

Article on the "Letter to Marcella" by Porphyry

Post by "Cassius" of April 17, 2019 at 6:40 AM

Thanks to Takis Panagiatopolis of the Athens Garden for this link:

http://www.epicuros.gr/pages/en/Tempe...us_Porphyry.pdf

! It seems clear that this writer was referencing Epicurean ideas while also combining them with elements that are absolutely irreconcilable. It is interesting to reflect on which are which.

"27. So then, first you must grasp the law of Nature and from it ascend to the divine law which also established the law of Nature."

ELIAS TEMPELIS

Professor of Philosophy at the Hellenic Naval Academy
eliasdar@otenet.gr

**A chapter of Epicurean philosophy
in Porphyry's Letter to Marcella¹**

When the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry (ca. 234 - ca. 304/310 AD) was around 68 years old, he married Marcella, who was a widow and mother of seven children. It seems that he married her, mainly because she already used to practise some sort of philosophical activity. When he was away on a divinely sanctioned journey, Porphyry sent her a letter with exhortations, so that she could continue dealing with true philosophy and thus live an unperturbed and happy life. Interestingly enough, this letter is not fully representative of Neoplatonism as a philosophical system. Since its discovery in a codex of the Ambrosian Library in Milan in the early 19th century, Porphyry's Letter to Marcella (*Προφύριου φιλοσόφου Προς Μαρκέλλαν*) has been edited and/or translated at least 15 times.²

[Tempelis Epicurus Porphyry.pdf](#)

Post by "Cassius" of April 17, 2019 at 7:06 AM

Is this letter to Marcella something you are familiar with [Matt](#) ?

Post by "Matt" of April 17, 2019 at 7:30 AM

I'm not terribly familiar with Porphyry's works, many that survive are fragmentary or quoted by secondary sources.

It seems that the specific section of the letter does support a knowledge of Epicurean principles

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Porphyry is of course best known for his biography of his master Plotinus and the his arrangement of the Enneads. He wrote some anti-Christian polemical works that did not survive except in secondary sources.

He and his pupil Iamblichus did not see eye to eye on the interpretation of Neoplatonic doctrine.

Porphyry also suffered from a depressive nature. He says that he even considered suicide at one point in his biography.

Post by “Matt” of April 17, 2019 at 7:40 AM

Porphyry is somewhat of an enigma due to the lack of complete extant writings.

We know everything that we can possibly know about Plotinus from Porphyry. Most importantly we know who and what influenced Plotinus from Porphyry. Specifically, we learn that the teacher of Plotinus was Ammonius Saccus.

We know he hated the Christians, but revered Jesus as a holy man.

His writing and philosophy, like most of the Neoplatonists, is very technical and based in Platonic and Pythagorean principles.

Post by “Cassius” of January 31, 2020 at 2:45 PM

Weren't we talking recently somewhere about someone recently interested in this letter to Marcella? I still to this day have not spent much time with it, but it seems to me very dangerous to consider this an Epicurean work as it seems to have lots of unEpicurean thought mixed into it.

It would take almost a line-by-line analysis to go through it but I see this as an example which appears to me directly UNEpicurean, because if the gods have decided to give up food and sex for themselves, then the implication is that we should consider doing so in emulation, which I cannot believe that Epicurus would suggest as a model for humans. But is not this letter

suggesting that humans should?

So then, just as those who have a fever are always thirsty because of the serious nature of their disease and eagerly desire what is most detrimental, so also those who have the soul which manages it in distress are always in need of everything and fall prey to fickle desires under the influence of their excessive greed.” 28. Consequently, even the gods have prescribed remaining pure by abstinence from food and sex. This leads those who are pursuing piety toward Nature’s intent, which the gods themselves constituted, as though any excess, by being contrary to Nature’s intent, is defiled and deadly. “For the ordinary man who fears the simple way of life is driven by fear into actions which are most likely to produce it. And many who have become wealthy have not found relief from evils but rather an exchange for greater ones.” Therefore,

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On the other this might seem to be an Epicurean quote at first glance, but is the "if it does not purge the PASSION OF THE SOUL" really well stated. That could be a translation issue, and if the meaning is "Disturbance" then all well and good, but if the meaning is "strong desire" then that sounds very Stoic to me.

