

## VS78 - Alternative Translation

Post by “Onenski” of July 4, 2023 at 12:29 AM

Hi everybody,

A traditional translation of VS 78 is: "The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one." [Ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ **θνητὸν** ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.]

I just read a different translation (I found it in a PhD dissertation in Spanish). Probably, [Don](#) can say something about it. The author affirms that the original form of the Saying is:

Ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ **νοητὸν** ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.

But, he says, there was a correction in Hartel manuscript which changed νοητὸν (intellectual) for θνητὸν (immortal) (there's a footnote which refers to "Wotke y Usener 1888: 197"). Apparently, Long & Sedley (and Bailey) took that correction as well as most of editors.

In brief, the translation would be: "The noble soul occuppies itself with wisdom and friendship; of these the one [wisdom] is **an intellectual** good, the other [friendship] immortal".

I think this can enrich our understanding of this VS, or at least add something to discussion.

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Post by “Cassius” of July 4, 2023 at 7:36 AM

If anyone tracks this reference to Hartel down please let us know. Thanks Onenski! To me that actually would make more sense. Seeing a contrast between moral and immortal is natural, but calling wisdom "mortal" does seem a little hard to follow the meaning.

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Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 7:49 AM

Source (Wotke & Usener, 1888):

[Spruchsammlung; \[Gr.\] entdeckt u. mitgetheilt von K. Wotke.](#)

Key to Source/Manuscript initials

V = Codex Vaticanus gr. 1950

W = verbessert von Dr. C. Wotke

U = verbessert von Usener

H= verbessert von Hartel

So, according to p.197, the Codex Vaticanus gr. 1950 (V) has θνητον (mortal) but Hartel "improved/amended" the text to νοητον, maybe for the same reasons we find it hard to interpret. Hartel appears to be a German scholar, like Usener and Wotke, not the name of a manuscript.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of July 4, 2023 at 7:49 AM**

What do you think Don?

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### **Post by "Don" of July 4, 2023 at 8:16 AM**

[DigiVatLib](#)

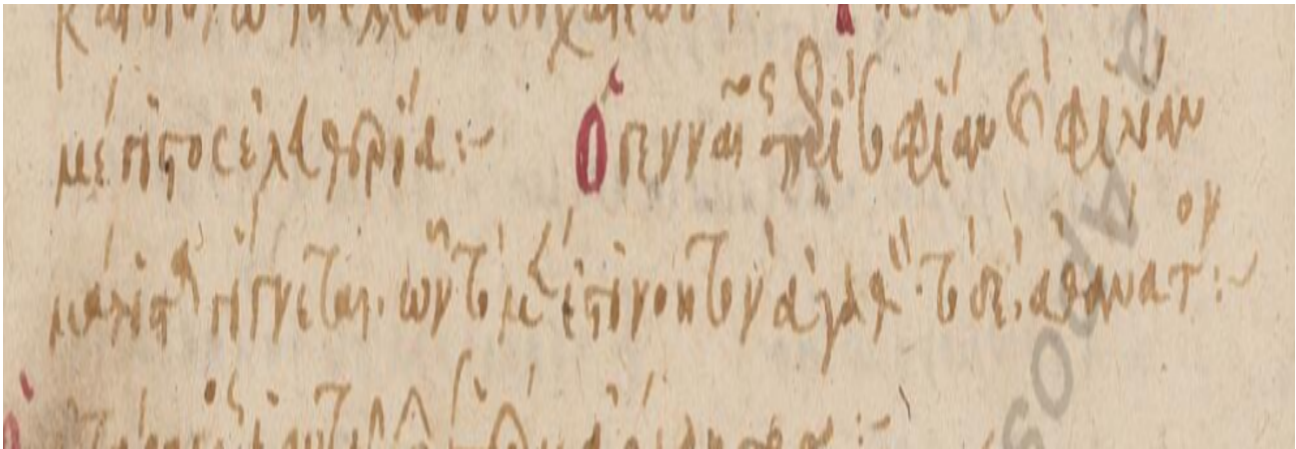
There's the manuscript link.

codex Vaticanus Graecus 1950 (1950 is the reference number, not a date incidentally)

The Vatican Sayings begin at the bottom of folio 401v with the big red T for Το μακαριον και αφθαρτον ... (PD1 and VS1)

Hartel is trying to "improve" the manuscript. Usener evidently accepts the θνητον of the manuscript but adds Hartel's improvement as a footnote to be thorough.

