

Thomas Carnes - Keeping the Friend in Epicurean Friendship

Post by “warjuning” of July 9, 2023 at 11:50 AM

Hello everyone. I am not sure if this is the correct place to upload the file below, but I hope so. The author argues that Epicurean ethics provides genuine room for other-concern, by valuing someone for their unique contribution to our happiness. Here is the abstract and some excerpts from it:

Abstract: There seems to be universal agreement among Epicurean scholars that friendship characterized by other-concern is conceptually incompatible with Epicureanism understood as a directly egoistic theory. I reject this view. I argue that once we properly understand the nature of friendship and the Epicurean conception of our final end, we are in a position to demonstrate friendship's compatibility with, and centrality within, Epicureanism's direct egoism."

"So there are three possibilities regarding how something might be valued: something can be only intrinsically valuable, that is, valued for its own sake only (which is how we just defined the final good); something can be only instrumentally valuable, that is, valued only for the sake of something else; or it can be simultaneously instrumentally and intrinsically valued. Of course, for Epicureanism only pleasure can be of the first type since pleasure is our final good and our only final good. All other valuable things, then, must either be only instrumentally valuable or simultaneously instrumentally and intrinsically valuable."

"To demonstrate briefly how something might be simultaneously intrinsically and instrumentally valuable within Epicureanism, consider the following examples. A hammer is only instrumentally valuable: it is valuable only insofar as it

contributes to our pleasure by enabling us to build things. But this is the only way in which it is valuable: we value hammers purely for the sake of something else, namely, the pleasure we might derive from building things. If I have nothing to build, I will not value the hammer in front of me. Appreciating beauty, on the other hand, seems both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. The beauty of what I am looking at is valued for its own sake insofar as there is nothing external to it that imbues it with value for me, as in the case of the hammer. I seek out the beautiful foliage on my campus in autumn, for example, just because of what it is: beautiful foliage. But it is also valued instrumentally insofar as taking in beautiful foliage provides me with pleasure. In this way beauty, and other things valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally, are partially constitutive of my pleasure. Hammers are not constitutive of my pleasure in this way. Perhaps building something can be, especially if I am a carpenter, but it is not the hammer itself that partially constitutes my pleasure, for the hammer is purely instrumentally valuable to me."

"In their own ways, then, the unconditionality criterion and the responsiveness account force onto their proponents too thin a conception of friendship, and we therefore need something more. They both neglect two key facts about genuine friends that are relevant to Epicurean doctrine (to which neither Annas nor Mitsis seems sensitive) and which form the basis of my more plausible conception of friendship. Drawing from Stump, and by extension ultimately Aquinas, we can understand these two facts as conditions of genuine friendship. 51 First, there is presumably something in it for the agent whose genuine friend is imposing long stretches of purportedly taxing and unrewarding time on the agent. And whatever that something is connects uniquely both to the intrinsic features that render a given friend unique and irreplaceable to the agent, as well as the unique

substantive character of the particular friendship in question. Call this the desire for the friend's company.⁵² Second, both friends who value each other for each other's sake, including the one in significant need as in Annas's example, are invested in the other's ability to achieve what each views as a good life, and this investment is unique to each specific friend in the same way the desire for one's company is unique. Call this the desire for the friend's good. These two key facts of genuine friends constitute what Stump takes to be two necessary and interconnected conditions for love. These conditions form the basis of a more robust conception of friendship capable of avoiding the problems associated with the unconditionality criterion, and capable of filling out what the responsiveness account fails to capture. But most importantly, each condition illuminates what goes wrong in Annas's and Mitsis's accounts, respectively."

"Moreover, the sense in which an Epicurean's friend is at once valuable for the friend's own sake and instrumentally valuable is the sense in which the Epicurean's friends and friendships are inseparable from pleasure, for they are constitutive of his pleasure.

To claim otherwise, I think, is to misunderstand friendship. When I value my friend for her sake, I am recognizing her unique conduciveness to my own happiness. I am not valuing her any more than this, nor am I valuing her any less than this. To value her more would be to place her and her good above, or in some other sense independent of, my own good. We might say this also involves other-concern, but this kind of other-concern would mean that I value her unconditionally, and I have already shown both the problems with doing this and the fact that this is not the only way, or even the most plausible way, to value a friend. This,

furthermore, would clearly be in violation of my direct egoism as an Epicurean agent. Now, if I were to value my friend less than I am suggesting, I would be valuing her purely, or at least primarily, instrumentally, as merely a source of pleasure, and this is equally problematic, although it could at least be consistent with my direct egoism. The challenge for me is to show that valuing my friend in the way I am suggesting does not fall short of genuine friendship by allowing too much instrumental valuing."

