

The Life of Epicurus

Diogenes

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translation by C.D. Yonge

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I. EPICURUS was an Athenian, and the son of Neocles and Ch³/₄restrate, of the burgh of Gargettus, and of the family of the Philaidae, as Metrodorus tells us in his treatise on Nobility of Birth. Some writers, and among them Heraclides, in his Abridgment of Sotion, say, that as the Athenians had Colonis and Samos, he was brought up there, and came to Athens in his eighteenth year, while Xenocrates was president of the Academy, and Aristotle at Chalcis. But after the death of Alexander, the Macedonian, when the Athenians were driven out of Samos by Perdicas, Epicurus went to Colophon to his father.

II. And when he had spent some time there, and collected some disciples, he again returned to Athens, in the time of Anaxicrates, and for some time studied philosophy, mingling with the rest of the philosophers; but subsequently, he somehow or other established the school which was called after his name; and he used to say, that he began to study philosophy when he was fourteen years of age; but Apollodorus, the Epicurean, in the first book of his account of the life of Epicurus, says, that he came to the study of philosophy, having conceived a great contempt for the grammarians, because they could not explain to him the statements in Hesiod respecting Chaos.

But Hermippus tells us, that he himself was a teacher of grammar, and that afterwards, having met with the books of Democritus, he applied himself with zeal to philosophy, on which account Timon says of him:

The last of all the natural philosophers,
And the most shameless too, did come from Samos,
A grammar teacher, and the most ill-bred
And most unmanageable of mankind.

And he had for his companions in his philosophical studies, his three brothers, Neocles, Chaeredemus, and Aristobulus, who were excited by his exhortations, as Philodemus, the Epicurean, relates in the tenth book of the Classification of Philosophers. He had also a slave, whose name was Inus, as Myronianus tells us in his Similar Historical Chapters.

III. But Diotimus, the Stoic, was very hostile to him, and calumniated him in a most bitter manner, publishing fifty obscene letters, and attributing them to Epicurus, and also giving him the credit of the letters, which generally go under the name of Chrysippus. And Posidonius, the Stoic, and Nicolaus, and Sotion, in the twelfth of these books, which are entitled the Refutations of Diocles, of which there are altogether twenty-four volumes, and Dionysius, of Halicarnassus, have also attacked him with great severity; for they say that he used to accompany his mother when she went about the small cottages, performing purification, and that he used to read the formula, and that he used also to keep a school with his father at very low terms. Also, that he, as well as one of his brothers, was a most profligate man in his morals, and that he used to live with Leontium, the courtesan. Moreover, that he claimed the books of Democritus on Atoms, and that of Aristippus on Pleasure, as his own; and that he was not a legitimate citizen; and this last fact is asserted also by Timocrates, and by Herodotus, in his treatises on the Youth of Epicurus.

They also say that he used to flatter Mithras, the steward of Lysimachus, in a disgraceful manner, calling him in his letters Paeon, and King; and also that he flattered Idomeneus, and Herodotus, and Timocrates who had

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revealed all his secret practices, and that he flattered them on this very account. And in his letter to Leontium, he says, "O king Apollo, my dear Leontium, what transports of joy did I feel when I read your charming letter." And to Themista, the wife of Leontius, he writes, "I am ready and prepared, if you do not come to me, to roll myself to wherever you and Themista invite me." And he addresses Pythocles, a beautiful youth, thus, "I will sit quiet," says he, "awaiting your longed-for and god-like approach." And at another time, writing to Themista, he says, "That he had determined to make his way with her," as Theodorus tells us in the fourth book of his treatises against Epicurus.

He also wrote to many other courtesans, and especially to Leontium, with whom Metrodorus also was in love. And in his treatise on the Chief Good, he writes thus, "For I do not know what I can consider good, if I put out of sight the pleasures which arise from flavors, and those which are derived from amatory pleasures, and from music and from the contemplation of beauty." And in his letter to Pythocles, he writes, "And, my dear boy, avoid all sorts of education."

Epictetus also attacks him as a most debauched man, and reproaches him most vehemently, and so does Timocrates, the brother of Metrodorus, in his treatise entitled the Merry Guests, and this Timocrates had been a disciple in his school, though he afterwards abandoned it; and he says that he used to vomit twice a day, in consequence of his intemperance; and that he himself had great difficulty in escaping from this nocturnal philosophy, and that mystic kind of reunion. He also accuses Epicurus of shameful ignorance in his reasoning, and still more especially in all matters relating to the conduct of life. And says that he was in a pitiable state of health, so that he could not for many years rise up from his sofa; and that he used to spend a minae a day on his eating, as he himself states in his letter to Leontium, and in that to the philosophers at Mitylene. He also says that many courtesans used to live with him and Metrodorus; and among them Marmaricem, and Hedeia, and Erotium, and Nicidium.