I usually try to stick with the manuscript. So...



There's the line in codex Vaticanus Graecus 1950, starting at the red O for ὁ γενναῖος...

Here's the Greek as shown in Wotke & Usener:

78\* ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ θνητὸν ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.

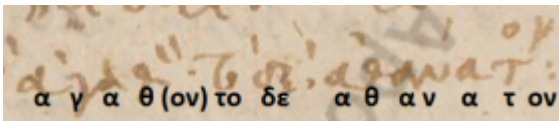
Their footnote then says: (line) 26 θνητον| νοητον V : verb. (verbessert von) H.

What does the manuscript look like to me?

ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ... Wait for it....

[pasted-from-clipboard.png](#) Well, would you look at that!

It certainly looks like **νοητον** to me!! And I don't think you have to know Greek to see those first markings don't look like θνητον. For example, here's a theta from elsewhere in the same saying from agathon:



There's no "loopy" theta at the beginning of that word νοητον within the manuscript. Hmmmm.....

That said, Epicurus did like his parallel constructions and thneton "mortal", athanaton "undying" would be more in keeping... BUT that's not what the manuscript says! νοητόν is the Attic variation of νοητός.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, νο-ητός](#)

"falling within the province of νοῦς,"

So, I'm not saying some scribe didn't misspell the word and write νοητον when it should have been θνητον ( as the prevalent wording has made it), All it would take are two letters. And the

parallel of mortal/immortal is in keeping with Epicurus's style... but again, that's not what the manuscript has. And, to the best of my knowledge, we don't have another instance of this saying anywhere else, do we?? As far as I know, this manuscript is the ONLY copy of the "Vatican Sayings" so there's nothing to "compare" to.

GREAT FIND, [Onenski](#) !!!

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### **Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 9:11 AM**

Would these have any relevance for this discussion with wisdom/Sages and friendship being discussed?

[U386]

Philodemus, On the Life of the Gods, Vol. Herc. 1, VI col. 1: ... to the gods, and he admires their nature and their condition and tries to approach them and, so to speak, yearns to touch them and to be together with them; and he calls Sages "friends of the gods" and the gods "friends of Sages."

[ U539 ]

Cicero, On End-Goals, Good and Bad, I.20.65 (Torquatus to Cicero): On the subject of friendship... Epicurus' pronouncement about friendship is that of all the means to happiness that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none more fruitful, none more delightful than this. Nor did he only commend this doctrine by his eloquence, but far more by the example of his life and conduct.

Just putting these here for discussion on the topic at hand. No strong feelings one way or the other on applicability.

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### **Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 9:26 AM**

[pasted-from-clipboard.png](#)

I'm taking another look at this... Yes, we're starting the morning out with a bang. Good thing it's a holiday and I don't have to go to work! 😄

That first letter is clearly an epsilon: ε

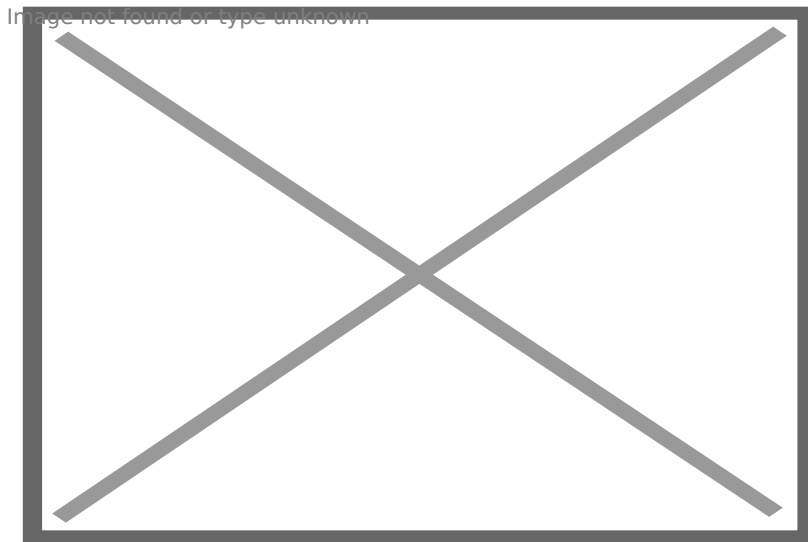
The next letter is a ligature for sigma+tau (i.e., s+t): [pasted-from-clipboard.png](#)

