A chapter of Epicurean philosophy in Porphyry’s Letter to Marcella

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 (Πορφύριον φιλοσόφου Πρὸς Μαρκέλλαν) has been edited and/or translated at least 15 times.

Scholarship on this letter in the decades following the discovery of the text focused on its relationship to the Greek philosophical tradition, and in particular to that form of the tradition embodied in the sententiae ascribed to Pythagorean and Epicurean philosophers. Usener, the first editor of Epicurean texts, fragments and testimonies, accepted that in paragraphs 27-31 of this letter Porphyry collated 18 scattered Epicurean statements, which deal with the law of Nature. In this, Usener was more or less followed by other editors of Epicurean fragments as well, like Arrighetti and Zografidis, and by editors of Porphyry’s letter. By far, none of these Epicurean views has been attributed to any known work, with the exception of a certain fragment (27.425-427), which is a variant of Epicurus’ Principal doctrine

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1 This is a preliminary version of the paper, which was presented in Greek at the 9th Panhellenic Symposium of Epicurean Philosophy (February 9-10, 2019, Cultural Center of Pallini, Athens), following a suggestion and invitation by Christos Yapijakis. A full version of this paper will appear in the forthcoming Proceedings of the Symposium.

2 The only known extant manuscript of this work of Porphyry has been dated to about 1500. The most recent edition and English translation is in Porphyry the Philosopher, To Marcella, by Kathleen O’Brien Wicker, Index Verborum by Lee E. Klosinski, Texts and Translations 28, Graeco-Roman Religion Series 10, Scholar’s Press, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Georgia, 1987.


6 For example, for Usener some of these fragments are “Incertarum Epistularum Fragmenta” and the majority are “Incertae Sedis Fragmenta Opinionumque Testimonia”.

7 “Ο τῆς φύσεως πλούσιος ἀληθὸς φιλόσοφος ὃρισταί καὶ ἔστιν εὐπόριστος, ὁ δὲ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν ἀόριστος τε καὶ δυσπόριστος”.

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XV⁸ / Vatican saying VIII.⁹ In Porphyry a similar formulation is first found in his On abstinence from killing animals,¹⁰ which was written probably earlier than the Letter to Marcella. The same view is also partly quoted in Plutarch’s How the young man should study poetry.¹¹

A new careful reading of Porphyry’s Letter to Marcella, however, most probably shows that what Porphyry actually did in paragraphs 27-31 (See Appendix), was to include only one isolated fragment and to incorporate an integral Epicurean text, without ascription to its author, but with slight modifications. Since the Letter to Marcella must have been composed around 300 AD, i.e. approximately 570 years after Epicurus’ death, it cannot be estimated with certainty to which Epicurean philosophers the integral text Porphyry incorporated belongs. In his work On abstinence from killing animals, also in the form of letter, Porphyry says that he knows of writings (“συγγράμματα”) by Epicurus himself and other Epicureans, the majority of which were full of narrations as to how little Nature requires (“τὸ ὀλιγοδεὲς τῆς φύσεως ἀφηγούμενον”), and that its necessities may be sufficiently remedied by slender and easily procured food.¹² Porphyry was right in that he was aware of a number of treatises on this subject, exactly because the Epicurean schools were known for the encouragement of innovative approaches to correct interpretation of Epicurus’ original doctrine.¹³ In the same work Porphyry continued by quoting a long Epicurean text (I.49-55), which seems to be an analysis of a variant of Principal doctrine XV / Vatican saying VIII, based on the approval of a simple, trouble-free diet. The coherent integral text in the Letter to Marcella, not known as such until today, contains a different analysis of a variant of the same view (27.425-427), which is exactly about how the wealth of Nature is well-defined and easily obtained. Porphyry’s familiarity with Epicurean philosophy and writings could probably be explained, if one bears in mind that he was of Syrian origin. Of the same origin were

