

Making Sense of Epicurean Friendship: An Intended Audience Approach

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Abstract: This paper argues that Epicurean friendship is instrumental in value, and Epicurus's varied claims about friendship can be understood as teaching strategies that are tailored to different levels of students. After rejecting an argument that presents Epicurean friendship as intrinsic, I outline Epicurus's methodology of teaching and examine his specific claims regarding friendship as intended for either novice, intermediate, or advanced students. This approach allows Epicurus's weaker and stronger claims regarding friendship to be viewed as gradually progressing students towards the good life without deviating from the ethical hedonism that frames his entire philosophical project.

"Stance saw great coherence and clarity in this work on ancient philosophy, where concepts can seem uninteresting or insignificant since they belong to an ancient world. This paper digs up these concepts and makes them fresh, compelling, and interesting; it caused us to look at friendship in a new and unexpected light. Through this new Epicurean lense, we were afforded a new perspective that incited deep conversation on the subject."

-Kayla Williams
Associate Editor

For Epicurus, everyone desires and ought to seek the final good of pleasure. Pleasure is the one good that is pursued for its own sake, and all other things are desired for the sake of it. Epicurus's view of friendship is perplexing because he seems to suggest that friendships have intrinsic worth, yet this appears to run counter to the ethical hedonism that frames his entire philosophy. It is unclear whether he takes friendship to have intrinsic worth or merely instrumental worth, as well as whether taking either perspective involves an inconsistency or if his views can be reconciled.

I will argue that Epicurean friendship is instrumental in value, and his varied claims about friendship can be understood as teaching strategies that are tailored to different levels of students. To do this, I will first reject an argument that presents Epicurean friendship as intrinsic by showing it to be inconsistent with Epicurus's philosophical framework. Then, I will outline Epicurus's methodology of teaching and examine specific claims regarding friendship as intended for different audiences. In the beginning stages, to encourage the initial development of friendships, pragmatic arguments involving self-interest are appealed

to. In the middle stages, one can be introduced to the necessary connection it holds to the life of pleasure by merging the practical teaching model relied on as initial motivators and the theoretical model that justifies and informs the practical model. In the last stage, one has achieved the good life and must recognize how the role of friendship continues to develop despite this, which may involve counterintuitive but philosophically consistent implications.

Cicero presents an interpretation of Epicurean friendship that claims the first associations and unions and wishes to form relationships occur for the sake of pleasure, but when advancing familiarity has produced intimacy, affection blossoms to such an extent that friends come to be loved just for their own sake even if no advantage accrues from friendship.¹

The argument that friendship starts out as instrumentally driven toward pleasure but develops into caring for a friend for his or her own sake cannot fit into Epicurus's philosophical framework and is in fact a misrepresentation.² Epicurus explicitly states pleasure is the only good pursued for its own sake and is that which all other things are desired for the sake of.³ This means to view one's friendship as possessing intrinsic value would involve a false belief and those

who hold false beliefs cannot qualify as living the good life for Epicurus.

The only way it would not involve a false belief would be to conflate friendship with pleasure. However, it cannot be argued that a friend's pleasure is just as important to someone as his/her own pleasure is unless one were to grant an extended notion of self whereby one's friend actually becomes a part of him/herself in a metaphysical sense. This approach also fails, as Epicurean metaphysics rejects any kind of body-soul dualism—"the mind and the spirit are firmly interlinked and constitute a single nature."⁴ There cannot be any part of me that exists outside of my body. Since Epicurus's philosophy is individualistic, it would also be inaccurate to suggest it is pleasure in general and not my pleasure that is the highest good for me. What I value cannot be separated from what is valuable for me, given Epicurus's psychological and ethical commitments, and any attempt to do so would be to disturb his whole philosophical project.⁵

In light of this, I believe friendship must be interpreted as having instrumental value, and I believe his claims can be understood as part of a developing teaching project. Epicurean philosophy is a therapeutic philosophy that draws an analogy between medicine and philosophy. Epicureanism is aimed at the prac-

tical goal of treating the suffering in one's soul (i.e., unhappiness) through the use of philosophical arguments to dispel false beliefs and introduce true beliefs.⁶ This means philosophy is assessed in terms of its success—if it fails to treat an individual it is not particularly useful on Epicurus's account.⁷ Just as medicine modifies general treatments to meet the needs of the individual patient, Epicurus believed arguments must be crafted to target the needs of the individual student. Teaching, therefore, involved tailoring arguments to their intended audience. Depending on the level of the student, a more or less sophisticated argument may be required. Given this understanding, looking at Epicurus's advice on friendship requires an understanding of the intended audience that each statement was directed toward in order to make sense of how they all remain consistent. I will divide Epicurus's claims about friendship into three broad categories of students: the novice, the intermediate, and the advanced.

