

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

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 6:11 AM

I have not previously seen this and have not finished reading it but it contains a lot of good research that should be helpful. And as you might infer from the fact that I am saying positive things about it, it does not take the position that Epicureans should be hermits!

File

[Epicurean Mission and Membership From The Early Garden To The Late Roman Republic](#)



A very good article covering the "missionary" aspect of the Epicurean movement.



Cassius

May 8, 2022 at 6:15 AM

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 7:24 AM

As of this note I am still on page 90 of the PDF, but I have to say this is one of the best written and most useful articles I have read in a long time on a subject that concerns the basic purpose of the forum - methods and purposes of the popularization of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 7:32 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2506-epicurean-mission-and-membership-very-interesting-article-by-macgilivray-on-anci/>

Lots of anecdotes and references I have never seen before, such as:

Quote

Epicureanism then, even for a critic like Cicero, had integrated itself into the vibrant exchange of ideas, and was a topic for intellectual sparring with friends.³³ Cicero's association with this group probably also provided him with the amusing anecdote that after a lecture in Campania on Epicureanism had ceased, the unnamed Epicurean lecturer gave time for questions to be asked by the audience; to which Paetus responded not by voicing an intellectual question as the lecturer had intended, but by asking who was to take the scholar to dinner? ³⁴

34 Fam. 9.25.2

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 8, 2022 at 10:36 AM

This article covers a lot of background, here an interesting excerpt:

Quote

Yet it is not just the Epicurean aspiration for privacy that has led some to posit their exclusivist nature, but also **the school's communal nature**. When the idea of the Epicurean desire for a quiet garden retreat is attached to their communal living it seems, to some, that the Garden must have been a self-sustaining, reclusive society. Although again **we must caution ourselves by noting that we are left with surprisingly few primary sources from which to examine whether such an interplay or dynamic existed.** Nor can we tell how such a format would define their understanding of those found outside of the Garden. **Most comments referencing their communal life are allusions; such as Epicurus' statement that: 'the agreeable life [is] in each other's society,'⁶ or when he references the insiders of the group as belonging to 'the household.'⁷**

Ancient commentators and historians of the Epicurean movement are equally laconic in their recording of the school's communal nature. **Diogenes Laertius, for example, remarked that: 'friends indeed came to [Epicurus] from all parts and lived with him in his garden,'⁸**

and in a subsequent statement he relayed for his readers the information that the **members of the Garden enjoyed 'the common life.'⁹** One of the only notable insights that we have received is that **their goods were held individually,** and were

not communally shared*10 something that would have separated them from other communal philosophical groups such as the Pythagoreans, or, at least the portrayal of, Philo's Therapeutae.¹¹

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 11:24 AM

Yes, as you read through the rest of the article he expands on this point with lots of details. To be clear, McGilivray does NOT believe that Epicureans were essentially Hermits who put up walls around themselves and lived isolated from the rest of the world.

The trust of the article is to the opposite point: That while Epicurus was very clear that not every person or group or people will become our friends, those who are "well-disposed" towards us should be invited to at least some of our gatherings (the 20th is explicitly mentioned) and that we engage in discussion and question and answer with them, even with those who we are sure will never want to spend the time to read all the 37 books and pursue all the details.

That's one of the the really interesting parts of the essay -- the use of outlines like the letters to Herodotus and Pythocles and the 40 doctrines: are they summaries for use of new people? are they abbreviations for use in memorization by the inner circle? are they in any sense "dumbing down" the doctrines to make it easier to spread the word?

So a lot of the essay is directed toward the question of how dedicated Epicureans should act towards those who are not (yet) dedicated Epicureans, and that touches on a lot of what we do with EpicureanFriends.com and our other initiatives.

McGilivray makes the kind of comments we are now accustomed to (calling DeWitt out when he goes too far with his Christianity analogies) while at the same time affirming DeWitt's basic point -- that the Epicureans were not at all hermits, and that it was an important part of the Epicurean model to work to expand the philosophy to others.