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⁸ Epicurus, Kόραι δούς XV: “Ὁ τῆς φύσεως πλοῦτος καὶ ὥρισται καὶ εὐπόριστός ἐστιν’ ὁ δὲ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν εἰς ἄπειρον ἐκπίπτει καὶ ἔστι δυσπόριστος”.  
⁹ Epicurus, Προσφώνησις VIII: “Ὁ τῆς φύσεως πλοῦτος καὶ ὥρισται καὶ εὐπόριστός ἐστιν’ ὁ δὲ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν εἰς ἄπειρον ἐκπίπτει καὶ ἔστι δυσπόριστος”:  
¹⁰ Porphyry, Περὶ ἀποχῆς ἐμψύχων I.49: “ὁ δὲ τῶν κενῶν δοξῶν αὐτοῦ τοῦ κορυφαίου ἐντὸς τοῦ ἐκ τῶν λιτῶν καὶ εὐπορίστων ἱκανῶς αὐτῆς τὸ ἐκ τῶν λιτῶν ἰόμενον ἀφηγούμενον.”  
¹¹ Plutarch, Πῶς δεῖ τὸν νέον ποιημάτων ἀκούειν 37a: “ὁ τῆς φύσεως πλοῦτος ὥρισται”. For G. Roskam (“Plutarch as a source for Epicurean philosophy: Another aspect of his Nachleben”, Ploutarchos, n.s., vol. 4, 2006/2007, pp. 80-81) in the long quotation near the end of the How the young man should study poetry, at first sight, Epicurus’ views receive by Plutarch a positive evaluation. They are introduced as examples of the philosophical insights to which poetry can prepare young men. In fact, however, it is the radicalness and strangeness of the Epicurean views which makes them so interesting for Plutarch in this context. For Plutarch is looking for philosophical tenets which are at odds with widespread convictions, and what he needs here are “strange” doctrines of other philosophical schools. By quoting Epicurus, Plutarch indirectly makes clear how strange the latter’s philosophy is. If that is true, the passage should not be understood as an approval of Epicurus’ views, but as subtle polemic.  
¹² Porphyry, Περὶ ἀποχῆς ἐμψύχων I.48: “τῶν γὰρ Ἐπικουρείων οἱ πλείως ἀπὸ αὐτὸ τοῦ κορυφαίου ἀφρόμενου μάζα καὶ τοῖς ἀκρόφιδις ἀφρομένου φαίνονται, τὰ τε συγγράμματα ἑμπελάθηκα τὸ ὀλιγοδεὲς τῆς φύσεως ἀφηγούμενον καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῶν λιτῶν καὶ εὐπορίστων ἱκανῶς αὐτῆς τὸ ἀναγκαίον ἰόμενον παριστάνετε”.  

First of all, Porphyry’s \textit{Letter to Marcella} could well be a treatise in epistolary form, which introduces the recipient as to how one can lead a philosophical life, but it could also be argued that this is a philosophical letter. It is known that the practice of writing philosophical letters goes back to the oldest generations of Pythagoreans, and even to Pythagoras himself, while Epicurus was the first to communicate a significant part of his philosophy in the form of letters, and this is the genre of protreptic epistolography.\footnote{John Dillon, “The Letters of Iamblichus: Popular Philosophy in a Neoplatonic Mode”, in Eugene Afonasin, John Dillon and John F. Finamore (eds.), \textit{Iamblichus and the foundations of later Platonism, Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval texts and contexts}, vol. 13, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2012, pp. 51-62.} Since the \textit{Letter to Marcella} contains Pythagorean and Epicurean doctrines, Porphyry might have imitated or followed Pythagoras and Epicurus in this practice. With regard to philosophy, the letter form was considered appropriate for the dissemination of ideas beyond the inner circle around the philosopher as illustrated by Epicurus’ \textit{Letter to Menoeceus}, which contains an exposition of moral theory intended for the general public. As has been argued, the \textit{Letter to Marcella} was actually intended for public circulation and can be interpreted as a protreptic text written in order to convert its readers to true philosophy.\footnote{Helène Whittaker, “The purpose of Porphyry’s \textit{Letter to Marcella}”, \textit{Symbolae Osloenses}, vol. 26, 2001, pp. 150-168.} Other studies on Porphyry have shown that he used to cite the works of other authors ranging over a millennium from Homer to his own contemporaries. His style of thinking was called “paratactic”. In other words, since Porphyry was no single-minded professional philosophical thinker, he often placed a number of different interpretations, explanations etc. in his own works and left the reader to make his own choice. The way Porphyry incorportated citations by other authors deserves of course further examination as a genre of its own. Probably the one unifying theme throughout Porphyry’s work is his passionate devotion to Greek culture in the broadest sense, with philosophy as the leading component.\footnote{Andrew Smith, “Porphyry – Scope for a reassessment”, in George Karamanolis and Anne Sheppard (eds.), \textit{Studies on Porphyry, Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, BICS, Supplement 98, 2007}, pp. 12-13. See also, \textit{Porphyry: On Abstinence from Killing Animals}, Translated by Gillian Clark, Ancient Commentators on Aristotle, General editor: Richard Sorabji, Bloomsbury, London – N. Delhi – N. York – Sydney, 2nd ed. 2014, pp. 19-20.} In his edition of Plotinus’ \textit{Enneads}, Porphyry confesses that he modified his master’s texts by inventing titles and dividing long treatises into shorter units. For each unit Porphyry used to make a brief hint as to its topic. By doing this, he wanted to make the material easily readable.\footnote{Πορφυρίου \textit{Περὶ τοῦ Πλοτίνου βίου καὶ τῆς τάξεως τῶν βιβλίων αὐτοῦ}, Εισαγωγή, εἰσαγωγή, αρχαίο κείμενο, μετάφρασε, σχόλια Παύλος Κάλλιγάς, Ακαδημία Αθηνών, Βιβλιοθήκη Α. Μανούση, Κέντρον Εκδόσεως Έργων Ελλήνων Συγγραφέων, Δεύτερη έκδοση, Αθήνα 1998, pp. 180, 184.}