IV. And in the thirty-seven books which he wrote about natural philosophy, they say that he says a great many things of the same kind over and over again, and that in them he writes in contradiction of other philosophers, and especially of Nausiphanes, and speaks as follows, word for word: "But if this man had a continual labor, striving to bring forth the sophistical boastfulness of his mouth, like many other slaves." And Epicurus also speaks of Nausiphanes in his letters, in the following terms: "These things led him on to such arrogance of mind, that he abused me and called me a schoolmaster." He used also to call him Lungs, and Blockhead, and Humbug, and Fornicator. And he used to call Platos followers Flatterers of Dionysius, but Plato himself he called Golden. Aristotle he called a debauchee and a glutton, saying that he joined the army after he had squandered his patrimony, and sold drugs. He used to call Protagoras a porter, and the secretary of Democritus, and to say that he taught boys their letters in the streets. Heraclitus, he called a disturber; Democritus, he nicknamed Lerocrates; [1a] and Antidorus, Saenidorus; [1b] The Cynics he called the enemies of Greece; and the Dialecticians he charged with being eaten up with envy. Pyrrho, he said, was ignorant and unlearned.

V. But these men who say this are all wrong, for there are plenty of witnesses of the unsurpassable kindness of the man to everybody; both his own country which honored him with brazen statues, and his friends who are so numerous that they could not be counted in whole cities; and all his acquaintances who were bound to him by nothing but the charms of his doctrine, none of whom ever deserted him, except Metrodorus, the son of Stratoniceus, who went over to Carneades, probably because he was not able to bear with equanimity the unapproachable excellence of Epicurus. Also, the perpetual succession of his school, which, when every other school decayed, continued without any falling off, and produced a countless number of philosophers, succeeding one another without any interruption. We may also speak here of his gratitude towards his parents, and his beneficence to his brothers, and his gentleness to his servants (as is plain from his will, and from the fact too, that they united with him in his philosophical studies, and the most eminent of them was the one whom I have mentioned already, named Inus); and his universal philanthropy towards all men.

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His piety towards the gods, and his affection for his country was quite unspeakable; though, from an excess of modesty, he avoided affairs of the state. And though he lived when very difficult times oppressed Greece, he still remained in his own country, only going two or three times across to Ionia to see his friends, who used to throng to him from all quarters, and to live with him in his garden, as we are told by Apollodorus (This garden he bought for eighty minae).

VI. And Diocles, in the third book of his Excursion, says that they all lived in the most simple and economical manner; "They were content," says he, "with a small cup of light wine, and all the rest of their drink was water." He also tells us that Epicurus would not allow his followers to throw their property into a common stock, as Pythagoras did, who said that the possessions of friends were held in common. For he said that such a doctrine as that was suited rather for those who distrusted one another; and that those who distrusted one another were not friends. But he himself in his letters, says that he is content with water and plain bread, and adds, "Send me some Cytherean cheese, so that if I wish to have a feast, I may have the means." This was the real character of the man who laid down the doctrine that pleasure was the chief good; who Athenaeus thus mentions in an epigram:

O men, you labor for pernicious ends;
And out of eager avarice, begin
Quarrels and wars. And yet the wealth of nature
Fixes a narrow limit for desires,
Though empty judgment is insatiable.
This lesson the wise child of Neocles
Had learnt by ear, instructed by the Muses,
Or at the sacred shrine of Delphis God.

And as we advance further, we shall learn this fact from his dogmas, and his maxims.

VII. Of all the ancient philosophers he was, as we are told by Diocles, most attached to Anaxagoras (although on some points he argued against him); and to Archelaus, the master of Socrates. And, Diocles adds, he used to accustom his pupils to preserve his writings in their memory. Apollodorus, in his Chronicles, asserts that he was a pupil of Nausiphanes, and Praxiphanes; but he himself does not mention this; but says in his letter to Euridicus, that he had been his own instructor. He also agreed with Hermarchus in not admitting that Leucippus deserved to be called a philosopher; though some authors, among whom is Apollodorus, speak of him as the master of Democritus. Demetrius, the Magnesian, says that he was a pupil of Xenocrates also.

