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Epicurus and Friendship

J. Hilton Turner

EPICURUS THE ATHENIAN philosopher who is said to have numbered his friends by cities and whose school continued uninterrupted for centuries,¹ is now almost a forgotten man even to some who use his name. To many, Epicureanism is the ancient atomic theory according to Lucretius, to more it is the doctrine "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Neither picture is complete or quite accurate. Brilliant as Lucretius was, he was not a typical follower of Epicurus either in the violence of his enthusiasm or in his obsessive interest in the scientific side of the system. Epicurus' interest was in happiness, which he unwisely termed pleasure, to be obtained by removing the reasons for unhappiness. The atomic theory was to him simply a means to this end, since belief in it eliminated the superstitious fears which plagued the minds of his contemporaries. The rest of his teachings were directed towards the same end, a happiness contributed to by peace of mind and a physical well-being unmarred by overindulgence or undue asceticism. The result is a closely-knit system with almost no loose ends, each element contribut-

ing to the desired result. The purpose of this article is to discuss one element of this teaching, the importance attributed to friendship.

Epicurean Friendship Inconsistent?

OF ALL the things wisdom prepares for the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship.²

This statement along with others from Epicurus' fragments shows how highly friendship (*philia*) was regarded by the Epicureans. However, the emphasis placed on friendship has in general been regarded as a weakness in the consistency of Epicurean ethics.³ The alleged weakness is briefly as follows: The ultimate good of the Epicurean is pleasure. This is satisfactory as an explanation of self-regarding action. In general it is quite possible to explain our activity as governed by a desire to gain greater pleasure or avoid greater pain, and to attribute our errors to ignorance of what these actually are. The same reasoning bases friendship on selfish motives. The opponents of Epicureanism, with the idealized conception of the true meaning of friendship, regarded this notion as a denial of the better side of human nature.⁴ But with apparent inconsistency Epicurus and his disciples recommended and practiced a quite lofty type of friendship. The Epicurean *sapiens* was expected, if need be, to die for a friend.⁵ A number of precepts can be gathered to show that friendship was on a reciprocal basis and that disinterested action was actually encouraged.⁶ The verdict has been that the reconciliation of these teachings is difficult even on the basis of the claim that to give is more pleasant than to receive,⁷ and that in regard to human relationships, Epicurean philosophy is high-minded and magnanimous in precept and practice, but in

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As Dr. Turner points out, Epicurus is one of the great neglected figures of ancient times. In contrast to Plato, however, he was a popular philosopher whose teachings appealed to a great many educated people. In this connection, the reader should turn back to N. W. DeWitt's article in the January, 1947 issue of THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL.

its theoretical basis cynical and mean.

In this article I propose to re-examine the position of friendship in the ethics of Epicurus by the use of pertinent evidences all too inadequately provided by his fragments, and to attempt to fit them into a reasonable pattern in accord with the aims of the philosophy.

It is, however, not my purpose to try to find a hard and fast logical consistency between theory and practice, and, failing in the search, to condemn this element of his ethical theory as another of many weaknesses. To be shocked at unscientific conclusions and inconsistencies of logic in Epicureanism is waste of emotional effort, and to judge him on the basis of such weaknesses without investigating the motives behind is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of his philosophy. Epicurus was a pioneer in many respects, an original thinker who boasted that he was not indebted to teachers.⁸ This boast is to a degree refuted by the facts, and his philosophy has been jeered at as second-hand, a debased version of the atomism of Democritus combined with a debased version of the hedonism of Aristippus,⁹ but his system viewed as a whole was his original creation possessing unity by virtue of its ultimate goal, the happy life for the individual, to be attained by the greatest possible removal of unpleasantness. It is with this principle in mind that I propose to investigate the place of friendship (*philia*) in Epicurean doctrine. The method employed in this article will be then to ask why Epicurus should be interested in *philia* and what contribution he intended it to make towards the goal of his philosophy. The validation of the resulting pattern will be its plausibility.