More importantly, what is suggested here is that in the \textit{Letter to Marcella} (27.425-31.483) Porphyry did not make a collation of a number of scattered views deriving from different Epicurean texts, but inserted an integral text, which was either a single chapter or even a whole treatise of Epicurean philosophy, aiming at the elaboration of a specific view of Epicurus, i.e. a variant of \textit{Principal doctrine XV / Vatican saying VIII}. The chapter or treatise was structured on a sequence of arguments and ideas, which seem to follow one another, and Porphyry must have generally been in agreement with its content. Thus, he must have inserted it in his own
work with minor interventions. Porphyry introduces the whole topic to his reader by saying that in what follows he will discuss the law of Nature. The view that “the written laws are laid down for the sake of temperate men” seems to belong to Epicurus (fr. 530 Usener), but not to the extant text which follows about the law of Nature from line 27.425 onwards. The title of the original chapter or treatise could very well have been the actual formulation of this particular Epicurean doctrine: “Ὁ τῆς φύσεως πλοῦτος ἄληθος φιλόσοφος ὀριστικαί καὶ ἔστιν εὐπόριστος, ὥ ἐν τῶν κενῶν ἄδοξον ἀδριστός τε καὶ δυσπόριστος”. The Epicurean text is interrupted for a while from 28.439 to 28.443, because Porphyry felt the need to insert a Neoplatonic view of his own about abstinence from food and sex. It does not seem to be a coincidence, however, that, as seen already, in his work On abstinence from killing animals, Porphyry also inserted an Epicurean text about the wealth of Nature. Immediately afterwards, in the Letter to Marcella he cited the continuation of the Epicurean text by presenting three exhortations deriving from “the philosophers” ("οἱ φιλόσοφοι"), who are not further specified. Porphyry introduced these views of the Epicureans by means of the verbs “φαίνονται”, “λαμβάνονται” and “παρακελεύονται”, probably because of his partial agreement with them.19 Till the end of paragraph 31 (line 483) Porphyry reproduced the remaining Epicurean text with no intervention of his own.20 After the end of this text, Porphyry, in the form of a very brief summary, stated that the discussion about the law of Nature is over. Porphyry’s vague reference to the existence of prescriptions similar to those described in the previous paragraphs (“τὰ τοῦτος ὅμως”) might be in connection with his claim in his work On abstinence from killing animals that he knew of many other Epicurean treatises with similar content.

The argumentation, which supports the ethical exhortations in paragraphs 27-31 of the Letter to Marcella, is structured on inter-connected sets of opposing views:

On the one hand, there are positive concepts like the wealth of Nature, which is limited, well-defined and easily obtained, and thus, he who follows Nature is self-sufficient. Also, the perception of what is not necessary, the absence of fear, the blessed reason, the wisdom, the knowledge and the confidence deriving from the simple way of life allow people to become in control of themselves. Finally, the love of true philosophy purges the passion of the soul, and therefore its benefit is compared with the benefit from medicine.