VIII. He uses plain language in his works with respect to anything he is speaking of, for which Aristophanes, the grammarian, blames him, on the ground of that style being vulgar. But he was such an admirer of perspicuity, that even in his treatise on Rhetoric, he aims at and recommends nothing but clearness of expression. And in his letters, instead of the usual civil expressions, "Greeting," "Farewell," and so on, he substitutes, "May you act well," "May you live virtuously," and expressions of that sort. Some of his biographers assert that it was he who composed the treatise entitled the Canon, in imitation of the Tripod of Nausiphanes, whose pupil they say that he was, and add that he was also a pupil of Pamphilus, the Platonist at Samos.

IX. They further tell us that he began to study philosophy at twelve years of age, and that he presided over his school thirty-two years. And he was born as we are told by Apollodorus, in his Chronicles, in the third year of the hundred and ninth Olympiad, in the archonship of Sosigenes, on the seventh day of the month Gamelion, seven years after the death of Plato. And when he was thirty-two years of age, he first set up his school at Mitylene, and after that at Lampsacus; and when he had spent five years in these two cities, he came to Athens; and he died there in the second year of the hundred and twenty-seventh Olympiad, in the archonship of Pytharatus, when he had lived seventy-two years. And Hermarchus, the son of Agemarchus, and a citizen of Mitylene, succeeded him in his school.

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He died of the stone, as Hermarchus mentions in his letters, after having been ill a fortnight; and at the end of the fortnight, Hermippus says that he went into a brazen bath, properly tempered with warm water, and asked for a cup of pure wine and drank it; and having recommended his friends to remember his doctrines, he expired. And there is an epigram of ours on him, couched in the following language:

"Now, fare–ye–well, remember all my words;"
This was the dying charge of Epicurus.
Then to the bath he went, and drank some wine,
And sank beneath the cold embrace of Pluto.

Such was the life of the man, and such was his death.

X. And he made his will in the following terms:

"According to this, my will, I give all my possessions to Amynomachus, of Bate, the son of Philocrates, and to Timocrates, of Potamos, the son of Demetrius; according to the deed of gift to each, which is deposited in the temple of Cybele; on condition that they make over my garden and all that is attached to it to Hermarchus, of Mitylene, the son of Agemarchus; and to those who study philosophy with him, and to whomsoever Hermarchus leaves as his successors in his school, that they may abide and dwell in it, in the study and practice of philosophy; and I give it also to all those who philosophize according to my doctrines, that they may, to the best of their ability, maintain my school which exists in my garden, in concert with Amynomachus and Timocrates; and I enjoin their heirs to do the same in the most perfect and secure manner that they can; so that they also may maintain my garden, as those also shall to whom my immediate successors hand it down. As for the house in Melita, that Amynomachus and Timocrates shall allow Hermarchus that he may live in it during his life, together with all his companions in philosophy.

"Out of the income which is derived from that property, which is here bequeathed by me to Amynomachus and Timocrates, I will that they, consulting with Hermarchus, shall arrange in the best manner possible the offerings to the names in honor of the memory of my father, and mother, and brothers, and myself, and that my birthday may be kept as it has been in the habit of being kept, on the tenth day of the month Gamelion; and that the reunion of all the philosophers of our school, established in honor of Metrodorus and myself, may take place on the twentieth day of every month. They shall also celebrate, as I have been in the habit of doing myself, the day consecrated to my brothers, in the month Poseideon; and the day consecrated to memory of Polyaeus, in the month Metageitnion.

"Amynomachus and Timocrates, shall be the guardians of Epicurus, the son of Metrodorus, and of the son of Polyaeus, as long as they study philosophy under, and live with Hermarchus. In the same way also, they shall be the guardians of the daughter of Metrodorus, and when she is of marriageable age, they shall give her to whomsoever Hermarchus shall select of his companions in philosophy, provided she is well behaved and obedient to Hermarchus. And Amynomachus and Timocrates shall, out of my income, give them such a sum for their support as shall appear sufficient year by year, after due consultation with Hermarchus. And Amynomachus and Timocrates shall, out of my income, give them such a sum for their support as shall appear sufficient year by year, after due consultation with Hermarchus. And they shall associate Hermarchus with themselves in the management of my revenues, in order that everything may be done with the approval of that man who has grown old with me in the study of philosophy, and who is now left as the president of all those who have studied philosophy with us. And as for the dowry for the girl when she is come to marriageable age, let Amynomachus and Timocrates arrange that, taking for the purpose such a sum from my property as shall seem to them, in conjunction with Hermarchus, to be reasonable. And let them also take care of Nicanor, as we ourselves have done; in order that all those who have studied philosophy with us, and who have assisted us with their means, and who have shown great friendship for us, and who have chosen to grow old with us in the study of philosophy, may never be in want of anything as far as our power to prevent it may extend.

