

Compassion in Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 12:20 AM

In a recent book discussion on Frances Wright's *A Few Days in Athens*, [Scott](#) was quite right to bring up the question as to whether 'compassion' was truly evident in Epicurus' teachings in the classical texts. [Kalosyni](#) had likewise raised the question in a forum post in the thread for the discussion. My purpose here is twofold; first, to thank both of you for raising the question (thank you!); and second, to reopen the discussion here with a handful of preliminary citations.

It is quite easy to demonstrate that Epicurus was motivated at least *in part* by concern for his fellow man; and clear, too, that he extended his concern beyond the pale of the professional philosopher. His introduction to the letter to Pythocles states his intent:

Quote

Therefore, as I have finished all my other writings I now intend to accomplish your request, feeling that these arguments will be of value to many other persons as well, and especially to those who have but recently tasted the genuine inquiry into nature, and also to those who are involved too deeply in the business of some regular occupation.

The letter to Menoecus expands on this further;

Quote

LET no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away. Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come.

So much for the letters. This is perhaps not the full-throated endorsement of compassion we would like to see, but the idea of the thing is beginning to take shape; Epicurus believed that in sharing his philosophy, he was helping to bring good health to the souls of all who would listen. He did not seek to convince only those in traditional philosophical circles, but to bring this 'true health' even to the commoners; scholars and working folk, young and old.

Proceeding in good order, we turn next to the Principle Doctrines:

Quote

27. Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.

28. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that even in our limited conditions of life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

There is friendship, then; the greatest pleasure, and surest path to happiness.

Quote

31. Natural justice is a symbol or expression of usefulness, to prevent one person from harming or being harmed by another.

And a sense of justice, too; predicated not on morality, or Natural Law, or divine intervention--all such suppositions being either false or arbitrary--but on harm. This is the kind of justice that is blind--that protects all people, not merely the pious or the powerful.

And in the Vatican Sayings;

Quote

29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

Here we begin to see a glimpse of a missionary attitude--the philosophy can bring help to *anyone*.

Quote

52. Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.

66. We show our feeling for our friends' suffering, not with laments, but with thoughtful concern.

78. The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one.

79. He who is calm disturbs neither himself nor another.

And we may hope that the great blessings of friendship may be available to all.

Next, we take the testimony of others; it is fitting that we start with Menander, as he and Epicurus were 'classmates'.

Quote

Hail, you twin-born sons of Neocles, of whom the one saved his country from slavery, the other from folly.

And Diogenes Laertius;

Quote

[Epicurus] has abundance of witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men--his native land, which honoured him with statues in bronze ; his friends, so many in number that they could hardly be counted by whole cities, and indeed all who knew him [...] the School itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues for ever without interruption through numberless reigns of one scholar after another; his gratitude to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the School, the most eminent of them being the aforesaid Mys ; and in general, his benevolence to all mankind.

Lucian;

Quote

But secondly I was still more concerned (a preference which you will be very far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him.

I'll expand on some of this tomorrow---my phone armed with more battery-life!