For the novice student of Epicurean philosophy, basic claims about friendship are presented and can be defended with a very pragmatic approach. Specifically, the claim that we should experience not only our friend's joys but also their deepest pains⁸ can be explained instrumen-

tally by appealing to our self-interest in achieving pleasure. I believe that on the whole, the pleasure one gains from a genuine friendship will always outweigh the pains. For Epicurus, there are two types of pleasure: kinetic and static. Kinetic pleasure describes the pleasure one gains while in the process of removing a pain (e.g., eating a good meal to relieve hunger), while static pleasure described the pleasure one feels after the pain has been removed (e.g., the state of being satisfied after one is done eating). Given that the terrible is always endurable on Epicurus's account,⁹ any pain encountered can be counterbalanced with kinetic pleasures or memories of kinetic pleasures. Support for this idea can be drawn from Epicurus's last day alive when he says,

Strangury and dysentery had set in, with all the extreme intensity of which they are capable. But the joy in my soul at the memory of our past discussion was enough to counterbalance all this.¹⁰

While one does experience pain even when enduring it, this pain is neutralized in the *overall balance* with the pleasures one simultaneously experiences. This leaves one gaining more pleasure from a friendship, as any pain that arises will be counterbalanced and endured.

1 Cicero, "On Ends," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A.A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1:66-70.

2 John M. Rist, "Epicurus on Friendship," *Classical Philology* 75, no. 2 (1980): 124.

3 Cicero, "On Ends," 1:29-32.

4 Lucretius, "3.136-76," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A.A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

5 Tim O'Keefe, "Is Epicurean Friendship Altruistic?" *Apeiron* 34, no. 4 (2001): 274.

6 Epicurus, "Key Doctrines," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 11-13.

7 Porphyry, "To Marcella," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31.

8 Cicero, 1:66-70.

9 Philodemus, "Against the Sophists," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4:9-14.

10 Diogenes Laertius, "10.22," in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

This seems especially convincing when one considers the various ways friendship acts as a means to pleasure. Epicurus believed that nothing enhances our security so much as friendship,¹¹ and those who had the power to eliminate all security-related fears were able to live the most harmoniously within their community.¹² Cicero mirrors this by suggesting, “a lonely life without friends is packed with risks and anxieties [...] friendships are creators of pleasures, as well as being their most reliable protectors.”¹³ Friendship may also afford mental security since the Epicurean practice of frank speech was used to ensure one is aware of beliefs they hold that are hindering their ability to achieve the good life, which was considered the responsibility of a friend or teacher.¹⁴ Moreover, the Epicurean Gardens were designed to ensure likeminded individuals could interact without the disturbances of culture—friends would reinforce true beliefs.¹⁵ Beyond security, there are countless other benefits that friendship affords, such as good company, emotional support, and sharing, to name a few.

Yet some may object that seeking friendship for its conferred benefits

seems to run counter to Epicurus’s claim that it is more pleasant to do good than to receive good. However, this idea may have simply been a teaching tool that emphasized that having no debts to others ensures a mental freedom that is pleasurable.¹⁶

Alternatively, it may be claimed that though the pleasures will always outweigh the pains while one is in a friendship, cases of the death of a friend seem to challenge the certainty that the scales will always tip in favor of pleasure over pain. However, for the same reasons one does not fear their own death, one does not fear their friend’s death or feel insurmountable pain when their friends die. Epicurus in fact perhaps established the modern idea of not mourning a loss but rather celebrating a life.¹⁷ The pleasant memories of one’s friend combined with an indifference toward death help the Epicurean successfully cope with the loss of a friend. In fact, remembering a friend can be akin to reflecting on the gods—it provides a sense of peace that comforts the soul.¹⁸

I will address Stephens’s objection that Epicureans always avoid pain, and thus when friendships inevitably expose individuals to pain,

the Epicurean deserts their friend.¹⁹ First, Epicureans do not avoid all pains.²⁰ While there is no one who pursues pain for the sake of pain, individuals do recognize that there are times when one can attain greater pleasures by enduring some pains.²¹ It is not hard to imagine how inconveniences for a friend can lead to far greater benefits an Epicurean would value such as trust, reliability, and reciprocity. Second, the ideas of never giving up on a friend²² seem to run counter to Stephens’s claim. If one is to never give up on a friend, this presumably includes providing aid to them even when doing so provides little immediate pleasure and perhaps even great immediate pain to oneself. Moreover, the claim that “one who never associates help with friendship [is not a friend]”²³ seems to suggest one ought to associate help with friendship, which does not exclude helping your friend when it is inconvenient or not particularly pleasurable. Considering that friendship acts as a two-way street, it would be unreasonable to have expectations for your friend to help you but never reciprocate the sentiment—to do so would be to undermine the trust that is foundational to the friendship in the first place. I think that to characterize the Epicurean as Stephens has is to misrepresent a life of pleasure as one of kinetic pleasure, whereby the

frequency of pleasurable experiences must outweigh the frequency of painful experiences. In reality, the life of pleasure lies in static pleasure, with ataraxia (freedom from pain in the mind) being sufficient to achieve this. Helping a friend need not compromise one’s ataraxia; similarly, the Epicurean need not desert their friend.