On the other hand, there are negative concepts like the empty false opinions, the ill-defined and hard to obtain wealth, the unlimited yearnings, the ignorant people, those who have a fever because of the serious nature of their disease, the desire of what is most detrimental, the fickle desires, the greed, the fear which reproduces its own self, the soul, the fear and the unlimited and empty desire as causes of great evils, the feeling to be always in need of everything as a consequence of forgetting Nature, the unlimited, disturbing and painful desire, the fleeting fancy, the turmoil deriving from excessive riches and the bestial life which has the same cause. Similarly, it is underlined that as the flesh cries not be hungry, not to be thirsty and not to be cold, similarly the soul does not repress these cries.


20 An indication of the coherence of the Epicurean text in the section 30.465-476 of the Letter to Marcella is presented by Kathleen O’Brien Wicker who argues (op. cit., p. 118): “This section resembles in some aspects a mini-diatribe on τῆς vs φιλόσοφος and is Stoic in its perspective as well as Epicurean”. It is characteristic that for Usener this section contains two different Epicurean fragments (frs. 200 and 489).
Further research is, of course, necessary concerning Porphyry’s surviving works for a better understanding of his style of thinking and writing, especially when his works serve as vehicles for views belonging to other philosophical schools and the Epicureans in particular. So far, he seems to have been the only Neoplatonist who inserted basic tenets of Epicureanism in his own philosophical treatises. With reference to the Epicurean chapter in the *Letter to Marcella*, Porphyry himself did not name its author, though it is somehow clear that it is an analysis of a main view of Epicurus and belonged to his rich collection of Epicurean writings with a similar content. The Epicurean view survives in four variants and Porphyry reproduced two different treatises about its meaning in his works *On abstinence from killing animals* and *Letter to Marcella*.

**APPENDIX**

In what follows, the Greek text of lines 27.420-31.484 of Porphyry’s *Letter to Marcella* is accompanied by the English translation also by Kathleen O’Brien Wicker (*op. cit.*, pp. 68-73).

In the Greek text most quotation marks, by means of which O’Brien Wicker (cf. *op. cit.*, pp. 114-119) denotes the collation of various Epicurean fragments in accordance to Usener’s edition of them, have not been adopted. In line 27.431 <ου> is added following A. Nauck’s edition of Porphyry’s text (*Porphyrii philosophi platonici Opuscula tria*, Lipsiae, In aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1860) and also in accordance with the meaning of the sentences before and after. In line 28.447 “διό” is corrected to “διό”. Quotation marks are inserted for the text of lines 28.447-28.450, which Usener and other editors of Epicurean fragments have not recognized as Epicurean views.