Two Kinds of Love

TO BEGIN, it is perhaps well to point out that the word *philia* is very inadequately translated by "friendship" in English.¹⁰ Its application is of far wider extent and it is perhaps better understood as non-passionate affection as contrasted with *erōs*, passionate love. It is, for example, used of the relations between members of a family. As used by the Epicureans it recognized no barriers of sex, age, caste, or nationality. We have fragments

of letters addressed by Epicurus to a wide variety of people, including Leontion, a *hetaira*,¹¹ and some unidentified children.¹² Both slave and free were admitted to the Epicurean fellowship.¹³

This emphasis on affection not based on passion is probably partially explained by a dislike of excessive emotion coupled with a realization of the power of love. Although the most violent Epicurean denunciations of love are found in Lucretius,¹⁴ and their vehemence was probably personal,¹⁵ Epicurus himself beyond doubt disapproved of passionate love and, in fact, condemned it as a "vehement desire after sexual pleasure accompanied by goading restlessness."¹⁶ There is on the other hand the often quoted passage:

I, for my part, am unable to think of the good, taking away the pleasures of the belly, and those from love, and those of hearing and sight.¹⁷

The significance of this passage, calculated to emphasize the material and sensuous basis of his ethical system, has, we may assume, been distorted by removal from context. To avoid a lengthy discussion, the most natural conclusion regarding his attitude toward love from the evidence we have, and the most consistent with his doctrine, is that it belongs to the category of natural but unnecessary desires of which the lack of fulfilment brings no pain.¹⁸

Take away sight and conversation and association and the passion of love is at an end.¹⁹

Epicurus had none of the daring idealism of Plato, who in dealing with the same passion would exalt it to become the desire which draws a man upward in the search for truth until he finally is able to look upon the beauty of the eternal forms.²⁰ The love which Epicurus exalted was love without passion. It was also a democratic love, not the one-sided love of two men, an older and a younger, like the lower stage of Platonic love. It is, however, with some confidence that I suggest that Epicurus in emphasizing love without passion was attempting, like Plato, but in a way suiting his far different personality, to purify the passion of love. We have here, then, a plausible reason for Epicurus' approval of *philia*—it was love which did not partake of

the disagreeable qualities and the limitations of *eros*.

Friendship: a Means to Happiness

HOWEVER, in keeping with the principle that Epicurus' philosophy finds unity in its end, *philia* should be further considered in relation to his ultimate purpose. This is the physical and mental welfare or pleasure of the individual. To secure this end he had adopted the atomic theory, which gave a plausible mechanistic explanation of the origin of the universe and of natural phenomena, thus eliminating the need for divine interference, and which also demonstrated the mortality of the soul. By this means could be eliminated the two greatest fears, fear of the gods and of torture after death. Thus human life was placed within definite limits over which the individual might be expected to have some control. Further he had precepts regarding fears and worry in the "limited life" thus given to man.

. . . The security that comes from a life of retirement and withdrawal from the crowd is the most unalloyed.²¹

The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made what he could akin to himself and the rest at least not alien: but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has obtained outside support for all which it was of advantage to treat thus.²²

The main part of this teaching is frequently summed up in the command: *lathe biosas*, "live unknown."²³ But this life in seclusion was not to be the life of a hermit: Lucilius asked Seneca:

Is Epicurus right in chiding as he does in one of his letters those who say that the *sapiens* is satisfied with himself and for that reason has no need of a friend?²⁴

It is friendship then that fills the gap and provides both the human companionship and the security needed by man. This is the significance of the reference to the "complete life" in the passage quoted near the beginning of this article. Elsewhere Epicurus considers

worthy of comparison the confidence gained by the knowledge that there is no existence after death and the security given in this "limited space of life" by friendship.²⁵

Friendship Must Be Self-centered

THIS is the position of *philia* in Epicurean philosophy, a substitute for those connections which impaired the opportunity of the individual for self-determination. In this relationship, however, in order that freedom of will and action may not suffer encroachment, the self-centered basis of friendship must not be forgotten. And so we have a constant emphasis on need and personal pleasure as the beginning of friendship.²⁶ The individual, for the sake of his own peace of mind, cannot afford to become a slave to necessity, or to superstitious beliefs, or to the whims of his fellow men. But as a free agent the Epicurean can and is expected to maintain a very high standard in his friendship.