The novice student now understands why he/she should seek friendships—genuine friendships are advantageous, even when they do not appear to be. Since Epicurus wants to have his students develop friendships at the beginning stages of learning, this argument seems to be enough to get them on the right track to developing true beliefs regarding the good life. However, for the intermediate student, Epicurus begins to take this pragmatic approach to a broader level. “All friendship is an intrinsic value, but it originates from benefiting.”²⁴ The intermediate student is faced with this lesson because they are familiar with the latter portion from their previous teachings, and the former portion will help them recognize that friendship is not only beneficial to achieving a good life but also necessary.

To understand how friendship remains instrumental to pleasure despite the above claim, it becomes important to recognize that Epicurus is

11 Epicurus, “Key doctrines,” 27–28.

12 Ibid., 7, 40.

13 Cicero, I.66–70.

14 O’Keefe, “Is Epicurean Friendship Altruistic?” 278.

15 David O’Connor, “The Invulnerable Pleasures of Epicurean Friendship,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30 (1989): 173.

16 Hilton J. Turner, “Epicurus and Friendship,” *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 6 (1947), 353.

17 Epicurus, “Vatican Sayings,” in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23, 28, 34, 39, 52, 66, 78.

18 Rist, “Epicurus on Friendship,” 129.

19 William O. Stephens, “If friendship hurts, an Epicurean deserts: a reply to Andrew Mitchell,” *Essays in Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2011): 3.

20 Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 127–32.

21 Cicero, 1.29–32, 37–9.

22 Diogenes Laertius, “10.117–20,” in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Medley. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

23 Epicurus, “Vatican sayings,” 23, 28, 34, 39, 52, 66, 78.

24 Ibid.

teaching from two distinctive models: a theoretical and a practical model. Both models coincide in content but are expressed differently to achieve different purposes. On the theoretical model Epicurus includes the teachings that pleasure is the highest good. On the practical model, teachings arise that highlight the “impossibility to living pleurably without living prudently, honorably, and justly [...] for the virtues are naturally linked to living pleurably, and living pleurably is inseparable from them.”²⁵ Virtue is taken to be a necessary means to pleasure. While conceptually the hierarchy that exists places pleasure as the intrinsic good and virtue as a means to this end, practically there appears to be little difference for human beings, in the sense that they appear inextricably tied. No human being can achieve a life of pleasure without virtue. While there are some virtues that are arguably self-regarding, there are a multitude of virtues that are both self- and other-regarding (e.g., charity, justice, kindness). Developing these virtues without caring for others seems highly unlikely given our intuitions regarding what virtuous behavior involves. As such, friendship is required to achieve the virtues that are required to achieve pleasure. Andrew Mitchell makes a stronger claim that friendship is a virtue for Epicurus,²⁶ but I believe a weaker claim that friendship is essential to achieving virtue is sufficient

for my purposes of drawing out the practical connection.

As such, pleasure, virtues, and friendship—though distinctive conceptually—are all practically viewed as one due to their inseparability in achieving the good life. After all, it is difficult to imagine a life where nothing can be added to it to make it better (i.e., the complete good life) as one without friendship.²⁷ This approach fits into one of Cicero’s interpretations that friendship is just as inseparable as the virtues in relation to pleasure.²⁸ Epicurus may be using the practical model to elucidate how an Epicurean should become disposed to behave as opposed to a claim about what they value.²⁹ Friends will become motivated to treat each other with care, but this need not conflict with their hedonistic egoism—motivation can be separated from evaluation.³⁰ If, for example, Epicurus is trying to teach his philosophy with the therapeutic model in mind, presenting friendship in this manner is not necessarily a false belief due to the practical interpretation and is also more effective at conveying to students what they need to do in order to achieve the good life they are seeking. Presenting friendship as merely an instrumental means seems to underplay its necessity in a way that makes it seem optional. In order to avoid this false belief from forming, Epicurus opts to categorize friendship in a way that accurately depicts

its connection to the good life, while simultaneously providing his theoretical teachings that stress the conceptual hierarchy. Friendship can now assume its proper role in the mind of the students.

