

Compassion in Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Scott" of February 7, 2022 at 10:09 AM

Thanks for starting this thread, [Joshua](#) ! You beat me to it and I'm glad, since you did a far better job than I could have 👍

I'm pleased that we have the quotes that show that Epicurus felt and expressed concern for people generally, as opposed to just a sort of tit-for-tat kind of "concern" for "friends" (which is an idea that can come out of certain passages). As you say, what we have is somewhat indirect, not the:

[Quote from Joshua](#)

full-throated endorsement of compassion we would like to see

Compassion is not identical with being "friendly", of course, or even being "kind" or "considerate". "Caring" comes closer but still doesn't nail it. All of these are also great attributes but I'm thinking in today's use of the term compassion we have something like a powerful "feeling with" another person, combined with a desire to alleviate suffering they have. Its often a fairly automatic response, like what one has when one sees a crying child or even a hurt animal. It's like empathy but with a motivation to reach out. It does not involve any desire of a reward for reaching out (even the reward that someone doing compassionate work under the aegis of a religious organization for example might get from knowing that are promoting their ideology). Of course, one can have an affiliation with a religious or philosophical organization and still have genuine compassion - I don't mean to suggest otherwise. But compassion is one of our natural, biological responses which can yet be cultivated (even into a strong, reliable personal pattern of feeling & behavior) - or conversely, repressed into oblivion. It is perhaps a bit "unusual" in not being directly self-advantageous to the organism feeling it and acting on it, though studies in evolutionary biology and other fields have identified it as producing social benefit. Certainly acting on compassion and eliminating another being's suffering can produce powerful feelings of pleasure, even though the initial impetus may not contain an consideration of that.

Is there even a word in ancient Greek or Latin that captures this idea?