We must not approve those who are always ready for friendship or those who hang back, but for friendship's sake we must even risk gratitude.²⁷

It is not so much our friends' help that helps us as the confidence of their help.²⁸

He is no friend who is continually asking for help nor he who never associates help with friendship. For the former barter gratitude for a practical return and the latter destroys the hope of good in the future.²⁹

Epicurus also forbade compulsory community of goods on the ground that it implied a distrust, which had no place in friendship.³⁰ Despite the prevalent view referred to at the beginning of this article, this generosity and altruism is in keeping with his philosophy:

It is not merely more noble, but also more pleasant to do good than to be the recipient thereof.³¹

That is to say, the action is itself better and it makes for the mental well-being and pleasure of the benefactor because the favourable balance in well-doing ensures the freedom from obligation which is essential for happiness. He may have added that to do good is more conducive to *asphaleia*, actual personal

security, than to be the recipient, although we have no surviving statement to this effect. This was, for example, the experience of the well-known Epicurean Atticus, who by a well-calculated program of benefaction survived unscathed the political upheavals of the first century B.C., despite his immense wealth and personal prominence.³²

Friendship and the Epicurean Community

ALTHOUGH this emphasis on self-interest, realistic as it is, may seem slightly repugnant, it must be remembered that friendship is reciprocal and with the Epicureans was not exclusive, but seems to have been potentially all-embracing.³³ From this point of view it was nobler than the famous friendships of Damon and Phintias and Pylades and Orestes, quoted against it by Cicero,³⁴ in that those friends, although, as the stories have it, they had no thought of self, excluded the rest of the world from the intimacy of their communion.

True Epicurean friendship was enjoyed in the fellowship of those who lived in accordance with Epicurean precepts:

Friendship too has practical needs as its motive. One must indeed lay its foundations (we seed the ground too) but it is formed and maintained through community of life among those who have reached the fullness of pleasure.³⁵

This meant historically the Epicurean school at Athens and other schools which sprang from it.

At vero Epicurus una in domo, et ea quidem angusta, quam magnos quantaque amoris conspiratione consentientes tenuit amicorum greges! quod fit etiam nunc ab Epicureis.³⁶

The nature of Epicurean *contubernium* is indicated by the following:

Epicurus did not recommend them to put their possessions into a common stock as did Pythagoras when he said that "Friends have all in common"; for to do so implied distrust and distrust could not go with friendship.³⁷

Those who have the power of procuring the greatest confidence as regards their neighbours, also live with one another most pleasantly since

they have the most certain pledge of security, and after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of one who has perished, as though he were to be pitied.³⁸

Friendship was useful to Epicurus from a practical point of view. It was the cement which held his school together. This fellowship of the Epicureans, called by a renegade "that mystic communion,"³⁹ probably is as important as any other factor in accounting for the long survival of the school.⁴⁰

Evangelistic Friendship

AND IT HAD an even wider application. Apart from the immediate circle, Epicurus is said by his biographer to have numbered his friends by cities.⁴¹ There is also a remarkable passage which is usually taken as a picturesque encomium of friendship, but which, I think, deserves to be taken more literally.

Friendship goes dancing around the world proclaiming to us all to awake to the praises of the blessed life.⁴²

Friendship, the personal contact, was what Epicurus, himself noted for his kindness,⁴³ counted on to emancipate his fellows from fears and mental distress and pain, and introduce them to happiness.

Here comparison with Platonic love, mentioned earlier, is not without some significance. Epicurus and Plato both saw in love potentialities which might well serve their purposes. Both would take the force and use it, each in the manner which suited his temperament. Plato wished to purify and intensify it so that it might be the attraction through which man is drawn towards the divine forms. Epicurus by emphasizing a less intense love democratized it; in relation to the happiness of the individual he made it a selfish thing, but in relation to the happiness of the individuals who make up the Epicurean *contubernium* and those who make up society, he caused the stigma of selfishness to fade and friendship to become not only a practical and even commendable basis for human relationships, but even to blossom into a missionary zeal.

