

Has the meaning of friendship changed since the times of Epicurus

Post by “waterholic” of February 1, 2023 at 1:03 PM

I am reading Living for Pleasure by Emily Austin. A lot of thought has gone into structuring Epicurean ideas into a more comprehensible format. So far a very rewarding experience.

Two somewhat disturbing observations though:

1. On friendship: the kind of tranquility or safety in friendship may actually no longer exist at least in the Western society. I had the fortune to live in a more traditional society with under-developed institutions. Friendship there was necessary, all-consuming and omnipotent. You want to find a good dentist, parking spot, decent job, a cemetery plot, resolution to a business conflict, even a legal dispute - you simply need friends. And your friends know this. This means your daily routine is to collect and dish out favours.

I have also lived in (North) Western Europe for several decades. Institutions have by now replaced the need for friends: from insurance to therapy, from life coaching to moving houses - everything is regimented, itemised and priced to perfection. "Friends" are reserved for idle chitchat on inoffensive topics with a very clear understanding that anything else is outside "the scope".

The question is, is it even possible to have a living experience of friendship in the Epicurean sense these days?

2. On virtue: the only other discontent I have about the book is the distinct impression that it is written as a "justification of Epicurus" for stoics. The detailed analysis why living an Epicurean lifestyle is not selfish and can be virtuous at times misses the point, sounding nearly apologetic.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2023 at 1:38 PM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

The detailed analysis why living an Epicurean lifestyle is not selfish and can be virtuous at times misses the point, sounding nearly apologetic.

Rhetorical question, not limited to this book: "Isn't that (sounding apologetic) a problem of just about every book and article written about Epicurus in the last 2000 years?"

I definitely agree that "sounding apologetic" is a big problem in general, and I wish I could point to books or articles that I think are free of that problem. I will say that this is one reason for my appreciation of Norman DeWitt - if there is a book on Epicurus that is largely free of "sounding apologetic" about Epicurus, it is that one.

So I do agree with your comment as written, but at the same time I will quickly add that I think "Living for Pleasure" is probably one of the least apologetic books on Epicurus I have read in a long time, which is why I like it so much.

I wonder if you (or others) can think of books which are less apologetic?

As for the definition of friendship I think that's a great question. The points you raise point out the problem - what do we (or Epicurus) really mean by "friendship"? I gather there are some specific references to what it means in Aristotle, but I am not sure about other writers. I wish that parallel to Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks on Pleasure" there were a similar book with similar research on "The Greeks on Friendship."

Post by “waterholic” of February 1, 2023 at 2:21 PM

[Cassius](#) thank you, I thought it was just my feeling.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So I do agree with your comment as written, but at the same time I will quickly add that I think "Living for Pleasure" is probably one of the least apologetic books on Epicurus I have read in a long time, which is why I like it so much.

To be clear, I very much enjoy the book. It's well structured and draws from the "correct" sources. Certainly better than many other recent/modern books. I guess I wish it could be more.

I haven't thought about the "apologetic" nature of the texts before, so I can't compare, but the DeWitt reference is interesting, I will revisit.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The points you raise point out the problem - what do we (or Epicurus) really mean by "friendship"?

I really struggle with this. Even if we find the accurate description of what social dynamic Epicurus implied in his definition of friendship to conclude that it is an essential element of a pleasant life, chances are, that social dynamic is no longer replicable in modern times. There is still academic benefit in researching the meaning of friendship in antiquity. But for us the likelihood of missing out on an essential part of the philosophy today is disheartening.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2023 at 2:38 PM

Yep I was just remarking in another thread that we can't hold ourselves to a standard of omniscience, and we just have to do the best we can with what is available.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 1, 2023 at 3:36 PM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

I had the fortune to live in a more traditional society with under-developed institutions. Friendship there was necessary, all-consuming and omnipotent. You want to find a good dentist, parking spot, decent job, a cemetery plot, resolution to a business conflict, even a legal dispute - you simply need friends. And your friends know this. This means your daily routine is to collect and dish out favours.

That situation is very interesting (and I would wonder perhaps people were not very close friends). And doesn't sound very fun.