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2022 at 6:14 PM

Some of you will appreciate that i was particularly impressed by THIS analysis:

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2506-epicurean-mission-and-membership-very-interesting-article-by-macgilivray-on-anci/>

Where did Lucretius get this obstinate desire that he describes above to fashion his didactic poem in Latin? The answer, I believe, is to be found by noting Lucretius' strong belief that it was the format of his work that contained its effectual power and presumably its construction in Latin was also a carefully chosen part of this allure. If Epicureanism wished, it seems Lucretius had judged, to truly integrate itself into Roman society it must be expressed in Latin. If, as he says, he wanted to put Epicureanism before his reader's mind, he did so with the recognition that, though capable in Greek, they thought in Latin. If Epicureanism was to become a Roman, as well as Greek, philosophy (and we have seen his belief on the transcended reach of philosophy demonstrated above), then it would need to be translated into the language of the state. We should remember that Cicero provides similar reason as motivating his efforts to manufacture philosophy away from their traditional Greek language, and into his native Latin.

Also:

Quote

J. D. Minyard (1985) 46,87 also concluded that: 'Had his purpose been purely explanatory, didactic, and descriptive, purely philosophical, this is what he should have done. Greek was well*known to his oligarchic audience and the De Rerum Natura is nothing if not an oligarchic poem...[rather] he wants his poem to reevaluatethe literary heritage and rearrange Roman culture, to reform the language itself and the society based on it....This cannot be accomplished by ignoring the language that reflects and embeds the inherited social form of thought and motivates a pattern of life it fossilizes and inspires...He clearly believed that if Epicureanism was to take root in society at large, specifically in Roman society, it must reach out to the wider audience in the form and on the terms to which that audience was used.

So we have to do both: study the details of the Greek and be sure we get the most accurate understanding of it, and then re-express the same thoughts in understandable English.

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:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2506-epicurean-mission-and-membership-very-interesting-article-by-macgilivray-on-anci/>

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^{50*} just as a patient would seek out a doctor, and not the other way around. ⁵¹ 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

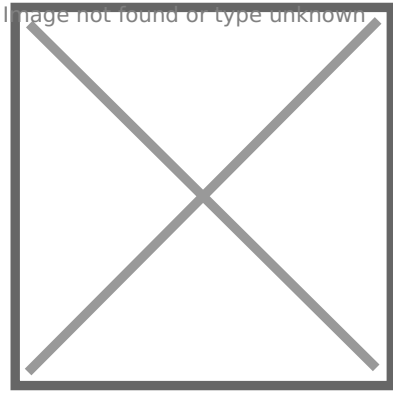
prompted the Epicurean popularisers, and further research will be needed to understand and place them within the larger context of the Second Sophistic age; we can though note that given that the abstinence from propagation seems to have been more of a shared cultural

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.⁵² 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, ⁵³ 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.

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2022 at 6:53 AM

Not sure if you saw this, but here's another later paper by the same author:



[Epitomizing Philosophy and the Critique of Epicurean Popularizers. Journal of Ancient History 3.1 \(2015\), pp.22-54.](#)

This study explores the concern in Epicureanism to create brief renderings of its philosophical tenets. It is argued that although the Epicureans were...

www.academia.edu

Post by “Cassius” of May 9, 2022 at 6:57 AM

Thanks no I did not! I am impressed with his style and cites so will look at that.

Also he says in the first paper that he wrote, but did not publish, a section more directly on Philodemus.

I have not heard of McGill. Otherwise so he might be interesting to look up his other activities.

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2022 at 7:12 AM

[Erlend D MacGillivray | University of Aberdeen - Academia.edu](#)

I tried to find him in the U of Aberdeen directory to no avail. He also seems to have gone down an Epictetus/Stoic track after the initial interest in Epicureanism. Just FYI. That doesn't diminish the utility of his papers and research!

Post by “Cassius” of May 9, 2022 at 8:10 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2506-epicurean-mission-and-membership-very-interesting-article-by-macgilivray-on-anci/>

[Quote from Don](#)

He also seems to have gone down an Epictetus/Stoic track after the initial interest in Epicureanism

That is so sad! Both his analysis and his notes seem to me to be of very high quality. This doesn't read like a "student" paper at all, but someone of advanced thinking and capacity who is widely read in the ancient materials.

At some point this paper probably needs to be compared to Nate's list of ancient Epicureans to be sure the list contains the ones MacGilivray references.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 9, 2022 at 8:44 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

He also seems to have gone down an Epictetus/Stoic track after the initial interest in Epicureanism.