:

philosophy causes every disturbing and painful desire to subside. Empty is the

discourse of that philosopher by which no human passion is healed. For just as there is no benefit from medicine if it does not heal the bodies’ diseases, neither is there from philosophy if it does not purge the passion of the soul.” So then, the law of Nature prescribes these things and others like them.

I don't have more time for this right now but I would not consider this letter to be safe Epicurean teaching without a lot more study and possible clarification.

Post by “Cassius” of January 31, 2020 at 2:53 PM

27. So then, first you must grasp the law of Nature and from it ascend to the divine law which also established the law of Nature. With these laws as your point of

What? Is this saying that there is a "Divine" law higher than nature? Is that not the inference or "ascend?"

If so, then that is a TOTALLY non-Epicurean viewpoint and can be expected to corrupt all the rest of the analysis.

Post by “Cassius” of January 31, 2020 at 2:57 PM

When did the Epicurean goal become "Reason" rather than "pleasure?" Answer: "it didn't, regardless of what is said here."

distress to external circumstances. Rather let us seek their causes in the soul, and, by breaking away from every vain yearning and hope for fleeting fancies, let us become totally in control of ourselves. For it is either through fear that a person becomes unhappy or through unlimited and empty desire. By bridling these feelings a person can gain possession of blessed reason for himself. To the extent that you are troubled,

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 31, 2020 at 7:08 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What? Is this saying that there is a "Divine" law higher than nature? Is that not the inference or "ascend?"

Lol 😄 That sounds very familiar. As far as I know, it is only the Stoics who frequently use the word "ascend", and this is what they do to assign what to react on an indifferent circumstance. They ascend to a deterministic law as a way to exercise control of their mind and reason while in fact they are only submitting themselves to such laws that they consider divine.

Post by "Cassius" of January 31, 2020 at 7:28 PM

Good catch Mike. I don't want to put too much pressure on a single word and maybe there is a translation issue, but yes, climbing a mountain toward virtue being at the summit seems to be a standard Stoic theme.

I recall Lucian using it to describe the Stoic figure in Hermotimus:

Her. Alas, Lycinus, I am only just beginning to get an inkling of the right way. Very far off dwells Virtue, as Hesiod says, and long and steep and rough is the way thither, and travellers must bedew it with sweat.

Ly. And you have not yet sweated and travelled enough?

Her. Surely not; else should I have been on the summit, with nothing left between me and bliss; but I am only starting yet, Lycinus.

Ly. Ah, but Hesiod, your own authority, tells us, Well begun is half done; so we may safely call you half-way by this time.

Her. Not even there yet; that would indeed have been much.

Ly. Where *shall* we put you, then?

Her. Still on the lower slopes, just making an effort to get on; but it is slippery and rough, and needs a helping hand.

Ly. Well, your master can give you that; from his station on the summit, like Zeus in Homer with his golden cord, he can let you down his discourse, and therewith haul and heave you up to himself and to the Virtue which he has himself attained this long time.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of January 31, 2020 at 8:05 PM

You're right Cassius. When I gave stoicism a shot, I used to ascend to such Virtue, and in fact there are four virtues to ascend to - these are wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Like what I told you, it didn't work for me. Ascending seems too ascetic for my passionate character.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2020 at 5:55 AM

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

Ascending seems too ascetic for my **passionate** character.

From Diogenes Laertius:

He will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom. *A man cannot become wise with every kind of physical constitution, nor in every nation.*

I thought of that because of your comment about a passionate character, which seems to me to be consistent with being "more deeply moved by feelings."

After finding it and seeing the next sentence, I wonder if the thoughts are not related, and in fact I wonder if it is possible for a person who does not feel deeply to become wise! The apathetic distant diffident spirit may be among the types of physical constitutions that are obstacles to the wise pursuit of proper living according to Nature (which we can identify with being in touch with and wisely following our feelings).