Here in the US when I lived in Oregon, I was part of a Buddhist Zen group. It was through knowing people there that I found a studio apartment (converted garage in a house). And a few other things with which I got help, just by mentioning my problem, people gave good suggestions. So being part of a religious community has a benefit, founded on mutual support arising from common religious beliefs, and others become a kind of second family. So I think it could have been somewhat like this for Epicureans back in the past.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

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chances are, that social dynamic is no longer replicable in modern times. There is still academic benefit in researching the meaning of friendship in antiquity.

I actually envision it to be very similar to what I experienced in the Buddhist community that I was a part of. The problem was that I came to realize that Buddhist philosophy didn't work anymore for me, so it didn't make sense for me to continue with the community.

The community had a core group who did much of the work of making things run efficiently (a board of directors, teachers, and Zen priests/trainees). And then two other levels of involvement which I would call intermediate/dedicated students. And then the newer students or occasional attendees. And there were times to study together and times to celebrate with community meals and movie nights.

Post by “waterholic” of February 2, 2023 at 11:07 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

That situation is very interesting (and I would wonder perhaps people were not very close friends). And doesn't sound very fun.

I may have described it in slightly exaggerated colours, but in essence that setup is not very different from a religious community. Friendship is still based on common, albeit secular, beliefs and shared interests. But there is of course no shared understanding of unnatural/extravagant desires, quite the opposite. A shared purpose is advancement of "our people" in all senses, which can cause misery.

Looking at a Buddhist community, I can assume there is a similar issue: the shared purpose (whatever it is). When does a common purpose overshadow an individual's preference for a pleasant, simple and unnoticed life?

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2023 at 11:14 AM

You know, even in a shared community (monks in a monastery) there are no doubt degrees of "friendship." You can have all the shared values in the world and still in the end not "click" with someone. So I would think that aspect of friendship would have to be considered in these discussions too.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 2, 2023 at 3:30 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

You can have all the shared values in the world and still in the end not "click" with someone. So I would think that aspect of friendship would have to be considered in these discussions too.

That was probably a frequent topic of frank speech back in the Garden!

Post by “ThinkingCat” of May 19, 2023 at 4:07 PM

What brought to these forums, is that I have started reading about Epicurus and have ideas of how I want to try and live my life yet it's difficult to have these conversations with my 'real life' friends about this so I seek an 'online epicurean garden' here! I wonder what Epicurus would say about this and what he would think about my 'online friends' as opposed to my 'real life friends' 😊

Post by “Don” of May 19, 2023 at 4:25 PM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

my 'online friends' as opposed to my 'real life friends'



For what it's worth, we're real, too.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 20, 2023 at 10:00 AM

[Quote from ThinkingCat](#)

What brought to these forums, is that I have started reading about Epicurus and have ideas of how I want to try and live my life yet it's difficult to have these conversations with my 'real life' friends about this so I seek an 'online epicurean garden' here! I wonder what Epicurus would say about this and what he would think about my 'online friends' as opposed to my 'real life friends'

We have some Zoom events for both Level 1 and Level 3 members -- which is a great way to meet people and discuss Epicurean philosophy -- and it is one step closer to "real life friends".

The book review group is open to all forum members, and you are welcome to drop in even if you haven't read the book. [Click here for more info.](#)

Post by "Pacatus" of May 22, 2023 at 6:19 PM

Thinking about this, it struck me that - like ripples spreading out on a pond - there might be a notion beyond a core circle of like-minded friends, but before the idea of community or society (a community of communities?) sustained by social contracts of mutual benefit.

I'll call it ***neighborliness***.

We are not close friends with our neighbors in our apartment building. We have seldom shared meals or entertainments. We seldom know their religion, if any (though our neighbors across the hall are Hindu) - or their personal or social philosophies. But we respect one another's presence: e.g., keeping the noise volume down - whilst, at the same time, tolerating the running feet of our upstairs neighbors' small children; as well as the occasional Saturday night party (which we also had in our youth). We help one another with doors, and carrying garbage bags to the dumpster.

We greet one another. We are a bit like Rilke's ***"solitudes that border and greet and protect one another."***

Our closest neighbor was a young woman who lived in the apartment next to ours for a few years. She is a staff sergeant in the Army (who relocated to Washington, D.C. - where she now has some classified position). Once she was locked out of her apartment, and spent some hours with us, talking and sipping wine, while waiting for the locksmith. She helped us move some heavy items (we're in our 70s and I have a bad back; she was incredibly physically fit: one of her passions). My wife looked after her cats when she had to go on some training missions. She

was always on call if we needed anything. She still texts my wife once in awhile, just to keep touch.

