New FAQ Entry - Is Epicurean Philosophy Purely a Matter of Personal Self-Improvement, or Does It Have a Missionary / Outreach Aspect?

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Is Epicurean Philosophy Purely a Matter of Personal Self-Improvement, or Does It Have a Missionary / Outreach Aspect?

The short answer is emphatically the latter: Epicurean philosophy has a strong and explicit outreach mission built into it from the very beginning. The common modern image of the Epicurean as a quietly self-satisfied person who has retired from the world to cultivate private pleasures is a serious distortion -- one rooted largely in centuries of hostile characterization by Stoic and Christian opponents who preferred to paint Epicureans as self-indulgent recluses rather than acknowledge what they actually were: tireless evangelists for a philosophy they believed could heal the suffering of all mankind.

The Misconception: "Live Unknown"

Some cite the Epicurean saying *lathe biosas* -- "live unknown" -- as evidence that Epicurean philosophy counsels withdrawal from public life and indifference to others. But this saying refers specifically to the avoidance of *political* ambition and the pursuit of fame and power -- not to any withdrawal from human contact or any indifference to sharing the philosophy. As the record of Epicurus's own life and the lives of his successors makes abundantly clear, no leading Epicurean ever came close to living unknown *as a philosopher*. They were among the most prolific writers and active recruiters in the ancient world.

Epicurus Himself: Three Hundred Books and a Self-Propagating School

Epicurus was one of the most productive writers in all of antiquity. Diogenes Laertius records that he authored approximately three hundred books -- all in his own words, without citing other authors -- surpassing even Aristotle in sheer volume. Epictetus, a Stoic opponent, gives involuntary testimony to Epicurus's outreach mission when he writes with evident sarcasm: "*Why do you even light a lamp and labor for our sake, and write so many books?*" The very question acknowledges that Epicurus labored *for the sake of others* -- it was his opponents who found this embarrassing, not the Epicureans themselves.

Norman DeWitt, in his article "Epicurus: Philosophy for the Millions" (*The Classical Journal*, 1947), describes in detail how Epicurus deliberately organized his school as what DeWitt calls a "self-propagating sect." After being expelled from Mytilene by hostile Platonists and eventually settling in Athens, Epicurus developed a systematic program of outreach. As DeWitt explains in

his own words from that article:

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> Outside of the school he instituted a method of disseminating his new doctrine by personal contacts. Each convert was urged to win over the members of his own household, his friends and neighbors, "never slackening in spreading by every means the doctrines of the true philosophy." Prospective converts were plied with books and tracts. Epicurus himself, like John Wesley, became a busy compiler of textbooks, and specific instructions were written for the proper use of them. He made outlines of doctrine for those who were unable to live in residence. The allegiance of disciples living in other cities was retained by epistles painstakingly composed.

DeWitt captures the spirit of this mission by describing Epicurean philosophy as having the color of a gospel. He contrasts this explicitly with the elitism of Platonism and Stoicism, which catered to aristocratic courts and the socially ambitious. The Epicurean philosophy, by contrast, was designed to be accessible to anyone: men, women, slaves, and free citizens alike, "never slackening in spreading by every means the doctrines of the true philosophy."

Within two centuries, as DeWitt notes, this program had spread throughout the Graeco-Roman world. Even Cicero, who despised Epicureanism, was forced to acknowledge that it had "taken Italy by storm."

The Ancient Sources: "Never Cease Proclaiming"

The outreach character of Epicurean philosophy is not just a feature of Epicurus's personal practice -- it is directly affirmed in the preserved sayings of the school. Vatican Saying 41 is among the most explicit:

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> "*We must laugh and philosophize at the same time and do our household duties and employ our other faculties, and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.*"

This is not a counsel of private self-improvement. The command to "never cease proclaiming" is as direct a missionary instruction as one finds in any philosophical or religious tradition. And Vatican Saying 52 gives this outreach mission a cosmic scope:

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> "*Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.*"

DeWitt identifies this saying with the Hippocratic tradition of *philanthropia* -- the love of humanity -- and observes that it describes a personified Love going "dancing round and round the inhabited earth, crying to all men to awake to the blessedness of the happy life." The whole world, in Epicurus's view, was a single parish in need of the same healing.