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"I further enjoin them to give all my books to Hermarchus; and, if anything should happen to Hermarchus before the children of Metrodorus are grown up, then I desire that Amynomachus and Timocrates, shall take care that, provided they are well behaved, they shall have everything that is necessary for them, as far as the estate which I leave behind me shall allow such things to be furnished to them. And the same men shall also take care of everything else that I have enjoined; so that it may all be fulfilled, as far as the case may permit.

"Of my slaves, I hereby emancipate Inus, and Nicias, and Lycon: I also give Phaedrium her freedom."

And when he was at the point of death, he wrote the following letter to Idomeneus:

"We have written this letter to you on a happy day to us, which is also the last day of our life. For strangury has attacked me, and also a dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which arises from there collection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions. And I beg you to take care of the children of Metrodorus, in a manner worth of the devotion shown by the youth to me, and to philosophy."

Such then as I have given it, was his will.

XI. He had a great number of pupils, of whom the most eminent were Metrodorus, the Athenian, and Timocrates, and Sandes, of Lampsacus; who, from the time that he first became acquainted with him, never left him, except one when he went home for six months, after which he returned to him. And he was a virtuous man in every respect, as Epicurus tells us in his Fundamental Principles. And he also bears witness to his virtue in the third book of his Timocrates. And being a man of this character, he gave his sister Bates in marriage to Idomeneus; and he himself had Leontium, the Attic courtesan, for his concubine. He was very unmoved at all disturbances, and even at death; as Epicurus tells us, in the first book of his Metrodorus. He is said to have died seven years before Epicurus himself, in the fifty-third year of his age. And Epicurus himself, in the will which I have given above, gives many charges about the guardianship of his children, showing by this that he had been dead some time. He also had a brother whom I have mentioned before, of the name of Timocrates, a trifling, silly man.

The writings of Metrodorus are these. Three books addressed to Physicians; one essay on the Sensations; one addressed to Timocrates; one on Magnanimity; one on the Illness of Epicurus; one addressed to the Dialecticians; one against the Nine Sophists; one on the Road to Wisdom; one on Change; one on Riches; one against Democritus; one on Nobility of Birth.

XII. Likewise Polyaeus, of Lampsacus, the son of Athenodorus, was a man of mild and friendly manners, as Philodemus particularly assures us.

XIII. And his successor was Hermarchus, of Mitylene, the son of Agemarchus, a poor man; and his favorite pursuit was rhetoric. And the following excellent works of his are extant. Twenty-two books of letters about Empedocles; an essay on Mathematics; A treatise against Plato; another against Aristotle. And he died of paralysis, being a most eminent man.

XIV. There was also Leontius, of Lampsacus, and his wife Themista, to whom Epicurus wrote.

XV. There were also Colotes and Idomeneus; and these also were natives of Lampsacus. And among the most eminent philosophers of the school of Epicurus, were Polystratus, who succeeded Hermarchus, and Dionysius who succeeded him, and Basilides who succeed him. Likewise Apollodorus, who was nicknamed the tyrant of the gardens, was a very eminent man, and wrote more than four hundred books. And there were the two Ptolemies of Alexandria, Ptolemy the Black, and Ptolemy the Fair.

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XVI. There were also three other persons of the name of Epicurus; first, the son of Leonteus and Themista; secondly, a native of Magnesia; and lastly, a Gladiator.

XVII. And Epicurus was a most voluminous author, exceeding all men in the number of his books; for there are more than three hundred volumes of them; and in the whole of them there is not one citation from other sources, but they are filled wholly with the sentiments of Epicurus himself. In the quantity of his writings he was rivaled Chrysippus, as Carneades asserts, who calls him a parasite of the books of Epicurus; for if ever this latter wrote anything, Chrysippus immediately set his heart on writing a book of equal size; and in this way he often wrote the same thing over again; putting down whatever came into his head; and he published it all without any corrections, by reason of his haste. And he quotes such numbers of testimonies from other authors, that his books are entirely filled with them alone; as one may find also in the works of Aristotle and Zeno.

