

Suavity - General Discussion

Post by "Cassius" of June 3, 2026 at 9:17 PM

Tonight we discussed briefly on the forum that just as there was an emphasis on "frank Speech" there was also an Epicurean emphasis on "Suavity" - at least according to the sources collected below by DeWitt. Given the hazards that "frank speech" can entail we probably ought to have at least as much discussion on suavity, as well as the Consideration that DeWitt also covers in the next following subsection. No doubt DeWitt is stretching somewhat here but I would say most all of it is well reasoned and makes very good sense for an Epicurean to pursue.

Quote from DeWitt - Epicurus And His Philosophy

14.9. SUAVITY

St. Augustine, who, like other churchmen of Africa, possessed a good understanding of Epicureanism and but for its denial of immortality would have awarded it the palm, in one passage selected as its watchwords "pleasure, suavity, and peace."⁸⁴⁵ It seems to have been the friendly ethic of Epicurus that won for this virtue of Suavity a manifest vogue among the Romans and for the words *suavis* and *suavitas* a certain currency in a definite context of meaning. They occur so repeatedly in the letters of Cicero and the writings of the Augustan age as to seem characteristic of the Latin vocabulary. However, in the plays of Plautus, who wrote vernacular Latin if any man did, they are found less often and only in the literal sense. Like the words *candid* and *candor*, they took on a fresh color from the Epicurean context; it was the "sweet friendship" of the disdainful Memmius that Lucretius hoped to win for himself by the charm of his verses.⁸⁴⁶ In his preface to the fourth book he informs us with clarity what *suavitas* should mean for poetry; he would smear the forbidding teachings of Epicurus "as if with the sweet honey of the muse." Conversion is his objective and suavity is his chief reliance.

It is quite to be expected that in Cicero's sly but genial essay *On Friendship*, a topic for which Epicurus possessed a moral copyright, we should find it briefly defined as "a certain agreeableness of speech and manners."⁸⁴⁷ It connoted both a quality of voice and an expression of countenance, as Nepos makes plain in his characterization of the youthful Atticus.⁸⁴⁸ Cicero in his letters knew the value of complimenting Epicurean friends upon the possession of it. Even to the lean and hungry Cassius, hardly sweet of disposition though known to have followed Epicurus, is ascribed "an unlimited fund of sweetness."⁸⁴⁹ The merry Papius Paetus deserved better to be told that his letters "overflowed with sweetness."⁸⁵⁰ Cicero even claimed the quality for himself, though famed for the acidity of his tongue.⁸⁵¹ It fitted much better the jocular Eutrapelus, whom he addresses as "my sweetest Volumnius."⁸⁵² So singular is the usage of the

word that it almost ranks as a test for identifying Epicurean correspondents.

Going back to the beginning we discover two necessities for the virtue in the creed of Epicurus. A chain argument, as often elsewhere, will make the logical sequence clear: the objective of life is tranquillity; this cannot be attained without security nor security without friends. Friends, in turn, are not to be won without effort. Friendship is too indispensable as an asset and too precious as a pleasure to be left to the hazards of chance. It is the part of wisdom to make friends systematically. To this end "a certain agreeableness of speech and manners" is essential. "Wear a smile," Epicurus recommended. Moreover, to make friends is not the final objective. These friends, so far as possible, must be made converts, and the creed so attractive they will gladly adhere. Success in this will result in good companionship, which is a final objective.

In addition to this logic of utility there was also a historical reason for cultivating the new virtue of suavity. Epicurus was not born too late to be a near contemporary to the earlier Cynics, all of whom practiced a kind of "shock treatment" in greeting the public and prospective students in particular. Antisthenes, when asked why he was so harsh with his pupils, retorted, "Physicians are so with the sick." Diogenes, who died when Epicurus was eighteen, interpreted freedom of speech as freedom to insult. Crates, known as the Gate-Crasher, a contemporary, was the teacher of Zeno, who adopted and bequeathed to the Stoic school this practice of asperity. Thus Stoicism by heredity became a scolding, censorious creed. Epicurus, reacting adversely to the example of the Cynics, cultivated the opposite virtue. He is on record as having dealt with this question in the second book of his work *On Lives*, where he wrote, "The wise man will not adopt the Cynic's way of life."⁸⁵³

The suavity of Epicurus was condemned as effusiveness by his enemies, who rummaged through his letters and assembled a gratifying list of examples. He addressed his disciple Colotes as Colotarion, as if a Richard should be called "Dicky dear." The offense was worse when he addressed the brilliant courtesan Leontion as Leontarion. He was maliciously accused of addressing both her and the barbarian Mithres as "Lord and Savior," salutations proper to Apollo; the words as he used them were mere expletives.⁸⁵⁴ To friends who had sent him food in a difficult time he wrote: "You have given heaven-high proofs of your good will to me."⁸⁵⁵ Less fortunate was part of a letter to Pythocles, a handsome lad: "I shall seat myself and await your lovely and godlike entrance."⁸⁵⁶ It was perhaps such language that prompted the saintly Epictetus to denounce him as "foul-mouthed."⁸⁵⁷ Compliments to pretty boys aroused suspicions in Greek minds, and the Stoic was censorious.

This cultivation of suavity, while in competitive contrast to Cynic license and Stoic asperity, serves also in a measure to separate Epicureanism from Platonism, which was the creed of highbrows. Suavity is more than courtesy. It is active and persuasive. The aristocrat may be courteous to all but he will be suave only to those whom he admits to equality. Suavity, as Epicureans practiced it, was a kind of salesmanship. It was their

weapon for making friends and influencing people. It was partly by means of it that they became the most numerous of all sects.

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