NOTES

References to the *Ratae Sententiae* and the Vatican collection of fragments are indicated by R.S. and S.V., respectively. Most fragments are referred to by the source and the number in Usener, *Epicurea* (Leipzig, 1887) noted in parentheses.

¹ Diogenes Laertius, 10. 9.

² R.S. 27, ὧν ἡ σοφία παρασκευάζεται εἰς τὴν τοῦ ὄλου βίον μακαριότητα πολλὸν μέγιστον ἔστιν ἡ τῆς φιλίας κτήσις. Cf. S.V. 78.

³ See Bailey, Cyril, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, Oxford, 1928, 517-521; Hicks, R. D., *Stoic and Epicurean*, New York, 1910; Guyau, Marie Jean, *La Morale d'Epicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*, Paris, 1904, 131-141. Views in closer accord with the conclusions reached in this article are to be found in the articles of Professor N. W. DeWitt, cited below (notes 26 and 36), to whom I must acknowledge a considerable indebtedness.

⁴ Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2. 78 ff.; Plutarch, *De Amore Proliis*, 2, p. 495a (U527): θαυμάζεται γὰρ ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις ὁ εἰπὼν, μισθοῦ γὰρ ἀνθρώπων τίς ἀνθρώπων φιλεῖ; (καίτοι) κατ' Ἐπικούρου ὁ πατήρ τὸν υἱόν, (ἢ) μήτηρ τὸ τέκνον, οἱ παῖδες τοὺς τεκόντας.

⁵ Diog. Laert., 10. 120b; καὶ ὑπὲρ φίλου ποτὲ τεθνήξεσθαι.

⁶ See below notes 27-30.

⁷ See below note 31.

⁸ Diog. Laert., 10. 13.

⁹ Cicero, *De Fin.*, 1. 17-26.

¹⁰ Hereafter when "friendship" is used as a translation of *φιλία*, it is to be understood as having the same connotation as the Greek word.

¹¹ Diog. Laert., 10. 5 (Us.143); 7 (Us.145).

¹² *Volumen Herculanense* 176, col. 18 (Us.176).

¹³ Diog. Laert., 10. 3.

¹⁴ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 4. 1037-1287.

¹⁵ See Stearns, J. B., "Epicurus and Lucretius on Love," *THE CLASSICAL JOURNAL*, 31 (1936) 343-351, who has made a rather too successful attempt to divorce the sentiments of Epicurus and Lucretius, and has, I feel, made the schism too great.

¹⁶ Hermias, in *Platonis Phaedrum*, p. 76 (Us.483), σύντονον ὄρεξιν ἀφροδισίων μετὰ οἴστρου καὶ ἀδημονίας. Cf. S.V. 51.

¹⁷ Us.67, derived from Diog. Laert., 10. 6; Athenaeus, 278 f.; 280b; 546c; οὐ γὰρ ἔγωγε ἔχω τί νοήσω τάγαθόν, ἀφαιρῶν μὲν τὰς διὰ χυλῶν ἡδονάς, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀφροδισίων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀκροαμάτων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς διὰ μορφῆς κατ' ὄψιν ἡδέας κινήσεις.

¹⁸ R.S. 26; 30.

¹⁹ S.V. 18, ἀφαιρουμένης προσόψεως καὶ οὐκ ἐπιθυμίας καὶ συναραστροφῆς ἐκλύεται τὸ ἐρωτικὸν πάθος. Cf. S.V. 51.

²⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, 270A-212B.

²¹ R.S. 14, εἰλικρινεστάτη γίνεται ἡ ἐκ τῆς ἡσυχίας καὶ ἐκχωρήσεως τῶν πολλῶν ἀσφάλεια.

²² R.S. 39, ὁ τὸ μὴ θαρροῦν ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν ἀριστα συντησάμενος οὗτος τὰ μὲν δυνατὰ οὐκ ἀποφύλακα κατασκευάσασα. τὰ δὲ μὴ δυνατὰ οὐκ ἀλλόφυλα γέσασα δὲ μηδὲ τοῦτο δυνατὸς ἦν, ἀνεπίμκτος ἐγένετο, καὶ ἐξήρῃσασα ὅσα τοῦτ'

ἐλυσιτέλει πράττειν.