In the translation, the supposed title of the incorporated Epicurean chapter or treatise is denoted by means of underlined text. Again, most quotation marks, by means of which O’Brien Wicker denotes the collation of various Epicurean fragments in accordance to Usener’s edition of them, have not been adopted. The translation of line 27.431 is modified with the addition of <not>. Quotation marks are inserted for the translation text of lines 28.447-28.450.
27. κατανοητέον οὖν πρῶτον
σοι τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦτον ἀναβατέον ἐπὶ
tὸν θείον, δι καὶ τὸν τῆς φύσεως διέταξε νόμον. ἀρ’
ὀν ὁμομεμένη οὐδαμοῦ εὐλαβήσῃ τὸν ἐγγραφὸν. “οἱ γὰρ
ἐγγραφοὶ νόμοι χάριν τῶν μετρίων κεῖται, οὐχ ὅπως μὴ
ἀδικήσαν, ἀλλ’ ὅπως μὴ ἀδικοῦνται.” “ὁ τῆς φύσεως πλοῦτος
ἀλήθεις φιλόσοφος ὄρισται καὶ ἔστιν εὐπορίστος, ὁ δὲ τῶν
κενῶν δοῦν ἀορίστος τε καὶ δυσπόριστος, ὁ οὖν τῇ
φύσει κατακολουθῶν καὶ μὴ ταῖς καναίς δόξαις ἐν πᾶσιν
ἀυτάρκης. πρὸς γὰρ τὸ τῆς φύσει ἀρκοῦν πάσας κτήσεις ἐστὶ
πλοῦτος, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἀορίστους ὀρέξεις καὶ ὁ μέγιστος
πλοῦτός ἔστιν οὐδὲν. <οὐ> σπάνιον γε εὑρείν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς
tὸ τῆς φύσεως τέλος πένητα καὶ πλούσιον πρὸς τὰς κενὰς
dόξας. οὐδεὶς γὰρ τῶν ἀφρόνων οἷς ἔχει ἀρκεῖται,
μᾶλλον δὲ οἷς οὐκ ἔχει οὐδενίζεται. ὅσπερ οὖν οἱ πυρείσ-
σοντες διὰ κακοῆθεσιν τῆς νόσου αἱ δυγωσί καὶ τῶν
ἐναντιοτάτων ἐπαθημοῦσιν, οὕτω καὶ οἱ τῆς ψυχῆς κακοὶ
ἐχοντες διωκμένην πένονται πάντων αἰεὶ καὶ εἰς
πολυτρόπους ἐπιθυμίας ὑπὸ λαμαργίας ἐμπιπτούσιν.”
28. ἀγνέυειν οὖν καὶ ὁ θεὸς δ’ ἀποχὴς βρομάτων καὶ
ἀφροδίσιον προσετάξαν, εἰς τὸ τῆς φύσεως, ἤν αὐτοὶ
συνρήσαν, ἐπάγοντες βουλήμα τοῦς εὐσέβειαν μεταν-
tας, ὡς ἂν παντὸς τοῦ παρὰ τὸ βουλήμα πλεονάζοντος
μαροῦ καὶ θανασίμου. “φοβοῦμενος γὰρ ὁ πολύς το λιτὸν
τῆς διαίτης, διὰ τῶν φόβων ἐπὶ πράξεις πορεύεται τὰς
μᾶλλον ἂν τούτων παρασκευαζούσας, καὶ πολλοὶ τοῦ πλοῦτου
τυχόντες οὐ τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν τῶν κακῶν εὐρον, ἀλλά μετα-
βολὴν μειζόνον.” διὸ φασίν οἱ φιλόσοφοι “οὔδεν οὔτως
ἀναγκαῖον ὡς τὸ γιγάντειν καλὸς τὸ μὴ ἀναγκαίον,
πλουσιότατὴν δὲ εἶναι πάντων τὴν αὐτάρκειαν καὶ
σεμνὸν τὸ μηδενὸς δεῖσθαι” λαμβάνονται. διὸ καὶ
“μελετῶν” παρακελεύονται “οὐχ ὅπως τι ποριστέον ἀναγκαίον,
ἀλλ’ ὅπως μᾶλλον θαρρήσομεν μὴ πορισθέντος. 29. μηδὲ
αιτίομεθα τὴν σάρκα ός τῶν μεγάλων κακῶν αἰτίαν μηδ’
eἰς τὰ πράγματα τρέπομεν τὰς δύσφοριας, ἐν δὲ τῇ ψυχῇ
τὰς τούτων αἰτίας μᾶλλον ζητῶμεν καὶ ἀπορρήτατως πᾶσαν
ματαίαν τῶν ἐφημέρων ὀρέξειν καὶ ἐλπίδα δολο γενόμεθα
ἐλαυτόν. ἢ γὰρ διὰ φοβόν τις κακοδαιμονεῖ ἢ δι’ ἀορίσ-
tον καὶ κενὴν ἐπιθυμίαν. ἢ τις χαλκοῦν δύναται τὸν
μακάριον ἐαυτὸ περιποίησαι λογισμὸν. εἰπ’ ὅσον δ’ ἄν
ἀμηχανίον, λήθη τῆς φύσεως ἀμηχανίες. σαυτῷ γὰρ ἀορίσ-
tους φόβους καὶ ἐπιθυμίας προσβάλλεις; κρέισσον δὲ σοι
θαρρεῖν ἐπὶ στιβάδος κατακεμένη ἢ ταράττεσθαι χρυσῆ
ἐχόμεν κλίνεται καὶ πολυτελῆ τράπεζαν. εξ ἐργασίας
ὕπνοιδους οὔσισι μὲν πλῆθος σφορέυται, μιὸς δὲ
tαξιάπορος συνίσταται. 30. ἀφυσιολόγητον μὴν ἤγου
βοώσῃ τῆς σαρκὸς βοῶν τὴν ψυχὴν. σαρκὸς δὲ φοινή μή
πεινήν, μὴ διψήν, μὴ ριγόν. καὶ ταῦτα τὴν ψυχὴν
χαλεπὸν μὲν κολύσαι, ἐπισφάλεις δὲ παρακοῦσαι τῆς παραγ-
γειλάσης φύσεως αὐτῇ διὰ τῆς προσφυοῦς αὐτῇ αὐταρκείας
καθ’ ἡμέραν. καὶ τὰ παρὰ τῆς τύχης μικρότερα διδάσκει
νομίζειν, καὶ εὔτυχοντας μὲν γινώσκειν ἀτυχεῖν, δυσ-
tυχοῦντας δὲ μὴ παρὰ μέγα τίθεσθαι τὸ εὐτυχείν· καὶ
dέχεσθαι μὲν ἀθορύβως τὰ παρὰ τῆς τύχης ἄγαθα, παρατε-
tάχθαι δὲ πρὸς τὰ παρ’ αὐτῆς δοκοῦντα εἶναι κακά. ώς
ἐφήμερον μὲν πάν τὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἄγαθόν ἔστι, σοφία δὲ
cαι ἐπιστήμη οὐδαμῶς τύχης κοινονεῖ. 31. οὐκ ἀποδεῖν τοῦ-
tων πόνος ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ φέρειν μᾶλλον τὸν ἀνόνητον ἐκ τῶν
κενοδόξων πόνων. ἔροι γὰρ φιλοσοφίας ἀληθινῆς πᾶσα
tαραχώδης καὶ ἐπίπονος ἐπιθυμία ἐκλύεται. κενός ἐκεῖ-
nοι φιλοσόφου λόγος. ώρ’ οὖ μηδὲν πάθος ἀνθρώπων θερα-
pεύεται· ὅσπερ γὰρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδὲν ὀφελος, εἰ μὴ τὰς
νόσους τῶν σωμάτων θεραπεύει, οὕτως οὐδὲ φιλοσοφίας,
eἰ μὴ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος.” ταῦτα μὲν οὖν καὶ
tὰ τούτοις ὅμοια ὁ τῆς φύσεως παραγγέλλει νόμος.
TRANSLATION