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 1, 2020 at 6:58 AM

On the contrary for Epicurus, philosophy is not the appearance of good health but the enjoyment of its truth. Ascending to virtues only affirms the appearance of truth while sensation affirms the truth itself. This is how I understand VS 54 which I use as my signature below.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2020 at 9:50 AM

I agree. I am not trying to be patronizing and I know that you are still reading DeWitt, but I think your observations are good and you have a knack for this Mike 😊

I really don't think any of this is that difficult for anyone who doesn't get sidetracked on "minimalism at all costs" and "the goal of life is ataraxia."

"Minimalism" is the wrong goal for the obvious reason that the goal of life is pleasure, and the principle stated in VS 63. "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is like him who errs through excess.

"Ataraxia" is wrong goal as well, and in my view that's why so many people don't translate the word. That's often because the closer they come to having to explain "ataraxia" in understandable terms in their first language, the more they realize that they *can't* make it reconcile with "pleasure" as the goal, and then they realize that they ultimately can't reconcile it with the stoic paradigm they prefer. So they leave it untranslated and suggest that it means something like Stoic apathy.

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 1, 2020 at 11:40 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Minimalism" is the wrong goal for the obvious reason...

This is why I avoid using the term "mindfulness" the way Zen Buddhists use it. Instead, I prefer the word "mindset" to describe the state of mind while in the process of prudence.

For instance, I'd choose to be frugal only because my eagerness to reap a much greater pleasure out of it afterward sets my mind to keep being frugal. Therefore, I do it not because it's my ascent to frugality.

On the other hand, I'd put a limit on frugality not because of my ascent to self-control or freedom of choice but because a need for immediate pleasure sets my mind to do so.

In other words, nothing is divine in virtues like courage and temperance. They are just utilities for the pursuit of pleasure, hence nothing to ascend to.

Yes Cassius. DeWitt makes sense to me now. Now I understand why EAHP is highly recommended for beginners of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2020 at 12:06 PM

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

term "mindfulness" the way Zen Buddhists use it. Instead, I prefer the word "mindset" to describe the state of mind while in the process of prudence.

Excellent choice. My experience is very little with people who talk about Buddhism, but the Stoics love the term "mindfulness" so "mindset" seems a good way to distinguish it. Or simply "attitude" as I think DeWitt generally uses.

[Quote from Mike Anyayahan](#)

nothing is divine in virtues like courage and temperance. They are just utilities for the pursuit of pleasure, hence nothing to ascend to.

Yes exactly. Such an obvious and simple point, and yet so hard to get people to come to terms with. They should be obviously not ends in themselves, so WHY do them? That question has an answer, and the answer is written inside every one of us, but woe be to those in the mainstream who would dare to admit that they are guided by "feeling!" The "mainstream" is nothing if not about denying oneself - and the Bible makes that very clear!!

[According to this list, FIFTY-FOUR different verses](#), starting with:

[Matthew 16:24](#) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

Again, even "denying oneself is obviously not an end in itself, so why do it? That question demands an answer, and Epicurus was brave enough to give it.

Post by “Matt” of February 1, 2020 at 4:22 PM

Hello Epicureans,

Your renewed discourse here has summoned me. Haha

I smell Neoplatonism cooking in here. It smells a lot like a seafood curry and cigarette smoke in an apartment complex.☐☐

Hope all is well.

Matt

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2020 at 4:24 PM

Good to hear from you Matt and I hope you are well too. Someone recently raised the topic of this letter to Marcella and I see back when we discussed it earlier it appears we did not sufficiently cook it deeply enough, and the aroma of stoicism / neoplatonism lingers still around it, waiting to be separated and dispelled! 😊

Post by “Mike Anyayahan” of February 1, 2020 at 5:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Excellent choice. My experience is very little with people who talk about Buddhism, but the Stoics love the term "mindfulness" so "mindset" seems a good way to distinguish it. Or simply "attitude" as I think DeWitt generally uses.

Yes Cassius. Attitude is another simple word for it. 😊

[Quote from Matt](#)

I smell Neoplatonism cooking in here.

