



The Moral Teachings of Epicurus

Diogenes Laertius

XXVI. [C]oncerning the rules of life, and how we ought to choose some things, and avoid others, [Epicurus] writes thus. But first of all, let us go through the opinions which he held, and his disciples held about the wise man.

He said that injuries existed among men, either in consequence of hatred, or of envy, or of contempt, all which the wise man overcomes by Reason. Also, that a man who has once been wise can never receive the contrary dispositions, nor can he of his own accord invent such a state of things as that he should be subjected to the dominion of the passions; nor can he hinder himself in his progress towards wisdom. That the wise man, however, cannot exist in every state of body, nor in every nation. That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally whether they are present or absent. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture. Nor will he marry a wife whom the laws forbid, as Diogenes says, in his epitome of the Ethical Maxims of Epicurus. He will punish his servants, but also pity them, and show indulgence to any that are virtuous. They do not think that the wise man will ever be in love, nor that he will be anxious about his burial, nor that love is a passion inspired by the gods, as Diogenes says in his twelfth book. They also assert that he will be indifferent to the study of oratory. Intercourse, say they, 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 it down, in his Doubts and in his treatises on Nature. Still, under certain circumstances of life, he will forsake these rules and marry. Nor will he ever indulge in drunkenness, says Epicurus, in his Banquet, nor will he entangle himself in affairs of state (as he says in his first book on Lives). Nor will he become a tyrant. Nor will he become a Cynic (as he says in his second book about Lives). Nor a beggar. And even, though he should lose his eyes, he will still partake of life (as he says in the same book).

The wise man will not be subject to grief, as Diogenes says, in the fifth book of his Select Opinions; he will also not object to go to law. He will leave books and memorials of himself behind him, but he will not be fond of frequenting assemblies. He will take care of his property, and provide for the future. He will like being in the country, he will resist fortune, and will grieve none of his friends. He will show a regard for a fair reputation to such an extent as to avoid being despised; and he will find more pleasure than other men in speculations.

All faults are not equal. Health is good for some people, but a matter of indifference to others. Courage is a quality which does not exist by nature, but which is engendered by a consideration of what is suitable. Friendship is caused by one's wants; but it must be begun on our side. For we sow the earth; and friendship arises from a community of, and participation in, pleasures. Happiness must be understood in two senses; the highest happiness, such as is that of a god, which admits of no increase; and another kind, which admits of the addition or abstraction of pleasures. The wise man may raise statues if it suits his inclination, if it does not then it does not signify. The wise man is the only person who

can converse correctly about music and poetry; and he can realize poems, but not become a poet.

It is possible for one wise man to be wiser than another. The wise man will also, if he is in need, earn money, but only by his wisdom; he will appease an absolute ruler when occasion requires, and will humor him for the sake of correcting his habits; he will have a school, but not on such a system as to draw a crowd about him; he will also recite in a multitude, but that will be against his inclination; he will pronounce dogmas, and will express no doubts; he will be the same man asleep and awake; and he will be willing even to die for a friend.

These are the Epicurean doctrines.

Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 10.26. Trans. C.D. Yonge. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.

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