²³ Plut., *Εἰ καλῶς εἴρηται τὸ λάθε βιώσας*, p. 1128 ff. (Us.551).

²⁴ Seneca, *Epistulae*, 9, 1 (Us.174), An merito reprehendat in quadam epistula Epicurus eos, qui dicunt sapientem se ipso esse contentum, et propter hoc amico non indigere desideras scire.

²⁵ R.S. 28, ἡ αὐτὴ γνώμη θαρρεῖν τε ἐποίησεν ὑπὲρ τοῦ μηθὲν αἰώνιον εἶναι δεῦν ἢ μὴδὲ πολυχρόνιον, καὶ τὴν ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ὠρισμένοις ἀσφάλεια φιλίας μάλιστα κατείδε συντηλουμένην. "The same opinion which has given us confidence of the fact that nothing that is terrible is everlasting or of long duration has been brought about to the greatest degree the security which we possess from friendship in the limited space of life itself."

²⁶ For example, S.V. 23; S.V. 34; Diog. Laert., 10. 120b (see note 35); Plut., *adversus Coloten*, 8, p. 1111b (Us.546). For Epicurean practice regarding friendship see DeWitt, N. W., "Epicurean Doctrine of Gratitude," *American Journal of Philology*, 58 (1937) 320-328; id., "Epicurean Suavitas," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd Ser., 32 (1938) Section 2, 41-48.

²⁷ S.V. 28, οὔτε τοὺς προχέριους εἰς φιλίαν οὔτε τοὺς ὀκηροὺς δοκιμαστῶν δεῖ δὲ καὶ παρακινδυνεύσαι χάριν, χάριν φιλίας.

²⁸ S.V. 34, οὐχ οὕτως χρεῖαν ἔχομεν τῆς χρείας παρὰ τῶν φίλων ὡς τῆς πιστεως τῆς περὶ τῆς χρείας.

²⁹ S.V. 39, οὐδ' ὁ τὴν χρεῖαν ἐπιζητῶν διὰ παντὸς φίλος, οὐθ' ὁ μηδέποτε συνάπτων· ὁ μὲν γὰρ καπηλεύει τῇ χάριτι τὴν ἀμοιβήν, ὁ δὲ ἀποκόπτει τὴν περὶ τοῦ μελλόντος εὐελπιστίαν. Cf. Philodemus, *περὶ παρρησίας*, 28 and 15, 6 ff.

³⁰ Diog. Laert., 10. 11; see note 37.

³¹ Plut., *Philosophandum esse cum principibus*, 3, p. 778c (Us.544), . . . τοῦ εὐ πάσχει τὸ εὐ ποιεῖν οὐ μόνον κάλλιον ἀλλὰ καὶ ἥδιον εἶναι . . .

³² See Cornelius Nepos, *Atticus*.

³³ S.V. 52, see note 42; cf. Diogenes Oenoandensis, XXIV, col. 2.

³⁴ Cicero, *De Fin.*, 2. 79.

³⁵ Diog. Laert., 10. 120b, καὶ τὴν φιλίαν διὰ τὰς χρείας· δεῖν μὲντοι προκατάρχεσθαι (καὶ γὰρ τὴν γῆν σπείρομεν) συνίστασθαι δὲ αὐτὴν κατὰ κοινωνίαν ἐν τοῖς ταῖς ἡδοναῖς ἐκπεπληρωμένους).

³⁶ Cicero, *De Fin.*, 1. 65. See DeWitt, N. W., "Epicurean Contubernium," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 67 (1936) 55-65.

³⁷ Diog. Laert., 10. 11, τὸν τε Ἐπικούρου μὴ ἀξιούν εἰς τὸ κοῦν κατατίθεσθαι τὰς οὐσίας, καθάπερ τὸν Πιθαγόραν κοινὰ τὰ φίλων λέγοντα· ἀπιστοῦντων γὰρ εἶναι τὸ τοιοῦτον· εἰ δ' ἀπιστων οὐδὲ φίλων.

