

# **Article - Lucretius on the Nature of Parental Love - McConnell**

**Post by "Cassius" of August 29, 2019 at 8:33 AM**

I don't have time right now for anything than just to mark this as a placeholder. If the first paragraph is representative, the author is going to eventually defend Epicurus on parental love, but only after starting out by accepting the representations of a gang of anti-Epicureans. How counterproductive and tiring it is to approach Epicurus in this manner!!

<https://t.co/VmfXelzKEt?amp=1>

Epicurus denies that human parental love is natural.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with his hedonist ethics, he maintains that parental love is a result of the rational weighing of the advantages (pleasures) and disadvantages (pains) that might arise from loving one's child;<sup>2</sup> parental love is a matter of choice. Hostile sources promote the view that the Epicurean position is obviously unconvincing and should be dismissed out of hand. Thus, Plutarch accuses the Epicureans: 'And do you not deny the natural bonding of parents to their children, which is apparent to everyone?' (τὸ δὲ φύσει περιέχεσθαι τὰ τεκόντα τῶν γεννωμένων οὐχὶ πᾶσι φαινόμενον ἀναιρεῖτε; *Adv. Col.* 1123A); Cicero, in both his speeches (*Dom.* 97–8; *Cael.* 79–80; *S. Rosc.* 40–1, 52–5, 62–3) and his philosophical works (*Leg.* 1.42–3; *Fin.* 1.23, 3.57, 3.62–8, 4.17, 5.65, 5.68–9, 5.81–4; *Tusc.* 5.5; *Off.* 1.12, 1.54), argues that the naturalness of parental love is clear to all reasonable people, and he expects wholehearted agreement from his Roman audience (indeed, drawing on his own experience, his Epicurean friend Atticus apparently agreed with him that Epicurus was wrong on this particular issue; *Att.* 7.2.4);<sup>3</sup> and Epictetus too offers a sustained critique of Epicurus' views on parental love (*Arr. Epict. Diss.* 1.23).<sup>4</sup> However, the scattered evidence in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* suggests that Epicurean views on parental love were both nuanced and sophisticated. In this paper I gather this evidence and seek to reconstruct the details of Lucretius' treatment of parental love.

In the first section I position parental love in the context of Epicurus' ethical system and show that it fits closely with his utilitarian account of friendship. In the

---

<sup>1</sup> Demetrius of Laconia, *PHerc* 1012, cols. LXVI–LXVIII Puglia; Cic. *Att.* 7.2.4; Arr. *Epict. Diss.* 1.23; Plut. *De amore prolis* 495A–C, *Adv. Col.* 1123A; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 3.17.5. With the exception of Demetrius of Laconia, the evidence is presented in 525–9 Usener.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch reports that, according to Epicurus, it is for a return that a father loves his son, a mother her child, and children their parents (μισθοῦ γὰρ ἀνθρώπων τίς ἀνθρώπων φιλεῖ; καίτοι κατ' Ἐπίκουρον ὁ πατήρ τὸν υἱόν, ἡ μήτηρ τὸ τέκνον, οἱ παῖδες τοὺς τεκόντας, *De amore prolis* 495A).

<sup>3</sup> On Cicero's treatment of parental love, see in particular Treggiari (2005) 9–36.

<sup>4</sup> This discourse can be seen as a supplement to 1.11, in which Epictetus presents in detail his own views on the issue. Cf. also 2.20, 3.22.67–72, and 3.24.58–118.

## Post by “Joshua” of August 29, 2019 at 10:12 PM

Huh.

Either I *seriously* misunderstand 'desire' in Epicurean philosophy, or this author is totally misapplying the concept.

Here's what I mean. When we talk about desire with regards to it being *natural* and *necessary*, surely what we mean is that the **experience** of a desire is *natural* (or *not*), while the **satisfaction** of a desire is *necessary* (or *not*). [Am I wrong here!?!]

Is enjoying food natural? The question doesn't really make sense. The desire to eat is natural. The satisfaction of that desire is necessary. But the enjoyment of the food itself is just a feeling of pleasure. That's the confusion this paper continually suffers.

Is it natural to desire to HAVE children? I could make a case either way. But the pleasure of loving those children if you DO have them is, 1.) An involuntary feeling, like all pleasures; and 2.) *always* a good in itself.

What a bizarre paper to read! "Should I love my children?" 🤔

---

## Post by “Cassius” of August 29, 2019 at 10:43 PM

Exactly Joshua. I think you are correct here:

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

When we talk about desire with regards to it being natural and necessary, surely what we mean is that the experience of a desire is natural (or not), while the satisfaction of a desire is necessary (or not). [Am I wrong here!?!]

How ridiculous to accept the idea that Epicurus would argue straightforwardly that it is not "natural" to love one's children. As you say, all pleasure is natural, as we did not create the mechanism ourselves, so anything in which we find pleasure is a natural result of that experience. Now some pleasures cost much more in pain than they are worth, but that does not make the pleasure, or the pain, any less "natural."

I continue to refer to Torquatus' statement as the most logical expression of what natural / necessary is all about -- that "*the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are*

*gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require but little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered."*

Now I am thinking that this argument maybe got mixed up in the issue of friendship and what is the motivating force for friendship in the first place (?) Maybe those who were attacking Epicurus were trying to argue that even with children the same issue is involved as Torquatus discusses with friends:

*"Other Epicureans though by no means lacking in insight are a little less courageous in defying the opprobrious criticisms of the Academy. They fear that if we hold friendship to be desirable only for the pleasure that it affords to ourselves, it will be thought that it is crippled altogether. They therefore say that the first advances and overtures, and the original inclination to form an attachment, are prompted by the desire for pleasure, but that when the progress of intercourse has led to intimacy, the relationship blossoms into an affection strong enough to make us love our friends for their own sake, even though no practical advantage accrues from their friendship,"*

And so maybe that argument mutated into "there is no NATURAL motivation to love our children any more than it is to love our friends - because Epicurus said It is all a question of advantage."

Maybe - as I am just speculating here, but there must be some explanation for this "bizarre" discussion.

---

## **Post by “Elayne” of September 4, 2019 at 10:01 PM**

Couldn't have said it better, Joshua! We use wisdom only to decide our actions-- the feelings are a direct interaction with reality, like the senses. A key difference of understanding between Epicurus and the Objectivists.

This reminds me of a ridiculous sentence in a study I read several years ago, which measured the fat content in human milk over the first year of an infant's life. It rises during that time, which surprised the researchers, and becomes higher than whole cow's milk. Their conclusion was along the lines of: more study will be needed to determine if this is safe for infants over one year of age. I laughed so hard that I dropped the journal.