This is important to note, and to ask the question as to why this might have happened -- and could happen for anyone -- sort of a theoretical exploration as to why might someone study Epicureanism, but then later choose focus on Stoicism or modern stoicism.

Here are some reasons that come to me:

- 1) The given individual's lifestyle is not set up to be supportive or conducive to enjoyment in life, due to a busy or stressful schedule and/or a lack of friends to do enjoyable activities with.
- 2) The given individual's life situation is very unpleasant, making it difficult to relax and enjoy life -- a solitary lifestyle, difficult illness, mental illness, or poverty.
- 3) The given individual ideologically identifies more closely with "struggle" or self-advancement -- long hard hours of work to achieve recognition or fame -- in an attempt to improve one's financial well-being and/or to distract from # 1 and # 2 above.

Any other reasons not listed?

I myself feel that reason # 1 above applies to me -- though I will try to stick with Epicureanism for a little while longer.

Post by “Don” of May 9, 2022 at 8:50 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

This is important to note, and to ask the question as to why this might have happened

My impression was that Stoicism as a research focus is probably more "popular" within academic research whereas Epicurean studies are more niche.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 9, 2022 at 3:56 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

My impression was that Stoicism as a research focus is probably more "popular" within academic research whereas Epicurean studies are more niche.

Possibly due to the lack of Epicurean source material, would guess.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 9, 2022 at 4:15 PM

Here is a fairly recent quick easy read, by Catherine Wilson. Which I noticed was posted on the FB group. It does a good job of highlighting key aspects, and very much recommend this if you haven't already read it. The points contained would be very good to share with those who are new to Epicureanism, and also to keep in mind as to why we "Keep Calm, and Carry On" with Epicureanism.

[Why Epicureanism, not Stoicism, is the philosophy we need now](#)

Philosophers have warned against pleasure since Plato, but Epicurean principles can be the basis of a humane politics aimed at security for all.

www.newstatesman.com

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 9, 2022 at 4:23 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2506-epicurean-mission-and-membership-very-interesting-article-by-macgilivray-on-anci/>

I now see that Cassius wrote a long reply to the Wilson article, on FB, and here it is:

Quote

Catherine Wilson continues to be one of the better writers on Epicurus today. Who could disagree with the title of her article? ~~Aside from her willingness~~ to accept the church fathers and Plato as "greats" I agree there is a lot of good material in this. However I'd like to talk about these two paragraphs:

"Epicurus made it clear from the start that he did not advocate the direct pursuit of personal pleasure in the forms of gluttony, indiscriminate sex or overconsumption of intoxicating substances. This was foolish, as it ultimately produces pain. Real pleasure arises from judicious - though not overly fussy - "choice and avoidance", and avoidance is as important as choice.

Epicurean ethics reduces to a few simple principles: avoid harming others and live so that others have no motive to harm you. Form agreements with them for mutual aid and protection. The greatest good for a human being, Epicurus thought, is friendship - pleasure in the presence of another individual, and the security of knowing that help will be given if ever it is needed."

My response:

(1) Epicurus did endorse the pursuit of food, sex, and other pleasures, but not (as she correctly observes) to the point of gluttony which ultimately produces more pain than pleasure. But to talk about "real pleasure" is something else: I would submit that Epicurus clearly says that "all pleasures are desirable" and there is really no such thing as a "false pleasure" --- if you want to talk about pleasures to be avoided, the point is that some pleasures produce more pain than pleasure in the end, when summed all together.

(2) I have even more concern about saying that "Epicurean Ethics reduces to a few simple principles" wherein those she lists a series of things in which pleasure is almost an afterthought. As she often does, Catherine Wilson is playing to current social norms and attempting to justify in modern terms. The goal of Epicurus is unwavering: pleasure for yourself and those who are your friends. Yes, a good way to do that is to live justly and honorably, but that is not the goal - the goal is the pleasure. Even less well stated is the statement that "the greatest good for a human being is 'friendship.'" Epicurus is very emphatic in defining the greatest good in philosophic terms as pleasure -- and Wilson is mixing the means and the ends in saying that he held the greatest good to be friendship. Epicurus clearly stated that of all the things that the wise man will seek in order to procure a life of pleasure, the greatest is friendship. That makes friendship, like virtue itself, a tool toward pleasure, and not the end in itself. Wilson is no doubt

well aware of this, but not content to point out that Epicurus said that one would die for a friend, or be as hurt at the torture of a friend as when tortured himself, she mixes the end and the means so as to appeal to a wider audience.