Were we friends, in Epicurus' sense? Not like our few close friends; not like Epicurus' circle as I understand it.

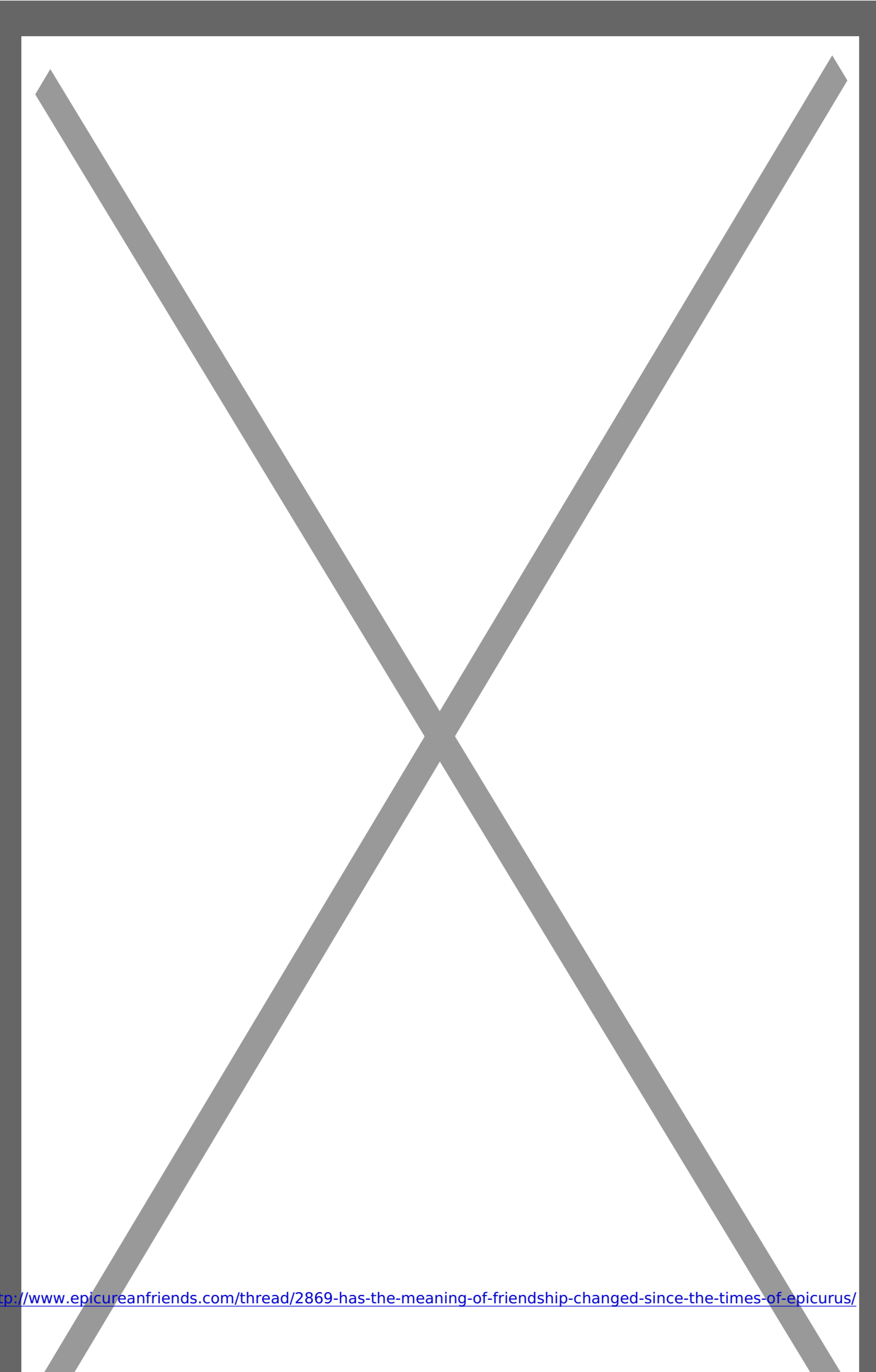
But we were good neighbors for one another. ***“Solitudes that border and greet and protect one another.”*** I have known others.

Post by “Don” of May 22, 2023 at 7:46 PM

[Pacatus](#) raises an interesting point.