³⁸ R.S. 40, ὅσοι τὴν δύναμιν ἔσχον τοῦ θαρρεῖν μάλιστα ἐκ τῶν ἡμιούτων παρασκευάσασθαι, οὗτοι καὶ ἐβίωσαν μετ' ἀλλήλων ἡδίστα τὸ βεβαιοτάτον πίστωμα ἔχοντες, καὶ πληρεστάτην οικειότητα ἀπολαβόντες οὐκ ὠδύραντο ὡς πρὸς ἔλεον τὴν τοῦ τελευτήσαντος προκαταστροφὴν.

³⁹ Diog. Laert., 10. 6, τὴν μυστικὴν ἐκείνην συνδιαγωγὴν.

⁴⁰ Diog. Laert., 10. 9.

⁴¹ Diog. Laert., 10. 9.

⁴² S.V. 52, ἡ φιλία περιχορεῖται τὴν οἰκουμένην κηρύτ-

VESTALIA

Carmella DiLeonardo—Lillian Hadley

ON JUNE 14, 1946, at Steinmetz High School, Chicago, the Latin Club under the direction of the sponsor, Mrs. Lillian Hadley, presented a most successful program. Since a Roman Wedding is one of the most interesting of subjects to all classes, girls or boys (and why not?), this made-to-order program is offered as a Valentine number that may be a prelude to June. The order of Mrs. Hadley's program was as follows:

- I. The Little Vestal Virgin (Lillian Lawler)
- II. The Tardy Vestal (Lillian Lawler)
- III. The Vestalia (Carmella DiLeonardo-Lillian Hadley)
- IV. A Roman Wedding (Lange-Lawler-Wayman-Hadley)

Appropriate music, such as "I Love You Truly," "O Promise Me," "At Dawning" and Mendelssohn's "Wedding March", added to the enjoyment of the large and enthusiastic audience.

Perhaps there are other teachers who have dramatized the ceremony of the Vestalia. For those who do not have their own version, the one written by Mrs. Hadley and Miss DiLeonardo should prove a welcome addition to the ever popular "Roman Wedding." (R.F.J.)

THE VESTALIA

NARRATOR: On June 7 the Penus Vestae, or inner shrine of the temple of Vesta in the Forum, which was closed the rest of the year, was thrown open to all matrons. During the seven following days they crowded to it barefoot. The object was to pray for a blessing on the household. Offerings of food were carried into the temple;

the Vestals offered the sacred cakes made of the first ears of corn; bakers and millers kept holiday; all mills were garlanded, and donkeys were decorated with wreaths and cakes.

On June 15 the temple was swept and the refuse taken away. As soon as the last act of cleansing had been performed, the 15th itself became *fastus*; that is, a day on which judicial and civil business might be transacted.

During the Vestalia the store houses and barns were cleaned and purified before the completion of the harvest. This corresponds to our week of spring housecleaning.

Curtain

VALERIA: Cornelia, next year you will be going to the Temple of Vesta on June 7 to celebrate the Vestalia. I remember the first time I went to the temple on the Vestalia. Remember the object of the Vestalia is to pray for a blessing on our household.

CORNELIA: This is really a holiday, isn't it, mother?

VALERIA: Yes. The bakers and millers have closed their shops.

CORNELIA: The mills and the donkeys are decorated with garlands and wreaths.

VALERIA: The Vestals will offer the sacred cakes made of the first ears of corn.

CORNELIA: Oh! Look, mother, the head Vestal and the other Vestals are on their way to the temple.

VALERIA: Now I must hurry to the temple with our offering of food.

Temple

The Vestals place the sacred cakes on the altar.

VESTALS:

The costliest sacrifice that wealth can make

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 355)

τοῦσα δὴ πᾶσι ἡμῖν ἐγείρεσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν μακαρισμὸν. Cf. Diog. Oen., II, coll. 3-6 and XXIV, col. 2.

The translation of the last term which stems from a version by N. W. DeWitt is designed to express the two ideas of praising and blessedness implicit in the word.

⁴³ S.V. 36; Diog. Laert., 10. 9-10.