and the next letter rounds out esti: εστι

The next letter appears to me be a nu which would start νοητον. I don't see any room for θν(ητον) and that letter is clearly a familiar variant of nu. It matches that middle version here perfectly: [pasted-from-clipboard.png](#)

Yep, the manuscript has νοητον. Jury still out if it's a scribal error or not, but the manuscript clearly has νοητον. Is this an instance of Usener knowing better than the scribe? The manuscript dates from between 1301 and 1350, so we're NOT talking anywhere near contemporary with the \*original\* sources... but still, it's all we got.

Wikipedia has a nice table of ancient Greek miniscule writing including some ligatures for those who want to dive into these waters with me:



[Greek minuscule - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

and this page is even more thorough:

<https://schmidhauser.us/tools/rgl/rgreek12.pdf>

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**Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 9:45 AM**

Well, would you look at that! It was hiding in DeWitt (p. 226) all along!

emend it, Vatican Saying 78: "The truly noble man busies himself chiefly with wisdom and friendship, of which the one is an understandable good but the other is immortal." Paradoxical as it must seem, Epicurus knows no higher praise than to call a thing immortal; being opposed in this text to understandable, it must mean "passing understanding."

DeWitt uses the noeton in the manuscript and NOT the thneton "correction."

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**Post by "Cassius" of July 4, 2023 at 10:22 AM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Well, would you look at that! It was hiding in DeWitt (p. 226) all along!

**T**HE aim of this study is threefold: first, to organize the surviving data on the life of Epicurus into a consequential biographical sketch so as to throw some light upon the growth of his personality and the development of his philosophy; second, to present a new interpretation of his doctrines based upon **less emended** remains of his writings; and third, to win attention for the importance of Epicurean-

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**Post by "Cassius" of July 4, 2023 at 10:25 AM**

Thanks to Onenski again for this observation - had we had it last night we might have further extended the discussion on how this fits with "Are we living like the gods yet?"

For example as to the difference between wisdom and friendship, I can see how wisdom is "understandable" (goes with the territory) but I don't always understand my friends!

Said another way, with friends I consider the pleasure that comes from having friends to be "godlike" even though I don't always understand them!

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## Post by "Onenski" of July 4, 2023 at 10:25 AM

You're right, [Don](#), there's not a Hartel manuscript, I didn't read correctly.

Besides, the author, Alberto Enrique Álvarez from the Autonomous University of Madrid gives some reasons for the **νοητὸν** interpretation. One of them it's that at the end of the Letter to Menoeceus Epicurus points out that philosophy is an immortal good. I add part of the Enrique's commentary:

"Undoubtedly, the usual structure of parallelisms and oppositions that constitutes many of the sentences, and even the phonetic similarity νοητόν / θνητόν, impel to the correction, which makes it possible to obtain in the text the pairs philosophy-mortal / friendship-immortal. However, these are not sufficient reasons to modify a manuscript whose writing and sense are clear.

[...]

So there is no reason to attribute to philosophy the qualifier of mortal. Hartel's correction is not necessary. It imposes on the text a spirit of symmetry that neither the sense of the sentence nor the thought of Epicurus demand.

[...]

As Bailey says, this is perhaps the greatest exaltation of friendship in Epicurus' work that remains to us; and, in the same sense, Cicero expresses himself, who assures us that Epicurus carried friendship to heaven with his praises (*eam* [i. e.,

*amicitiam*] *Epicurus in caelum efferat laudibus*). The fact of extolling friendship is understandable, because, as we have seen on several occasions, it guarantees security among men, which is one of the conditions of ataraxia, in such a way that it allows the wise, within human limits, to live as a god.