Post by "Cassius" of July 9, 2023 at 12:21 PM

Thanks for the post Warjuning.

I didn't have time to read the full thing yet but I see this from the conclusion.

Quote

Considering SV 66 and SV 39 each within the context of Epicurus' other writings on friendship in particular, and his ethics more generally, strengthens the case that Epicureanism is both directly egoistic and committed to other-concern. Additionally, the most plausible understanding of friendship is one according to which the other-concern required by it is compatible with avowing our own good as our only final good. We are, if I am correct, left with no reason to think that committed Epicureans cannot have genuine friends.

Seems like a lot of people (including some shaky Epicureans) think that the anti-Epicureans have point in arguing that if you follow Epicurus you can't truly have friendship, but this has always been a very poor argument and it looks like the article hits the right points.

Probably good here to include the way [Torquatus](#) dealt with this:

[65] XX. One topic remains, which is of prime importance for this discussion, that relating to friendship, which you declare will cease to exist, if pleasure be the supreme good, yet Epicurus makes this declaration concerning it, that of all the aids to happiness procured for us by wisdom, none is greater than friendship, none more fruitful, none more delightful. Nor in fact did he sanction this view by his language alone, but much more by his life and actions and

character. And the greatness of friendship is made evident by the imaginary stories of the ancients, in which, numerous and diversified as they are, and reaching back to extreme antiquity, scarce three pairs of friends are mentioned, so that beginning with Theseus you end with Orestes. But in truth within the limits of a single school, and that restricted in numbers, what great flocks of friends did Epicurus secure, and how great was that harmony of affection wherein they all agreed! And his example is followed by the Epicureans in our day also. But let us return to our theme; there is no need to speak of persons.

[66] I see then that friendship has been discussed by our school in three ways. Some, denying that the pleasures which affect our friends are in themselves as desirable to us as those we desire for ourselves, a view which certain persons think shakes the foundation of friendship, still defend their position, and in my opinion easily escape from their difficulties. For they affirm that friendship, like the virtues of which we spoke already, cannot be dissociated from pleasure. Now since isolation and a life without friends abound in treacheries and alarms, reason herself advises us to procure friendships, by the acquisition of which the spirit is strengthened, and cannot then be severed from the hope of achieving pleasures.

[67] And as enmity, spitefulness, scorn, are opposed to pleasures, so friendships are not only the truest promoters, but are actually efficient causes of pleasures, as well to a man's friends as to himself; and friends not only have the immediate enjoyment of these pleasures but are elate with hope as regards future and later times. Now because we can by no means apart from friendship preserve the agreeableness of life strong and unbroken, nor further can we maintain friendship itself unless we esteem our friends in the same degree as ourselves; on that account this principle is acted on in friendship, and so friendship is linked with pleasure. Truly we both rejoice at the joy of our friends as much as at our own joy, and we are equally pained by their vexations.

[68] Therefore the wise man will entertain the same feeling for his friend as for himself, and the very same efforts which he would undergo to procure his own pleasure, these he will undergo to procure that of his friend. And all that we said of the virtues to shew how they always have their root in pleasures, must be said over about friendship. For it was nobly declared by Epicurus, almost in these words: "It is one and the same feeling which strengthens the mind against the fear of eternal or lasting evil, and which clearly sees that in this actual span of life the protection afforded by friendship is the most powerful of all."

[69] There are however certain Epicureans who are somewhat more nervous in facing the reproaches of your school, but are still shrewd enough ; these are afraid that if we suppose friendship to be desirable with a view to our own pleasure, friendship may appear to be altogether maimed, as it were. So they say that while the earliest meetings and associations and tendencies towards the establishment of familiarity do arise on account of pleasure, yet when experience has gradually produced intimacy, then affection ripens to such a degree that though no interest be served by the friendship, yet friends are loved in themselves and for their own sake. Again, if by familiarity we get to love localities, shrines, cities, the exercise ground,

the park, dogs, horses, and exhibitions either of gymnastics or of combats with beasts, how much more easily and properly may this come about when our familiarity is with human beings?

[70] Men are found to say that there is a certain treaty of alliance which binds wise men not to esteem their friends less than they do themselves. Such alliance we not only understand to be possible, but often see it realized, and it is plain that nothing can be found more conducive to pleasantness of life than union of this kind. From all these different views we may conclude that not only are the principles of friendship left unconstrained, if the supreme good be made to reside in pleasure, but that without this view it is entirely impossible to discover a basis for friendship.

