

## VS29 - Interpreting VS29

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 14, 2023 at 7:46 PM

[VS29](#) -

"Employing frankness in my study of natural philosophy, I would prefer to proclaim in oracular fashion what is beneficial to men, even if no one is going to understand, rather than to assent to [common] opinions and so enjoy the constant praise which comes from the many." - Inwood and Gerson

[VS29](#) -

"Speaking freely in my study of what is natural, I prefer to prophesize about what is good for all people, even if no one will understand me, rather than to accept common opinions and thereby reap the showers of praise that fall so freely from the great mass of men." - St. Andre

Thoughts:

I would interpret this as saying that Epicurus was saying a lot more than just "pleasure" is a natural guide. And I think "oracular fashion" means he was being very specific about what is beneficial and good.

We ran out of time last night in our Wednesday night discussion, so didn't really get much on this one. Curious for thoughts by [Onenski](#), [Joshua](#), and [kochiekoch](#) ...and anyone else.

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Post by “Don” of September 14, 2023 at 8:04 PM

FYI: χρησμοδεῖν =

**A.** *deliver oracles, prophesy*, [Hdt.7.6](#), [Ar.Eq.818](#) (anap.), [Pl.Cra.396d](#); [τι X.Ap.30](#); [τισι Pl.Ap.39c](#); “[τὰ συμφέροντα](#)” *Epicur. Sent.Vat.29*; “[χ. ἐμμέτρως](#)” *Plu.2.623c*—Pass., “[κεχρησμοδησθω](#)” [Pl.Lg.712a](#); “[τὰ κεχρησμοδημένα](#)” [Id.Ep.323c](#).

**II.** Pass., *to be inspired, receive a divine revelation*, *Ph.2.384*.

When Epicurus says he would prefer to speak in an oracular fashion and frankly ( [VS29](#) uses [παρρησία](#) parrhesia "Frank speech") is he talking about the cryptic way in which oracles spoke? He prefers to convey his teaching on nature as he sees fit even if some don't understand and he doesn't "reap the showers of praise"?

Wasn't Epicurus's mother a purveyor of charms and oracles?

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## Post by "Joshua" of September 14, 2023 at 9:40 PM

### Quote

Wasn't Epicurus's mother a purveyor of charms and oracles?

That's the story--that his father was an itinerant teacher and his mother sold charms, both occupations suggesting low birth. Given that;

1. They were unwanted colonizers in disputed territory and
2. Metrodorus wrote a tract "On Noble Birth" defending Epicurus against the derision of his detractors,

The story is probably true enough so far as it goes. As for the VS, I suspect that there is a touch of irony in it. When Alexander the Great went to an oracle at the Oasis of Siwa, the prophets told him that he was not the son of Philip, but the son of a God. How convenient for both parties--it cost the Oracles nothing to say this, and earned them the patronage of the most powerful man on earth. If only the High Priestess at Delphi had thought of it first!

Oracles in the ancient world were flatterers; politically useful, they lent an air of pious gravitas to any worldly endeavor. DeWitt cited Demosthenes to this end;

### Quote

It is just and right and important, men of Athens, that we too should exercise care, as you are accustomed, that our relations with the gods shall be piously maintained. Therefore our commission has been duly discharged for you, for we have sacrificed to Zeus the Saviour and to Athena and to Victory, and these sacrifices have been auspicious and salutary for you. We have also sacrificed to Persuasion and to the Mother of the Gods and to Apollo, and here also we had favorable omens. And the sacrifices made to the other gods portended for you security and stability and prosperity and safety. Do you, therefore, accept the blessings which the gods bestow.

In one of my favorite anecdotes, Heraclitus hid a scroll in a temple where it would be discovered and passed off as divine utterance.

For every ten thousand seers, there is but one Lucy Harris to steal the pages from the "prophet", in her case Joseph Smith, and challenge him to reproduce the results.

But now to the point. Whatever else he might be, Epicurus is not a prophet, an Oracle, or even (though he was given the title *Soter*) a Messiah or heavenly savior. But he was a voice, and he cried out in the metaphorical wilderness of ancient superstition. And those who were 'well disposed', as the inscription in Oenanda puts it, to hear his words may have thought that not everything they were hearing was good news.