Yes. That's also what I observed from the sentences especially the fact that there is a higher level of ascension, and this is a typical epistemological element of Platonism and Neoplatonism.

Post by “Matt” of February 2, 2020 at 12:27 PM

Yeah, Neoplatonism and Stoicism deal in principles that eventually become unintelligible. The One is both immanent and transcendent, both outside reality and at the same time manifests as reality itself. Infinitely complex and yet can be reduced to extreme simplicity.

I understood Plotinus and his Enneads and for years I considered him to be great thinker. However, in the end his system is just another bump in the road of a long line of philosophical systems that bear no fruit. He was just that... “a great thinker” and nothing more.

Post by “Matt” of February 2, 2020 at 12:46 PM

My philosophy is *no philosophy* these days. Life becomes much quieter when you don't have other people's speculations bouncing about in your consciousness.

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2020 at 4:31 PM

Well I am not sure that I should "Like" your last comment, Matt, but I do think that someone who thinks as you are currently thinking would find a lot to like in [Lucian's Hermotimus \(which i think is ultimately pro-Epicurean\)](#):

Hermotimus. Oh, why but that I could cry like a baby? It cuts me to the heart, it is all so true; it is too much for me, when I think of my wretched, wasted years—paying all that money for my own labor, too! I am sober again after a debauch, I see what the object of my maudlin affection is like, and what it has brought upon me. [84]

Lycinus. No need for tears, dear fellow; that is a very sensible fable of Aesop's. A man sat on the shore and counted the waves breaking; missing count, he was excessively annoyed. But the fox came up and said to him: 'Why vex yourself, good sir, over the past ones? you should let them go, and begin counting afresh.' So you, since this is your mind, had better reconcile yourself now to living like an ordinary man; you will give up your extravagant haughty hopes and put yourself on a level with the commonalty; if you are sensible, you will not be ashamed to unlearn in your old age, and change your course for a better. [85]

Now I beg you not to fancy that I have said all this as an anti-Stoic, moved by any special dislike of your school; my arguments hold against all schools. I should have said just the same if you had chosen Plato or Aristotle, and condemned the others unheard. But, as Stoicism was your

choice, the argument has seemed to be aimed at that, though it had no such special application. [86]

Hermotimus. ***You are quite right. And now I will be off to metamorphose myself. When we next meet, there will be no long, shaggy beard, no artificial composure; I shall be natural, as a gentleman should. I may go as far as a fashionable coat, by way of publishing my renunciation of nonsense. I only wish there were an emetic that would purge out every doctrine they have instilled into me; I assure you, if I could reverse Chrysippus's plan with the hellebore, and drink forgetfulness, not of the world but of Stoicism, I would not think twice about it. Well, Lycinus, I owe you a debt indeed; I was being swept along in a rough turbid torrent, unresisting, drifting with the stream; when lo, you stood there and fished me out, a true deus ex machina. I have good enough reason, I think, to shave my head like the people who get clear off from a wreck; for I am to make votive offerings to-day for the dispersion of that thick cloud which was over my eyes. Henceforth, if I meet a philosopher on my walks (and it will not be with my will), I shall turn aside and avoid him as I would a mad dog.***

Post by "Mike Anyayahan" of February 2, 2020 at 8:46 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

My philosophy is *no philosophy* these days. Life becomes much quieter when you don't have other people's speculations bouncing about in your consciousness.

If you refer "philosophy these days" as the mainstream academic philosophy that reduces philosophy to Philology and historicism as though there is a market of philosophical thoughts to choose from, then, I am with you. I wouldn't philosophize in that sense.

But Epicurus would think of philosophy in a different way. As I understand it, philosophy for him is a living philosophy and not a list of dead appearances of the living. Here I quote from VS 54: "It is not the pretended but the real pursuit of philosophy that is needed; for we do not need the appearance of good health but to enjoy it in truth."

In my case, my philosophy is the pleasure of learning from my experience while applying my lessons of past experiences and testing all sorts of wisdom through practice. 😊