Now, what is not necessary is that the praise of friendship should entail the corresponding degradation of philosophy, especially when the role of wisdom in the happiness of the wise man is as relevant as that of friendship. That is why we maintain the qualifier "intellectual" that SV78 assigns to wisdom, refusing its modification by "mortal." ("EL GNOMOLOGIUM VATICANUM Y LA FILOSOFÍA DE EPICURO", p. 460-463)

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 4, 2023 at 10:53 AM**

Admin Note:

Because I am a fast learner (sarcasm) it has taken me only eight years to discover that the forum software allows footnoting in "Lexicon" entries, but not in normal pages or posts. I am therefore converting the master copies of our [Principal Doctrines](#) and Vatican Sayings to Lexicon entries, and the top menu (under texts) now takes you to those locations. No doubt there are other links here on the forum to the existing pages, so I will leave the old ones in place (at least for a while) while we convert links.

I will substitute this version of VS78 for the ones we are discussing in the master list, and also in our separate forum for VS78, and I will move this thread to that location if it is not already there. [Oops it is there - good planning by Onenski!]

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### **Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 12:12 PM**

\* ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἔστι νοητὸν ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.

An alternative translation: "One who is noble in mind most of all depends upon wisdom and friendship — one is a good perceptible to the mind, thinkable, and imaginable; the other, everlasting and perpetual."

I would take that that friendship is so important, one can barely conceive of its importance.

γενναῖος "noble in mind, high-minded" From γέννα (génna, "descent, birth, origin") + -ιος (-ios). Compare ἀγενής (agenés "of no family, ignoble, mean, cowardly, vile"). Think of the name Eugene "well-born, noble"

σοφίαν (sophian "skill in matters of common life. sound judgement, intelligence, practical wisdom") Remember this is also the exact element in philosophy "φιλοσοφία".

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, σοφία](#)

γίγνεται has a number of connotations including: γ. παρά τι *to depend upon...*

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, γίγνομαι](#)

νοητος

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, νο-ητός](#)

αθάνατος

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀθάνατος](#)

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### Post by “Cassius” of July 4, 2023 at 12:17 PM

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I would take that that friendship is so important, one can barely conceive of its importance.

A good caution for those who:

- 1 - Tend to be overly introverted (a common trait here including me!)
- 2 - Think that Epicurus had nothing to say about social organization ("politics").

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### Post by “Don” of July 4, 2023 at 1:36 PM

As far as the parallel constructions go, maybe it's enough that they end in the same letters?

σοφίαν φιλίαν

νοητον ἀθάνατον

Although those are very common grammatical endings, so...

Still, there's no arguing with what it actually written in the manuscript!

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### **Post by “Matteng” of April 10, 2025 at 4:37 PM**

Why is friendship immortal ? My thoughts:

It is meant to be divine. Divine are the gods with 2 aspects: they are blessed and incorruptible. With blessed I think the highest good/ goal is meant => Pleasure.

Conclusion: Prudence is an instrumental good but friendship ( Philia) is a Pleasure ( so blessedness so divine ) a „immortal“ good.

Your thoughts ?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of April 10, 2025 at 5:09 PM**

That's a good question and apparently subject of dispute, but I'd go with literally nothing but pleasure itself as being good in itself, and everything else, including prudence and friendship, being instrumental, and not the same as pleasure itself.

While it would depend on how strictly you define friendship, I've found that even friendship can sometimes be a pain 😊

That's more of a joke than a point, but I see Epicurus' point in wanting to be extremely rigorous in making it clear that only "pleasure" is always pleasurable.

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### **Post by “Don” of April 10, 2025 at 5:56 PM**

ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται, ὧν τὸ μὲν ἐστὶ νοητὸν ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.

"One who is noble in mind (ὁ γενναῖος) most of all depends upon wisdom (σοφίαν) and friendship (φιλίαν) — one is a good perceptible to the mind, thinkable, and imaginable; the

other, everlasting and perpetual."

ἀθάνατον literally means "un-dying" or "not subject to death." I've taken that as the wisdom we acquire dies with us; but friendship with others has ripples that outlive us. The impact we have on our friends lives on after we die.