Cicero's Testimony: Epicureans as Pamphleteers

Among the charges Cicero leveled at Epicureans -- and Cicero was one of the most hostile witnesses available -- was that they were too eager to make their philosophy accessible to the masses. He complained that Epicureans had begun writing in Latin for general audiences, deliberately bypassing the educated elites to reach ordinary people. This was, in Cicero's view, beneath the dignity of true philosophy. From the Epicurean perspective, it was the whole point. The record of Cicero's own era confirms that Epicurean books, summaries, and epitomes circulated so widely that they constituted what we would today recognize as a publishing campaign targeting the broadest possible readership.

Diogenes of Oinoanda: The Inscription as Missionary Monument

Perhaps the most dramatic single example of Epicurean outreach in all of antiquity is the great inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda. In the second century AD, an elderly Epicurean named Diogenes caused a philosophical treatise to be carved in stone on a public stoa in the city of Oinoanda in what is now Turkey -- a monument running to hundreds of fragments, intended to bring Epicurean teachings to all who passed by, including future generations and foreign visitors.

Diogenes states his rationale explicitly in Fragment 3 of the inscription:

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> "*Now, since the remedies of the inscription reach a larger number of people, I wished to use this stoa to advertise publicly the medicines that bring salvation... Having already reached the sunset of my life (being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age), I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure... as I have said before, the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing (for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep); moreover, it is right to help also generations to come (for they too belong to us, though they are still unborn) and, besides, love of humanity prompts us to aid also the foreigners who come here.*"

This is one of the most explicit statements of a philosophical outreach mission in all of classical antiquity. Diogenes uses the language of medicine -- the philosophy as healing remedy, the world as suffering from a plague of false beliefs -- and extends his concern not merely to his fellow citizens but to foreigners, future generations, and indeed all of humanity. The inscription was not a private monument but a public one, deliberately placed where it could reach the

widest possible audience. Nothing about it resembles the behavior of a person counseled to "live unknown."

Lucretius: Bringing Light to Hearts in Darkness

The Roman poet Lucretius, writing in the first century BC, gives perhaps the most vivid literary expression to the Epicurean sense of philosophical mission. The opening of *On the Nature of Things* frames the entire poem as an act of rescue: Lucretius writes to carry the light of Epicurean understanding into the darkness where human beings wander in fear. The famous lines from Book 1 announce that the "terror and darkness of mind" tormenting humanity must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun but by the rational account of nature:

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> "*This terror then and darkness of the mind must be dispelled, not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the aspect and the law of nature.*"

And in Book 2, Lucretius describes himself as following in the footsteps of Epicurus across untrodden fields, gathering flowers to weave a garland that no one has yet placed on any head -- imagery of discovery combined with the desire to share what has been found. Throughout the poem, the driving energy is not the contentment of a philosopher who has found his own peace, but the urgency of someone who wants to bring that peace to others.

Lucretius describes Epicurus himself in terms of heroic mission: a man who "first dared to raise mortal eyes against" the oppressive weight of superstition and "burst out beyond the flaming walls of the world" to bring back the knowledge that frees humanity. This is the language of a founder whose achievement was understood by his followers as a gift to all mankind -- not a private discovery to be quietly enjoyed.

The Conclusion: Outreach Is Not Optional, It Is Intrinsic

The evidence, from Epicurus's own practices down through Lucretius and Diogenes of Oinoanda, points in a single direction: outreach and the desire to share the philosophy with others is not a peripheral feature of Epicureanism. It is built into the philosophical core. The philosophy is rooted in a conviction that the happiness it describes is genuinely available to all people -- not just the educated, not just the wealthy, not just men, not just citizens -- and that conviction generates a natural and powerful impulse to communicate it as widely as possible. Epicurus himself described the good as something which, once found, cries out to be shared. His followers took that seriously across five centuries of the ancient world, and the same impulse is alive in the Epicurean community today.