

The Anti-Social Contract, an elaboration and advice on living unknown for introverted Epicureans

Post by "Charles" of December 1, 2022 at 2:50 PM

Writing this at work so consider this my rough draft.

It is safe to say that a good chunk of us on the forums are introverts. Any diverse group or community will have them; however, I'm intending this thread for those who consider themselves hermits, recluses, or extreme introverts, especially the unregistered lurkers on here. I'm also writing from personal experience, as aside from a tiny, select handful, such as immediate family and my romantic partner, I do not feel the need to speak to anyone else unless it's for the sake of my pleasure. My own absences from the community here can be explained by this behavior.

Epicurean Philosophy is simultaneously well-disposed towards both extroverts and introverts. To the regulars that is no surprise, but more often than not casual explication of the philosophy emphasizes emotional, social conduct if not from Epicurus' Garden, then the [Principal Doctrines](#) that talk of friendship. Meanwhile what little is mentioned of a solitary life, is typically on the ascetic side: why engage in the public hustle if removing pain and becoming tranquil is your goal? Why not sit alone with your bread and water? As is usual, the popular and public approach is a gross oversimplification of the options an Epicurean has for themselves.

In his [Biography of Epicurus](#), Diogenes Laertius references Epicurus as writing to Pythocles: "*Hoist all sail, my dear boy, and steer clear of all culture.*" This is the same Pythocles that Laertius copies the [letter](#) to near the end of Book 10, and the contents of said letter imply that the two had numerous or frequent correspondence with each other. The letter's intent is not only didactic, but it seemed that Epicurus would hope that it would be shared and spread, so it remains a useful piece of advice, particularly to new learners. To me, this is one of the key sources and examples of "living unknown". In terms of Epicurean ethics, living unknown is just as crucial as the desires and their value to pleasure, because it ties into other aspects of the philosophy, namely the epistemology and some of its politics (See: [PD's31-40](#)) into consideration and accommodation. Of course, the ethics of the philosophy is perhaps the most important aspect of Epicureanism, it is first and foremost a philosophy of hedonism, justified and integrated through its physics and epistemology.

But what exactly does "live unknown" mean?

Quite simply it means to remove yourself from the vagaries of public life: whether that be government and the political system, the military, prevailing educational institutions, the church and its associated traditions, including religion as a whole, and even the gossip and collective opinion of the general public (ie the mob), or anything of a similar nature involving

society at large. To become obsessed and completely engrossed in these fields will do little to stymie fears about life and death, and more often than not bring more pain and stress to the point of perhaps overwhelming any sense of achievement. These institutions are dependent on the current thoughts and mindset of the collective at large.

Just as in Epicurus' time, it is all too regrettable that pleasure is shunned and quickly equated with gluttony and depraved license. Epicurus himself had personally experienced the animosity towards his ideas, causing him to travel to different islands before ultimately settling in Athens, but it was an issue that has persisted across all of history and even today. In a better world, we could hope for the general public to be Epicurean or at least hedonistic. They would then have little reason to judge us and provoke the necessity for living unknown.

[Quote from Vatican Saying 29 & 58](#)

For I would certainly prefer, as I study Nature, to announce frankly what is beneficial to all people, even if none agrees with me, rather than to compromise with common opinions, and thus reap the frequent praise of the many.

We must free ourselves from the prison of public education and politics.

[Quote from Maxims of Epicurus \(Usener 187, attributed to Epicurus\)](#)

"I never desired to please the rabble. What pleased them, I did not learn; and what I knew was far removed from their understanding."

In short, in order to live pleasantly, particularly if you wish to be Epicurean, you must not heap attention onto yourself in the eyes of the public whilst still believing in that death is nothing, pleasure is the highest good, there is no divine will, etc. However, there is additional nuance that is quietly and subtly acknowledged by Epicureans but is otherwise glossed over by popular interpretations and readings of Epicurus if not outright rejected. The most common of which is the abstention from political activity and education. Yet there are numerous sources from Epicurus' own life and the wise man sayings by Laertius. I'll cross post a comment I made on the nature of isolation versus being aware of your surroundings to quickly dispel this objection again.

[Quote from me on the Austin thread](#)

An Epicurean society is political in the sense of caring for the well-being and health of their country. Its citizens would not be ignorant or secluded from the world around them, on the contrary, they would have knowledge of the various figures and events around them. Epicurus was well read on Plato and his contemporaries; he could not have rejected them and devised the system of the garden had he chosen to completely and utterly withdraw into isolation.

Had Epicurus completely and utterly withdrawn from all public life, he would not have taken to teaching his ideas in Lampsacus, Mytilene, or Athens. He would've been content to live his life and die either taking his ideas with him or leaving them dedicated in a single source such as books he had secretly written, in the manner of the obscure and only posthumously notable Enlightenment thinker [Jean Meslier](#), a priest whose lifetime work was a grand book dedicated to atheism and materialism, the very things his occupation of over 35 years opposed. If Epicurus had taken a similar approach to Meslier, it is not hard to imagine that his ideas would not have survived let alone become so influential. No, Epicurus followed his advice and never strayed from his beliefs. It is much more reasonable to see that, to each person to each their own desires. So too, are the circumstances that necessitate our active involvement with the general public.

[Quote from Biography of Epicurus \(Wise man sayings\)](#)

Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the Problems and in the work On Nature. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life

[...]

He will engage in lawsuits and will leave writings behind him, but will not deliver speeches on public occasions. [...] He will be careful of his reputation in so far as to prevent himself from being despised. He will erect statues of others, but whether he had one himself or not, he would be indifferent. [...] He will pay court to a king, if occasion demands. He will rejoice at another's misfortunes, but only for his correction. And he will gather together a school, but never so as to become a popular leader. He will give lectures in public, but never unless asked...

Simply withdrawing from public life may work well, but it is more nuanced than that. To truly "live unknown" is to abandon the ensnaring culture and conventions of public life and cultural institutions. For Epicureans, their replacement is either their own solitude perhaps paired by staunch individuality or more commonly the structure of the Garden, be it in person or an online format such as this forum. The garden is nor ever was a commune of common property. Members never pooled their resources or gave up their possessions by coercive tradition, some even lived far across the country, keeping in touch by letters, not by the appearance of their person.

To get back onto the topic of the thread, it is more than possible for an introverted, anti-social Epicurean to live pleasantly and be happy. It would always be prudent to keep a few friends within your network as a safety net and for the occasional impulse of wanting to socialize, no matter how rarely. Yet it is not necessary to engage with the public, as even studying and observing the world around you will suffice. Indeed, even engaging with your fellow Epicureans is by no means required. The garden is a resource, open to all but welcoming to who are sympathetic to pleasure.