.

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.”

Is Bailey leading us into a trap with a problem translation? Or in this case does Bailey have the better view? We know that Epicurus provided in his will for the marriage of Metrodorus daughter, so I tend to think in this case Bailey is correct. I posted about this previously [here](#).

Post by “jbaker” of January 26, 2018 at 11:33 AM

I prefer Bailey's translation here too but then again, he's also the source of the troublesome translation of PD 6. Why did he make the decisions he made? Once things settle down in Santa Barbara, my Classicist friend has a workprint edition she's going to scan some pages from for me.

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2018 at 11:56 AM

It seems almost certain that this is going to be another case where we start with the general rule (that there IS no absolute rule that applies to everyone) and then analyse this as a case of particular importance because of the amount of pain and pleasure that can come from it. Surely it (hyper-romanticized love, anyway) also fits in a category such as "intoxication" which is often, but not always presumably, going to be a bad idea. But "marriage" doesn't have to be based on intoxication, and we'd have to know tons of variables to reach a specific conclusion in a particular case.

And we KNOW that Epicurus directed in his will that Metrodorus' daughter be married - there is even an academic article citing that point somewhere. So in this case it might be that all of them are erring in not making it clear that this too is a generalization rather than a rule. I would think that if possible to a good match, Epicurus would say that it is desirable, but to be cautious because of the risk.

Same thing with children, which might be even riskier, but has great rewards if done right. Probably need a separate thread on that at some point - years ago there was a long discussion of the relative merits and demerits of "childlessness"

Post by "brett" of January 26, 2018 at 9:13 PM

I also think that the principle of seeking friendships for pleasure and security applies. If you have a lifelong relationship that brings you pleasure AND security (worthy of debating the different interpretations of secure), it seems marriage is a boon. Some marriages, either due to individual constitutions, choices, or circumstances (or a combination of these) are more pain than pleasure.

For me, my 16 year relationship is the highlight of my life and it's brought me FAR more pleasure than pain. Sure, I forgo the short-term pleasure of casual sex with others whom I find attractive, but that is far far outweighed by the benefits (since my wife has started managing our 401k and retirement, the goal of financial security is in sight!).

I'd be VERY interested to see how the textual criticism angle plays out. Seems Bailey has his issues so curious the choice he made in translation.

Post by "Cassius" of January 27, 2018 at 2:21 AM

will cause no pain or grief, it is desirable. For the Epicureans “say that having sex never benefits, but it *is* desirable, provided that it does no harm.”⁵³ Sex is never advantageous, according to Epicurus, because it rids us of no pain; the desire for sex, then, is, at best, merely natural. But it is that. And hence sex is “worth pursuing,” even if it merely varies the katastematic pleasure of painlessness. For it feels good. Indeed, as I explained earlier, the kinetic pleasure of the body is the *only* thing which feels good. And feeling, according to Epicurus, is the criterion of goodness,

ery unhelpful, but

⁵³ Hermias, *In Platonis Phaedrum* 76 (= U. 483).

⁵⁴ For fancy food as providing variation, cf. Hermarchus *apud* Porphyry, *De Abstinencia* 1.51 (= U. 464): eating meat “contributes to variation of pleasures, as does sex or drinking foreign wine.”

⁵⁵ D.L. 10.118: συνουσίαν δὲ φασιν ὀνήσαι μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἀγαπητὸν δὲ εἰ μὴ ἔβλαψε. The second half of this sentence is usually translated as though Epicurus were saying of sex that “one should be content if it does no harm” (Long and Sedley, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 116, translating the version of this saying in VS 51). But Cicero reports that the Epicureans think *genus hoc voluptatum optabile esse, si non obsit, prodesse numquam* (TD 5.94), i.e., as J.E. King translates in the Loeb edition, “this kind of pleasures is desirable, should there be no obstacle, but is never of benefit.” And the μέν-δέ construction (also preserved in the three other versions of this saying cited at U. 62) likewise suggests that Epicurus’ point is not that one is lucky if having sex does one no harm, but that the desire for sexual intercourse is, “on the one hand,” not a necessary desire, but is, “on the other,” a natural one, since having sex is “desirable.”