

Thomas Carnes - Keeping the Friend in Epicurean Friendship

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I think that what may ease these critics in understanding Epicurean ethics better is a deeper dive into Epicurean ontology, and more specifically the doctrine that just because something is relative, it does not mean it is not objective and real. They seem to think that if the person does not possess intrinsic value outside of its relations, then it cannot possess it in its relations either. But I think that an Epicurean response could address that presupposition by pointing out that relative properties can truly belong to an object, personal or not, due to their causal contribution (if I got this right. I have Polystratus' reasoning in mind). Thus, we could truly and partially attribute intrinsic, noninstrumental value to our friends, as their causal influence reveals them to us in a way that we directly take pleasure in it, without further instrumentalising that particular experience in itself. Nonetheless, due to the fact that each person aims towards their own pleasure, we approach inter-objective, relational value concentrically, making it a part of our own final end, pleasure, thus the dual nature of valuations in friendship. Both intrinsic and instrumental in different respects.

With this background in mind, Torquatus' first argument seems very airtight to me. He reaches the conclusion that friendship is a very important part of the pleasurable life, and to be pursued for the same reason. The argument he adduces does not touch upon relative properties, or ontology in general. It could be easily misunderstood if read through a lens of "just because someone is valuable-to-someone, it does not mean that they are really valuable", because the valuing subject does not impose value on the object it interacts with, but it is the interaction of both that gives rise to their relative properties, their relation, that is not subordinated to either of the terms it connects. The value subject A sees in B is not imposed by A on B, nor is the causal contribution of B merely an offering of something that is independently possessed by it non-rationally.

I think that the developmental account of friendship may be suggestive of or at least compatible with the above. With time, the more a person sees the good in the unique fashion that the friend individuates it, the more pleasurable the friend's presence becomes, and the more appreciative they become of it. However, what follows it in Torquatus' exposition does not emphasize causal inter-relatedness, thus the stress over being-valuable-for-someone being divorced from being-truly-valuable, leading to a (seeming) divorce of instrumentality and other-regard, and whatever may be concluded from it, e.g. that instrumentality is incompatible with great sacrifices for the sake of one's friend.

The third view looks like a subcategory of friendship, a more refined one between like-minded people.

Edit: By intrinsic, I do not mean divorced from instrumentality. I mean something close to "the immediate impact I experience with objects". To borrow the example from the above article, my interaction with the flower produces the feeling of beauty in me in a direct sense, without this being incompatible with my instrumental reasons that drive me to enjoy beautiful flowers.