

# "Epicurean Mission and Membership" - Very Interesting Article by MacGilivray On Ancient Epicurean Missionary Spirit

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 6:27 PM

Here's a part of the Conclusion, that will hopefully encourage more of us to read the bulk of it:

The Epicureans were then no isolationist community living within a garden compound, or a scholastic group content to merely recite philosophical truisms amongst themselves. Rather this was a community that was structured from the

beginning, and with the ideological supports, to have an active concern to include outsiders, and to extend their philosophy beyond their immediate associates. Yet despite such characteristics, the Epicureans were not a community of evangelists or missionaries. The realization that the Epicureans had a strong aversion to the open propagation of philosophy also needs to be informing and pulling upon our understanding. This concern is probably best demonstrated by Epicurus' frequent refrains on the crowd's inability to respond correctly to philosophical truths, and his belief on the futility of trying to structure a message to appeal to a mass audience. The following passage probably best expresses this attitude:

*[I would rather] reveal the things which are expedient to all mankind, even if no one is going to understand me, than assent to the received opinions and reap the adulation lavishly bestowed by the multitude.*

So although the school could show an effort and concern not witnessed in its main rivals to embrace and expedite the development of outsiders/beginners, and it could even on occasion be found pursuing specific individuals to persuade, there was little conception or drive to actively evangelize, or attempt to spike the interest the otherwise uninterested masses with the potency and legitimacy of their message. As with other contemporary philosophical schools it was assumed that if you were to be responsive to the philosophy that you would seek it out<sup>50</sup> just as a patient would seek out a doctor, and not the other way around. <sup>51</sup> This explains why the epitomes, which some scholars have designated as also functioning as propaganda material, despite the long preface we are given on their designed use and varied intended audiences, make no hint at their possible use for convincing or introducing the philosophy to those with no prior interest.

Yet the picture is further complicated for scholars wanting a straightforward account of the Epicurean engagement with mission, for as we plotted the Epicurean movement across the generations of the school, and as philosophy moved westwards onto Roman soil, this open\*closed dynamic came under pressure. Subsequent generations of Epicureans do not seem

to have been merely content with the School's inclusion/amenability to outsiders; but rather they sought to actively proselytize their message to the commonality of society. The tension that Epicurus was aware of above between holding a message that was expedient for all mankind, but not fashioning it in a way to appeal to the majority of humankind was for some Epicureans strained to breaking point. Though it is hard to exactly judge the motives and circumstances that

prompted the Epicurean popularisers, and further research will be needed to understand and place them within the larger context of the Second Sophistic age; we can though note that given that the abstinence from propagation seems to have been more of a shared cultural agreement amongst the schools, rather than a dogmatically informed opposition in Epicureanism, that we should not be particularly surprised that given appropriate circumstances that this aversion would be liable to degrade. The reasons motivating this change would also probably be reliant upon broad Epicurean cosmopolitanism, and their fundamental concern to include a cross\*spectrum of society within their ranks to gain the therapy that their philosophy provided.<sup>52</sup> The successful implementation of this desire could, I proposed, be uniquely achieved in Epicureanism because of their philosophy's focus on dyadic teaching, rather than a more politically focused philosophy, and through the School's sanctioning and practice of producing epitomes of their philosophy for beginners. However others such as the Epicurean scholar Philodemus demonstrated the continuing observance of the open\*closed dynamic in the school, <sup>53</sup> and he frequently critiqued the populists' efforts to simplify the philosophy into epitomes, and bemoaned their attacks on the value of serious philosophical texts.

Yet the change in Epicureanism to fashion texts that would draw people to their message was not just done through the utilization of brevity. Lucretius' great didactic poem the *De Rerum Natura* was explicitly crafted to lure educated Latin speakers through its finessed prose to consider the (at first usually distasteful), message of Epicureanism. Although some scholars have opined that his poem was an anomalous flash of interaction of between Epicureanism and educated Roman society, we found that we could establish a surprisingly large list of Epicurean adherents from the top of Roman society. Epicureanism was part of the general intellectual discourse of the time, and not restricted to a isolated, or peripheral philosophical community. Cicero's frequent comments on the numeracy of his Epicurean peers, and his numerous recollections at finding them present in friend's houses, at drinking parties, and hosting philosophical lectures, all testify to the vitality of Epicureanism and its success in positioning itself as a respected intellectual position in elite Rome society at Rome. But more this, the popularity and adherence to Epicureanism amongst the politically and business active Roman elite reveals the ability of Epicureanism to extend its membership beyond operating merely in specifically designed Epicurean communities and to include, as I have argued they had always done, well\*disposed and interested members into their midst.