He offered pleasure, but it was pleasure only in this world; death, he said, was nothing to be feared, but neither was there hope for a life to come. The universe was infinite and eternal, and if that failed to cheer you up, there was more; neither our world nor our species was morally, physically, or theologically at the center of it. As for the gods, they do exist; and while they do not punish us, neither will they answer our prayers. Supplication is futile; there is no hope for intercession in times of need, and no justice for the victim of the evildoer in the judgment of the afterlife. Logic and dialectic, which had seemed the surest route to knowledge, truth, and virtue, in fact brought us no closer to the end that we sought for. And if divine friendship is the richest and deepest fountain of pleasure, what hope can we have that the fountain will not run dry tomorrow? Seeing that the utter finality of death will not only take our friends from us, but also poison our happiness with an impossible longing to be reunited.

Only a beast unfit to be called a philosopher could teach a way of thinking so unworthy of the human soul. But for the Epicureans themselves, it must have been Lucian of Samosata who best captured their feeling;

#### Quote

The fellow had no conception of the blessings conferred by that book upon its readers, of the peace, tranquillity, and independence of mind it produces, of the protection it gives against terrors, phantoms, and marvels, vain hopes and inordinate desires, of the judgement and candour that it fosters, or of its true purging of the spirit, not with torches and squills and such rubbish, but with right reason, truth, and frankness.

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But secondly I was still more concerned (a preference which you will be very far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him.

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**Post by “Don” of September 15, 2023 at 6:06 AM**

Alternative translations:

[Epicurus - Vatican Sayings](#)

29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

[Epicurus.info : E-Texts : The Vatican Sayings](#)

29) To be frank, I would prefer as I study nature to speak in revelations about what is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the scattered praise that is broadcast by the many.

[Vatican Saying 29 - Epicurus Wiki](#)

Analysis

A laud to frankness, the cardinal Epicurean virtue of parrhesia: it is best to speak of natural matters frankly (i.e. in a manner that is void of any superstition) than to cater to popular beliefs, however false those might be, in order to garner the applause that the multitudes are so ready to confer upon anyone who agrees with their prejudices.

The paradoxical argument is that this, rather anti-populist position the true philosopher ought to assume, ultimately is the one that is indeed beneficial to all people. It is better to speak in a manner that seems "oracular" and might not be understood by many, rather than to take the facile approach of consenting to all sorts of popular misconceptions.

Greek text:

παρρησία γὰρ ἔγωγε χρώμενος φυσιολογῶν χρησµωδεῖν τὰ σµφέροντα πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις  
µᾶλλον ἂν βουλοίµην, κἂν µηδεὶς μέλλη συνήσειν, ἢ συγκατατιθέµενος ταῖς δόξαις καρποῦσθαι  
τὸν πυκνὸν παραπίπτοντα παρὰ τῶν πολλῶν ἔπαινον.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of September 15, 2023 at 10:05 AM

The first two translations in post 4 seem to say that is it better to speak in oracles. And the third one says something very different: that is it better to be frank and straightforward than to speak in oracles - so this one would need a very close examination of the Greek words used.

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## Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2023 at 10:40 AM

I would presume that "speaking in oracles even though understood by none" is intended to mean: "I will speak carefully and accurately and precisely in a way that conveys the truth to those who are capable of understanding," with the point being that I am going to speak the truth whether the people who are hearing me are capable of understanding it or not.

What's generally wrong with Oracles? Not that they are speaking with certainty and sounding profound, but that they are speaking with certainty and sounding profound about things that they cannot and do not know.

The things that Epicurus is stating are things that he maintains he can and does know.

Ultimately while we can do our best to speak clearly and in understandable terms, we have no way to compel the listeners to understand, or to give them the power to understand when they are under the spell of false ideas or otherwise incapable of understanding. All we can do is speak the truth frankly and let events follow as they will.

An important caveat as is stated by Lucian in Alexander the Oracle Monger -- we have no "duty" to speak to everyone, especially those where speaking will end up getting ourselves killed while accomplishing nothing.

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## Post by "Don" of September 15, 2023 at 12:24 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

What's generally wrong with Oracles?

My take was that oracles are often misunderstood by people because of their cryptic pronouncements.

"If you go to war, a great empire will fall" (Oh, it's my empire and not my enemy)

"Rely on your wooden walls!" (Oh, the Oracle means to rely on our ships!)

"Socrates is the wisest!"

I take it that Epicurus called it like he saw it but was often misunderstood by the hoi polloi. But he didn't worry about that but tried to be as frank as possible: [Death is nothing to us!](#) Oh he

can't mean that there's no life after death. We don't like that.

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### **Post by “kochiekoch” of September 17, 2023 at 4:39 PM**

Thanks for the invite Kalosyni.

It all seems rather straightforward. Epicurus would rather tell the truth, even crouched in mysterious, esoteric, language, the average person wouldn't understand, than to tell the average person what they want to hear, and to reap the benefits of such action.

People love it when a wise man reinforces their prejudices. 😊