Such then, so numerous are the works of Epicurus; the chief of which are the following: Thirty-seven treatises on Natural Philosophy; one on Atoms and the Void; one on Love; an abridgment of the Arguments employed against the Natural Philosophers; Doubts in Contradiction of the Doctrines of the Megarians; Fundamental Propositions; a treatise on Choice and Avoidance; another on the Chief Good; another on the Criterion, called also the Canon; the Chaeridemus, a treatise on the Gods; one on Piety; the Hegesiana; four essays on Lives; one on Just Dealing; the Neocles; one essay addressed to Themista; the Banquet; the Eurylochus; one essay addressed to Metrodorus; one on Seeing; one on the Angle in an Atom; one on Touch; one on Fate; Opinions on the Passions; one treatise addressed to Timocrates; Prognostics; Exhortations; a treatise on Specters; one on Perceptions; the Aristobulus; an essay on Music; one on Justice and the other Virtues; one on Gifts and Gratitude; the Polymedes; the Timocrates, a treatise in three books; the Metrodorus, in five books; the Antidorus, in two books; Opinions about the South Winds; a treatise addressed to Mithras; the Callistolas; an essay on Kingly Power; the Anaximenes; Letters.

XVIII. And I will endeavor to give an abridgment of the doctrines contained in these works, as it may be agreeable, quoting three letters of his, in which is the epitome of all his philosophy. I will also give his fundamental and peculiar opinions, and any adages which he uttered which appear worthy of being selected. So that you may be thoroughly acquainted with the man, and may also judge that I understand him.

Now the first letter is one that he wrote to Herodotus, on the subject of Natural Philosophy; the second is one that he wrote to Pythocles, which is about the Heavenly Bodies; the third is addressed to Menaecus, and in that there are continued the discussions about lives.

We must now begin with the first, after having said a little by way of preface concerning the divisions of philosophy which he adopted.

XIX. Now he divides philosophy into three parts. The canonical, the physical, and the ethical. The canonical, which serves as an introduction to knowledge, is contained in the single treatise which is called the Canon. The physical embraces the whole range of speculation on subjects of natural philosophy, and is contained in the thirty-seven books on nature, and in the letters again it is discussed in an elementary manner. The ethical contains the discussions of Choice and Avoidance; and is comprised in the books about lives, and in some of the Letters, and in the treatise of the Chief Good. Accordingly, most people are in the habit of combining the canonical divisions with the physical; and then they designate the whole under the names of the criterion of the truth, and a discussion of principles, and elements. And they say that the physical division is conversant about production, and destruction, and nature; and that the ethical division has reference to the objects of choice and avoidance, and lives, and the chief good of mankind.

XX. Dialectics they wholly reject as superfluous. For they say that the correspondence of words with things is sufficient for the natural philosopher, so as to enable him to advance with certainty in the study of nature.

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Now, in the Canon, Epicurus says that the criteria of truth are the senses, and their preconceptions, and the passions. But the Epicureans, in general, add also the perceptive impressions of the intellect. And he says the same thing in his Abridgment, which he addresses to Herodotus, and also in his Fundamental Principles. For, says he, the senses are devoid of reason, nor are they capable of receiving any impressions of memory. For they are not by themselves the cause of any motion, and when they have received any impression from any external cause, then they can add nothing to it, nor can they subtract anything from it. Moreover, they are out of the reach of any control; for one sensation cannot judge of another which resembles itself; for they have all an equal value. Nor can one judge of another which is different from itself; since their objects are not identical. In other words, one sensation cannot control another, since the effects of all of them influence us equally. Again, Reason cannot pronounce on the senses; for we have already said that all reasoning has the senses for its foundation. Reality and the evidence of sensation establish the certainty of the senses; for the impressions of sight and hearing are just as real, just as evident, as pain.

It follows from these considerations that we ought to judge of things which are obscure by their analogy to those which we perceive directly. In fact, every notion proceeds from the senses, either directly, or in consequence of some analogy, or proportion, or combination. Reasoning having always a share in these last operations. The visions of insanity and of sleep have a real object for they act upon us; and that which has no reality can produce no action.

XXI. By preconception, the Epicureans meant a sort of comprehension as it were, or right opinion, or notion, or general idea which exists in us; or, in other words, the recollection of an external object often perceived anteriorly. Such for instance, is the idea: "Man is being of such and such nature." At the same moment that we utter the word man, we conceive the figure of a man, in virtue of a preconception which we owe to the preceding operations of the senses. Therefore, the first notion which each word awakens in us is a correct one; in fact, we could not seek for anything if we had not previously some notion of it. To enable us to affirm that what we see at a distance is a horse or an ox, we must have some preconception in our minds which makes us acquainted with the form of a horse and an ox. We could not give names to things, if we had not preliminary notion of what the things were.

XXII. These preconceptions then furnish us with certainty. And with respect to judgments, their certainty depends on our referring them to some previous notion, of itself certain, in virtue of which we affirm such and such a judgment; for instance, "How do we know whether this thing is a man?"

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