The word that Epicurus consistently uses that is translated "friend, friendship" is philos, philia φίλος, φιλία.

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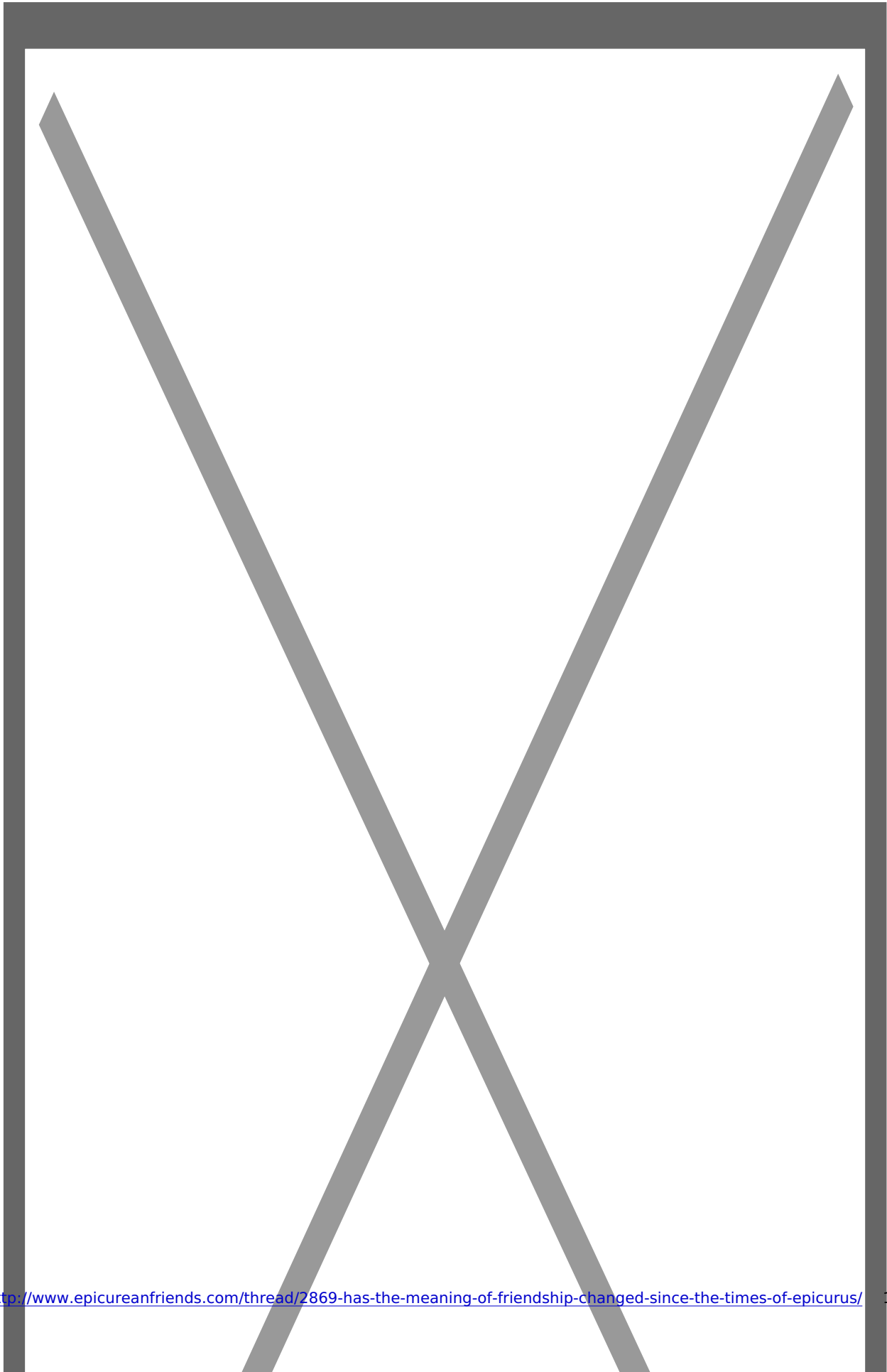
[Philia - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, φι^λί-α](#)

Ancient Greek had several words that evoked gradations and varieties of affection or love. I'm curious which one would be closest to [Pacatus](#)'s "neighborliness" scenario.

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[Greek words for love - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

Maybe xenia (ξενία, xenía) instead of philia?