Post by “warjuning” of July 9, 2023 at 1:26 PM

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.

Post by “Cassius” of July 9, 2023 at 3:59 PM

Wow great post! This is such a an important point, and you do a great job of linking it to the specifics of friendship, like it should be linked to everything else:

[Quote from warjuning](#)

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).

Epicurus does not say that just because something is the abstract product of experience and reflection over time that it is not "real" and that we should not consider it capable of generating pleasure and pain that are also very real to us.

I see this as a subset of the phrase I am pilfering from David Sedley that Epicurus was not a radical atomic reductionist. Even though it is true that only atoms have an eternal unchanging existence, the "qualities" that emerge from combinations of atoms have just as much "truth" to them as do the atoms themselves, and it is wrong for us to act as if our level of existence is less "important" to us than the atomic level. The pleasure and pain that result from friendship

relationships may not have the same permanence as the atoms themselves, but they are among the most important to us in life.

Post by “warjuning” of July 9, 2023 at 7:07 PM

Thank you for your feedback! Sorry for the late response.

I concur with your assessment of Epicurus' ontology. Atomic configurations are irreducible to the quantitative magnitudes of atoms (size, shape, weight, solidity), as qualities arise from the ways atoms relate and structure themselves. The reality of these relations guarantee the reality of what emerges, as atoms are not merely juxtaposed to each other without genuine unity, but are truly organized and conjugated. Maybe I am mistaken, but when atomism posits the reality of "atoms and atoms/atoms and void", the "and" is just as real as atoms and void. It signifies that they do not just stand next to each other, but they are in some sense "together".

For reasons of utility, this could be mapped onto the modern distinction between internal and external relations. Internal relations constitute the being of a thing, like building blocks. They are inseparable from it. If they cease to be, the object ceases too. External relations exist **between** the terms they relate and conjugate without constituting them. They allow their subjects to remain intrinsically independent from them. Take for example the following proposition:

i) Warjuning is sitting on his bed

The relation between me and my bed does not constitute either of us as objects. If I choose to stand up, I will still be quite human and my bed will still be a bed. Nonetheless, I am truly on my bed, and my bed is truly supporting my body. There is a real, non-constitutional relation between us.

I believe something similar is happening within Epicurean cosmology:

- Atoms do not constitute one another, as they exist in their own unique, indivisible unity. Yet, they give rise to real organization and structures. Similarly, atoms move within the void and the void yields to atoms, but both interact without constituting one another. None of those elements just stand side by side, juxtaposed to one another. Yet, they are not each other's building blocks either.
- Epicurus, by virtue of his realist epistemology, posits objects with genuine organization. If relations between atoms are non-constitutive and external to them, and if the unity they establish is genuine and real, then they must be also ontological and fully real. This means that atoms are not merely moving next to each other, but the "and" has real force.

It is equivalent to concrete wholeness and structure.

If the "and" is primordial in such a way, then it makes sense to see it throughout Epicurean cosmology. To return to our initial subject, I may appreciate a friend because of their virtuous, and thus pleasant character. For instance, I appreciate my best friend because we are very like-minded, which makes me feel safe and carefree in being myself and striking all kinds of discussions. She possesses spontaneity, creativity, humour and numerous other good qualities, that she expresses in her own singular way. When I am confronted by this genuinely pleasant uniqueness of my friend, they gradually become valuable for me. Our relation is wholly inter-subjective. It cannot be reduced to "intrinsic value" that my friend possesses before I grew to appreciate her, nor is it reducible to my opinion of her. We are both causally responsible for it, and yet, it is not reducible to our constitution as beings. If we would stop being friends, we would still be individuated, atomic beings. It is fully external. Nonetheless, we are both truly affecting each other, maximizing our individual and shared pleasure, have developed a positive disposition towards one another and have agreed to be friends. There is real causal force exchanged being two atomic objects, which are also normative subjects. Yet both can still "break" from the relation between them, without this making the relation in any sense unreal. This only points towards the contingency of affairs, which permeates everything apart from atoms and void themselves.

My thoughts and beliefs are still being formed, but I am glad to share them here.

Post by "Cassius" of July 9, 2023 at 8:04 PM

[Quote from warjuning](#)

My thoughts and beliefs are still being formed, but I am glad to share them here

And thank you very much for doing so!

Post by "warjuning" of July 9, 2023 at 8:06 PM

My pleasure!