Time for the reminder from Diogenes of Oinoanda, who perhaps one day will have shouted loud enough for even Ms. Wilson to hear:

Fr. 32

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of May 9, 2022 at 4:27 PM

Yes I think Don's explanation is the right one. Even today Epicureanism is not reputable among the academics. A few of them may argue differently (the O'Keefe's etc, who argue the "tranquility" position) but the majority of Academia knows better.

The majority of Academia rightly sees Epicureanism as an individualistic rejection of Platonist uniformity, and they aren't going to finance and support and promote tenure for people to focus on the deeper aspects of what Epicurus taught.

It would be interesting to try to learn more about Macgilivray personally to see what he really thinks himself, but I bet Don's right - if you want a career in Academia you're going to toe the line and not spend too much time on Epicurus.

And if you choose to go down the "tranquility" road then you'll eventually end up in Stoicism, because they have the market on anesthesia and emotional suppression cornered.

Post by “Cassius” of May 9, 2022 at 4:38 PM

Catherine Wilson is an interesting case as she seems a little more willing to break away from the orthodoxy on Epicurus.

However I don't get the feeling that she is as much an Academic as she is a writer for more general audiences, so maybe she has more flexibility to follow her intuitions.

My take is that she thinks she can push the envelope on Epicurean philosophy toward more popular success (at least in publishing) if she combines it with a good sprinkling of politics to make it sound more relevant to modern audiences. She might be right about that to some extent, but I doubt it will win her much endorsement in Academia. If someone wants to justify their politics through philosophy, most of the Academics realize that it's more efficient to focus on the mainline Platonic-Aristotelian position, where they can rest their desired uniformity of position on "forms" or "ideas" or "essences."

It's really hard to claim eternal significance for a particular set of political ideas when the only things that are eternally the same are things like the size, shape, and weight of the atoms. 😊
It's much easier to claim that one's own views equal "virtue" and that your opponents' views are "evil" and the anti-Epicurean philosophies are the home of that approach.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 9, 2022 at 4:49 PM

So we carry on, and this quote from the "Epicurean Mission and Membership" which Cassius provide above:

Quote

...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.

So we need to consider that what we have to offer for learning opportunities should be geared for people who seek us out. Yet it is a kind of "catch 22" because we need to tell people about

it, since Epicureanism is not know the way it was back in ancient times.

So now in modern times we really do need to "be missionaries", otherwise nobody will even know what Epicureanism is.

Post by “Cassius” of May 9, 2022 at 5:17 PM

Yes the full article speculates that the "missionary" viewpoint expanded over time during the Roman period, and I think correctly. We never will likely want to be shouting at passersby from the street corner, but the world increasingly offers lots of opportunities for us to claim a space in the "marketplace of ideas."

Post by “Don” of May 10, 2022 at 7:46 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So we have to do both: study the details of the Greek and be sure we get the most accurate understanding of it, and then re-express the same thoughts in understandable English



Which is exactly what I was trying to provide in my letter to Menoikeus to give people a gateway to the original language and to allow them to arrive at a personal, meaningful paraphrase for themselves.

Post by “Cassius” of May 10, 2022 at 8:54 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Which is exactly what I was trying to provide in my letter to Menoikeus

Yes exactly. This has to be a team effort and not everyone will be able or inclined to do everything and they shouldn't try.

It will always be beyond the capability or inclination of some to translate the original Greek -- or grow an original Greek philosopher's beard! 😊

Post by “reneliza” of May 12, 2022 at 2:54 PM

wait so.... I *should* send a pamphlet back to the JW who cold mailed me a pamphlet on the true route to happiness?

Post by “Cassius” of May 12, 2022 at 3:54 PM

Renelisa I like your sense of humor! Very highly qualified to be a pamphleteer and disqualified from being a Stoic!