Post by “Pacatus” of May 22, 2023 at 8:00 PM

[Don](#)

According to Wiktionary, ξενία can mean hospitality – so, close.

Γείτονας means neighbor – and γειτονεύω means to be neighbors, or to border on. I also found a reference to γειτονικός, meaning neighborly.

Could you combine the terms into a phrase meaning “neighborly hospitality” perhaps? 😊

Post by “Little Rocker” of May 22, 2023 at 10:40 PM

I love your discussion of 'neighborliness,' Pactatus! I've long been puzzled by the opening of KD 40, which includes the phrase ἐκ τῶν ὁμορρούντων, generally translated as 'from their neighbors,' but it's a strange construction for a number of reasons, among them that it's not clear whether these neighbors are a threat to the Epicurean community or part of it.

Post by “Don” of May 22, 2023 at 10:59 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Could you combine the terms into a phrase meaning “neighborly hospitality” perhaps?



γειτοξενια?? "Neighbor-hospitality"??

γειτοφιλια?? "Neighbor-friendship"??

PS: To be used for entertainment purposes only. Not intended for use by actual Ancient Greeks



Post by “Don” of May 22, 2023 at 11:15 PM

One thing to keep in mind in this thread is that people were *really* literally dependent on family and friends in ancient Greece. There was little or no government support in the sense of assistance.

Later, "In the Roman Empire, the first emperor Augustus provided the Cura Annonae or grain dole for citizens who could not afford to buy food every month. Social welfare was enlarged by the Emperor Trajan. Trajan's program brought acclaim from many, including Pliny the Younger. Other provisions for the poor were introduced during the history of Ancient Rome." ([Wikipedia](#))

If you were orphaned, widowed, disabled in an accident, you were up the proverbial creek without a paddle IF you didn't have friends or family to take care of you. That's one of the reasons Epicurus places so much importance on solid, mutually-beneficial friendships. You knew you had a social support system. Friendships based on politics or convenience would not be of any help if the friendship was no longer politically beneficial to one party.

That's not too say that Epicurean friendships were not warm, loving, respectful, caring, etc. They no doubt were. Epicurus himself makes provisions in his will for his friend's children! But that larger societal context is important to keep in mind.

Post by “Joshua” of May 23, 2023 at 12:02 AM

To take that one step further, Don, hospitality is essential in a seafaring civilization. Ships wreck, lose their course, and wind up on distant shores. It's no accident that the Odyssey is one long story of a guy trying to get home on a boat--the Aeneid, one long story of a war refugee looking for asylum.

My favorite story in this vein is Xenophon's *Anabasis*, where the Persians kill the generals of the mercenary Greek army under flag of truce, and the remaining 10,000 Greeks trek north to the free Greek cities on the Black Sea with the whole might of the Persian cavalry behind them.

The palpable relief in the shouted words "Θάλαττα! θάλαττα! — The Sea! The Sea!" is nearly sufficient to tell the whole story. The sea means fellow Greeks, and passage home.

Post by “Little Rocker” of May 23, 2023 at 9:46 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Friendships based on politics or convenience would not be of any help if the friendship was no longer politically beneficial to one party.

I've thought about this as a feature of small towns in rugged environments in America today. Why alienate neighbors by arguing over politics when you might need each other in cases of peril. I've been in some places lately where my main thought was, 'wow, I'm in a place where there are so many ways to get killed by making a simple mistake.' And most people have stories like, 'You remember when we all had to go out in the snow to save (insert name of fellow resident of the town)?'

Post by “Little Rocker” of May 23, 2023 at 11:31 AM

In a similar vein, another thing that interests me about small, isolated places is that if people know each other personally and have a history of mutual assistance, the political stuff doesn't play such a big role even if people talk all day about politics in the coffee shop. So people will say something along the lines of, 'Yeah, Bob is a liberal/conservative, but he's one of us' because Bob rushed out to pick up Paul when his car broke down on the mountain pass just before the big blizzard hit. Sort of like, 'he's a fool, but he's *our* fool.'

Post by “Don” of May 23, 2023 at 1:56 PM



Post by “Eikadistes” of May 23, 2023 at 6:34 PM

Great use of *Firefly*, [Don](#) ! 😊

Post by “Don” of May 23, 2023 at 7:48 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

Great use of *Firefly*, [Don](#) ! 😊

[Browncoats](#) forever!