

*Did Epicurus approve of Marriage?
A study of Diogenes Laertius X, 119*

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THIS SECTION of Diogenes' life of Epicurus reads as follows in all the manuscripts:

καὶ μὴν καὶ γαμήσειν καὶ τεκνοποιήσειν τὸν σοφὸν ὡς Ἐπίκουρος ἐν ταῖς Διαπορίαις καὶ ἐν ταῖς Περὶ φύσεως κατὰ περιστάσιν δέ ποτε βίου γαμήσειν καὶ διατραπησεσθαι τινὰς οὐδὲ μὴν τήρησειν ἐν μέθῃ φησὶν ὁ Ἐπίκουρος ἐν τῷ Συμποσίῳ

There are many difficulties in this curious passage which Bailey justly describes as "scrappy and incoherent" and it is, I think, true to say that no two editors agree on text and punctuation. The passage is, however, rather important since the first part of it is the only reference we have in the Epicurean corpus to the Master's views on marriage and the begetting of children – a subject which must surely have been treated by a moralist with his views on human happiness.

Let us then begin by considering the passage up to βίου γαμήσειν. As it stands the text asserts positively that the wise man *will* marry and beget children. But ever since Epicurean studies began in modern times this has been queried, and the great scholar Gassendi felt bound to follow Casaubon in emending καὶ μὴν καὶ to καὶ μηδὲ, in other words, to print the exact opposite of the MS reading. In more recent times Usener, Bailey, and Diano revert to the MS but Hicks in the Loeb edition agrees with Gassendi. The principal reason for the emendation is clear enough; in the first place it has seemed to many scholars from Casaubon onwards to be impossible to reconcile approval of marriage with Epicurus' own well-attested views on human happiness in general and sex in particular; in the second, all references by later writers to the Epicurean view of marriage agree in depicting the Epicurean as an opponent of wedlock and the family.

The key to a happy life, Epicurus taught, is ἀταραξία, freedom from worry (*Ep.* III, 128), a freedom to be won only by restricting the needs of the present and our hopes for the future, by pursuing self-sufficiency (ἀὐταρξεία – *Sent. Vat.* 77), and by refusing to give hostages to fortune (*Sent. Vat.* 47). It would certainly seem more consistent with this attitude

to recommend abstention from marriage and the responsibilities of fathering a family than to advise assuming them – especially for the σοφός. It may be admitted that there is evidence that Epicurus himself was very fond of children (though the famous letter to[N]απία may not be his after all); *Sent. Vat.* 61 may be a mild word of praise for the security of family life, and *Sent. Vat.* 62 contains shrewd advice to children on how to keep the peace when parents are annoyed. But *Sent. Vat.* 51 is a bitter attack on sex, and the concluding sentence of it, slightly altered, are the words immediately preceding this present passage: συνουσίη δέ, φασίν, ὤνησε μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἀγαπητὸν δὲ εἰ μὴ καὶ ἐβλαψε.

This refers, admittedly, to sex relations and not to marriage itself. But later authorities are quite explicit in their references to Epicurean condemnation of that institution. Epictetus (Arrian, *Epic. disc.* 3, 7, 19), quoted by Gassendi, says:

..ἐπινοεῖς Ἐπικουρείων πόλιν. Ἐγὼ οὐ γαμῶ. Οὐδ' ἐγώ. οὐ γὰρ γαμήτεον, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ παιδοποιητέον.

and also, (1, 23, 3), διὰ τὴν ἀποσυμβουλεύειν (Ἐπικουρε) τῷ σοφῷ τεκνοτροφεῖν; τὴν φοβῆ, μὴ διὰ ταῦτα εἰς λύπας ἐμπέσῃ;

and again, (*ibid.* 7), ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν... τολμᾷ λέγειν ὅτι Μὴ ἀναιρώμεθα τέκνα. He condemned this teaching of Epicurus as ἀνατρεπτικὰ πόλεως, λυμαντικὰ οἴκων (3, 7, 20) (cf. also *ibid.* 2, 20, 20). Seneca is equally explicit (*fr.* 45 Haas): “Epicurus... raro dicit sapienti ineunda coniugia quia multa incommoda admixta sunt nuptiis.” The testimony of the early Church is on the same side. Clement of Alexandria couples Epicurus with his atomist predecessor Democritus in *Strom.* II, 23, 138:

Δημόκριτος δὲ γάμον καὶ παιδοποιεῖν παραιτεῖται διὰ τὰς πολλὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀηδίας τε καὶ ἀφορκᾶς ἀπὸ τῶν ἀναγκαιοτέρων. συγκατατάττεται δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ Ἐπίκουρος...