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 reference, you need never be concerned about the written law. “For the written laws are laid down for the sake of temperate men, not to keep them from doing wrong but from being wronged.” “The wealth of Nature, being truly philosophic, is well-defined and easily obtained, but the wealth of empty false opinions is ill-defined and hard to obtain. So then, the person who follows Nature and not empty false opinions is self-sufficient in everything. For satisfying Nature any possession is wealth, but for satisfying unlimited yearnings even the greatest wealth is nothing. It is <not> rare to find a man poor in the attainment of Nature but rich in empty false opinions. For no ignorant man is satisfied with what he has; instead he pines for what he does not have. 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, the philosophers say that “nothing is as necessary as perceiving clearly what is not necessary,” and that “the greatest wealth of all is self-sufficiency,” and they take “the need of nothing as worthy of respect.” Therefore they exhort us to “practice not how we must provide for some necessity but how we will remain confident when it is not provided.

29. Let us neither censure the flesh as cause of great evils nor attribute our 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, it is because you forget Nature, for you inflict upon yourself unlimited fears and desires. But it is better for you to have confidence as you lie on a bed of straw than to be in turmoil while you possess a gold couch and a costly table. As a result of lamentable labor, property is amassed but life becomes bestial.

30. Consider it in no way contrary to Nature for the soul to cry out when the flesh cries out. The flesh cries not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. And so it is difficult for the soul to repress these cries, but it is dangerous for it to disregard nature’s exhortations to it because of the self-sufficiency which grows in it from day to day. Nature also teaches us to regard the outcomes of fortune of little account and to know how to be unfortunate when we are favored by fortune, but not to consider the favors of fortune important when we experience misfortune. And Nature teaches us to accept unperturbed the good outcomes of fortune, but to stand prepared in the face of the seeming evils which come from it. For all that the masses regard as good is a fleeting fancy, but wisdom and knowledge have nothing in common with fortune.

31. Pain does not consist in lacking the goods of the masses but rather in enduring the unprofitable suffering that comes from empty false opinions. For the love of true 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.

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