

Friendship as Supported by the Canon, Physics, and Ethics

Post by “Elayne” of August 21, 2019 at 7:15 PM

I have had a private and enjoyable conversation with a member about Epicurean friendship, and I think it has been a while since we specifically discussed friendship here. The member had a question about how "agape", an ancient Greek term for love which has been used for a sort of general charity and well-wishing by Christians, might be able to blend with our philosophy.

Here is a good example of how, by sticking to the original 3 part philosophic structure of Canon, Physics, and Ethics, and by using original texts, we can take an Epicurean view of friendship. After doing so, it will (I hope) be clear to our members that trying to incorporate incompatible elements of friendship from Christianity would not have the same results.

The Canon contains the tools by which we interact with reality-- our senses (which we take to include instruments used to extend these), the prolepses, and our feelings of pain or pleasure. Applying the Canon to friendship, it is clear that we must have our senses in order to observe the existence and behaviors of other people-- children may have imaginary friends, but real friendship involves specific, real people. I would say that the role of prolepsis here includes our evolved processes for social interactions, which emerge developmentally and are not learned from scratch by personal experience alone. And our subjective feelings of pain or pleasure upon being with specific others provide us critical information about their intentions towards us.

From Physics, studied by means of the Canon, we know that we are mortal, that we have only this one life, and that there is no absolute morality in the universe-- no tablet of commandments and no rule about how to treat others. From the observation of nature included in physics, we see that pleasure is the evolved way organisms with nervous systems have developed to recognize what is health-giving and life-sustaining and pain the signal for tissue damage. Our observations teach us that members of the same species will tend to usually have many pains and pleasures in common, but individual variation of genetics and environment means we will also differ. Because of our more advanced cognitive skills, humans are able to consider our net pleasure, not just the pleasure of the moment, and plan our actions even more wisely.

This information leads to our Ethics, our ways of deciding how to act in various situations, in order to have net pleasure for ourselves. Remember that ethics and virtues are not absolute but are tools to use for the resulting pleasure. Let's look at some of Epicurus' words about friendship, which were based on the Canon and Physics.

PD 27 "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (Cyril Bailey). These are strong words. Epicurus

based this on observation of his life and that of others. I find that for me, he is correct. I advise you to use the Canon to determine if this is true for you.

Letter to Idomeneus: "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus" (CB). Epicurus' pleasure in friendship was so strong that even the memory of it provided pleasure during his painful dying process. It was important to his pleasure that he knew he had taken care to provide for his friends even after his own death.

VS 23 "All friendship is desirable in itself, though it starts from the need of help" (CB). This means that even though friendship is instrumental for other pleasures, the friendship itself is a pleasure. I find this to be very true and would go further in saying the intrinsic pleasure of friendship is the strongest.

PD 39. "The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life." (this translation is from Epicurus.net-- I do not see the translator).

VS 28 "We must not approve either those who are always ready for friendship, or those who hang back, but for friendship's sake we must run risks" (CB). Advice based on observation of what happens in each of those situations.

Those two quotes, PD 39 and VS 28, remind us that because we are using reality-based processes, not idealistic concepts, we will not have anything to do with virtues that treat all humans the same. We will not use abstract consequentialism. We must use our observations and feelings to find out who is a friend to us and who is not.

VS 56" The wise man feels no more pain when being tortured himself than when his friend tortured."

VS 57 "On occasion a man will die for his friend, for if he betrays his friend, his whole life will be confounded by distrust and completely upset." (both of these translations I got from [epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)

, and there is a note that these have been reconstructed).

These last two quotes are very important, IMO. We are not being advised to feel pain or to die for friends as if to be virtuous-- these are descriptive quotes. They are observations of what true friendship feels like-- that we are so connected to our friends that their pleasures and pains cause us pleasures and pains. Although friendship must be mutual to be real, the feelings themselves are not contractual. There is not a cold calculation that we use, nor logic, minus feelings, when it comes to our friends, because we love them with all our hearts.

[Eli](#) tells me that the Greek word for friendship is "filia", which comes from the word "filo", to love (which she says now also means to kiss).

In summary, Epicurean friendship is not abstract. It is a real relationship, of deep mutual feeling, between individuals. It is not compatible with the religious or idealistic expressions currently described as "agape". In my life, like Epicurus, I have been more glad for the love between friends than for any other pleasure.