Theodoret is obviously copying this in *cur. Graec. errorum* XII, 176 (Migne):

Δημοκριτῷ δὲ καὶ Ἐπικούρῳ λίαν μεμφόμεθα, παραιτεῖσθαι καὶ τὸν γάμον καὶ τὴν παιδογονίαν κελεύουσι.

The teaching thus well-attested rings true; it is consistent with Epicurus' general doctrine and is what we should expect; it is almost inconceivable that he could ever have advised the opposite as a general rule.

The words κατὰ περίστασιν δέ ποτε βίου γαμήσειν strengthen this conviction. The δέ ποτε shows that this is an exception appended to the rule. In general the wise man will not marry “*but sometimes* depending on the circumstances of his life, he will marry.” Clearly circumstances may at times be such that the disadvantages of a family will be outweighed

by the advantage – then he may marry. But it is noticeable that Epicurus himself never did so. The conclusion is inescapable that the reading cannot be right. Those who print it do not explain how it can be made to agree with the later evidence or even what it means. Bailey translates, “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.” This seems possible but in fact omits the important word *ποτε*.¹ How the mistake arose it is hard to say. *καὶ μὴν καὶ* is a common Epicurean phrase and is unlikely to be a corruption of *καὶ μηδέ* since the usage of the passage demands *οὐδέ* as the negative. Perhaps the simplest way out is to regard these three words as a plain mistake, the scribe of the archetype having carelessly written one phrase instead of another, and to reject them, reading instead *οὐδέ* or *οὐδὲ μὴν*.

What are we to do with the remaining words:

*καὶ διατραπήσεσθαι τινὰς οὐδὲ μὴν τηρήσειν*² ἐν μέθῃ φησὶν ὁ Ἐπίκουρος ἐν τῷ Συμποσίῳ

Gassendi added the first three to the preceding sentence, ejecting *διατραπήσεσθαι* altogether and substituting *τεχνοποιήσειν* for it. This does, as he says, make for “*consensus integer cum priore parte*” but is a very violent and unjustified change. Hicks (Loeb edition) and the latest editor, Diano, print these three words as a separate sentence; others regard the whole passage as one though no two agree on what the reading or interpretation should be. The verb *διατρέπομαι* would seem to mean “to turn aside (from),” “to be overawed (by),” or “to avoid from a feeling of shame.” It is found with both a transitive and an intransitive use so that *τινας* can be taken as subject or object; Hicks prefers the former and translates, “Some too will turn aside from their purpose” (this interpretation is accepted by LSJ *s.v.*), but most editors seem to think that *τινας* should be the object, e.g., Bailey translates, “He will feel shame in the presence of some persons.”

The second verb, *τηρήσειν*, has caused more difficulty. The basic meaning of this word, of course, is “to observe,” which would seem to demand an object, either *τινας* again or another supplied by conjecture, as Kühn in the 18th. century supplied *τὰ φαινόμενα*. Most editors have felt obliged here to emend the text and change the verb. Gassendi re-

¹ Meibomius prints *καὶ μὴν καὶ* in his edition of 1692 but then feels it to be necessary to insert a negative in the second part of the sentence and read *κατὰ περιστάσιν δὲ ποτε βίου οὐ γαμήσειν*.

² P reads *τήρησιν*.

wrote it as οὐδὲ νυκτερεύσειν; Bailey altered τηρήσειν to ἐπηρεάσειν (“and certainly will not insult them in his cups”). More or less violent changes include Hermann’s ληρήσειν (accepted by Hicks), and various expansions of the MS reading such as Diano’s τήρη<σιν ἀφή>σειν, Meibomius’ μῆν<ιν> τηρήσειν and Kochalsky’s τήρη<σιν κοσμοῦ μεθή>σειν. De Witt, as usual retaining the MS reading wherever he can, takes the passage to mean that the wise man will not ply others with drink and then watch them so as to learn their secret thoughts; an odd idea. He also takes διατραπήσεσθαι to mean “to put to confusion,” translating the whole sentence as “He will put a certain kind of people to confusion and most assuredly will not watch men in their cups” (*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, p. 300). This is grammatically possible but the sense, especially in the first part of the sentence, is not very convincing.

We can, however, agree with DeWitt that the words from καὶ διατραπήσεσθαι to the end form one sentence, and also feel fairly certain, in spite of Gassendi, that they have nothing to do with Epicurius’ views on marriage but are an observation taken from his *Symposium*. The transition is abrupt, it is true, and the writing jerky, but this part of Book X is only a string of aphorisms put together without care or skill – that is assuming that the text has not been tampered with, which is by no means certain. But here it is possible to make that assumption and without altering the text in any way these words can be rendered thus: – “and some people he will avoid, and certainly not watch them when they are drunk – so says Epicurus in the *Symposium*.” Who or what these people may be we cannot tell. Such a translation makes reasonable sense and suits the character of the abstemious sage better than to suppose that he himself is the one who is drunk.

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