I think Epicurus went one step further and also had teachings designed specifically for those who have already achieved the good life of pleasure. These advanced students were faced with one last daunting lesson: there are times when one should sacrifice themselves for a friend.³¹ If this lesson applied to those who had not yet achieved a life of pleasure, it would suggest something else supersedes pleasure as the highest good because one would be striving to achieve that end rather than the end of pleasure. To sacrifice yourself for your friend, it must be the case that one has already achieved the good life since achieving a life of pleasure is the Epicurean’s highest priority. Epicurus claims that the length of one’s life does not impact one’s happiness,³² since the good life of static pleasure is such that nothing can be added to it to make it any better. The static pleasure Epicurus refers to is final, complete, and self-sufficient. As such, comparing two lives with respect to completeness, a genuinely happy life that is a short duration is no less happy than a longer life of the same kind—one is already at the maximum capacity of happiness.³³

With this understanding, my sacrifice for my friend will in no way detract from my happiness. Knowing this, as well as knowing that my friend’s happiness matters to them just as much as my happiness matters to me, leads to self-sacrifice for another seeming quite reasonable. I believe it is reasonable, in certain circumstances, because the Epicurean will recognize that they could not have achieved their life of unsurpassable static pleasure without their friend—and so they feel permanently indebted to their friend. Failing to take an opportunity to repay the debt owed and failing to maintain the contract of loyalty³⁴ would likely lead to a loss of freedom from pain in the mind, which is required for the life of pleasure. One would lose all sense of peace. In this sense, while no real harm will occur from sacrificing oneself (death is not a harm), failing to sacrifice oneself when it is warranted could result in harm to oneself. The Epicurean will choose to avoid this harm because it is not a harm that is leading to greater pleasure—there is no surpassing the static life of pleasure.

Friendship continues to develop and one must continue to respond to its development. This is perhaps why those who concern themselves wholly with friendship are characterized as immortal³⁵—in sacrificing oneself to aid a friend in achieving their good life when circumstances call for it,

25 Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” 56–57.

26 Stephens, “If friendship hurts,” 3.

27 Hilton J. Turner, “Epicurus and Friendship,” *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 6 (1947): 353.

28 Cicero, 1.66–70.

29 Matthew Evans, “Can Epicureans Be Friends?” *Ancient Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (2004): 412.

30 *Ibid.*, 413.

31 Epicurus, “Vatican Sayings,” 56–57.

32 Epicurus, “Key Doctrines,” 19–21.

33 Glenn Lesses, “Happiness, Completeness, and Indifference to Death in Epicurean Ethical Theory,” *Apeiron* 35, no. 4 (2002): 67.

34 Cicero, 1.66–70.

35 Epicurus, *Vatican sayings*, 23, 28, 34, 39, 52, 66, 78.

one is never forgotten as he/she lives on in their friend's memory, despite their existence ceasing metaphysically.

Overall, I have argued that it would be inconsistent to assign intrinsic value to friendship on Epicurus's philosophical model, especially given his metaphysical claims. From there, I argued that reconciling the varied claims concerning friendship with an instrumental interpretation requires viewing them as embodying a teaching approach that requires different levels of argumentation for different audiences. This allows Epicurus's weaker and stronger claims to be understood as appealing to different students in varied stages of philosophical development. The novice's teachings focus on encouraging the development of friendships that requires appealing to the advantages one receives from a friendship. I responded to various objections concerning the death of a friend and the avoidance of pain. The intermediate student's teachings focus on highlighting the necessary connection friendship has to the life of pleasure, and the advanced student must learn to recognize that the requirements of friendship continue to develop despite one's achievement of the life of pleasure.

It is unclear what Epicurus's thoughts were on more casual friendships: if he would consider them friendships at all, what expectations they would involve, and what role they would play in achieving the good life. Epicurus's statements provide us with a picture of friendship that is genuine, enriching, close, and deep.

Comparing one's own friendships to this model may in fact be a useful exercise. These types of friendships seem to be extremely rare and difficult to foster in our modern society, yet they remain necessary for the good life. Central to Epicurean philosophy, in fact part of his four-fold cure, is the doctrine that the good life is easily attainable. Perhaps outside of the Epicurean Gardens this is not the case, and it is unclear whether this signals a flaw in Epicurean philosophy or a flaw in our modern society.



About Janice Perri

Janice Perri is a third-year philosophy major at York University located in Toronto, Ontario. She will be attending law school next year while pursuing an MA in philosophy. Her philosophical interests include, but are not limited to, the philosophy of law, ethics, and ancient philosophy.