

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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Post by “Bryan” of June 4, 2026 at 1:12 AM

I think Dewitt was focusing on **ἡ χάρις (grace)** for this.... and even here the alpha privative (i.e., ungrateful) shows itself to be important to Epicurus' thought.

VS 69. Ingratitude's Trap

to tês psy-khês a-chá-ris-ton lích-non e-poí-ē-se to zô-on eis á-peí-ron tôn en di-ai-tē

poi-kil-má-tôn

τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀχάριστον λίχνον ἐποίησε τὸ ζῶον εἰς ἄπειρον τῶν ἐν διαίτη
ποικιλμάτων

the ungrateful greed of the soul makes the living being [go] into an infinity of
diverse things in the way living

ἡ ψυχή αἱ ψυχαί	soul	ΨΥΧΗ <i>blowing</i>
ἡ χάρις αἱ χάριτες	grace	ΧΑΡΙΣ <i>being cheerful</i>
ἀχάριστος (ov)	ungrateful	ΑΧΑΡΙΣΤΟΣ <i>not being cheerful</i>

VS 75. Gratitude for Past Fortune

eis ta pa-rō-chē-kó-ta a-ga-tha a-khá-ris-tos Phō-nē hē lé-gou-sa:

"té-los Hó-ra mak-roû bí-ou"

εἰς τὰ παρωχηκότα ἀγαθὰ ἀχάριστος Φωνὴ ἢ λέγουσα:

"τέλος Ὅρα μακροῦ βίου"

the ungrateful statement toward the good things that have passed by is the one saying: "Look at the fulfillment of a long life"

Post by "Don" of June 4, 2026 at 8:46 AM

I freely admit I have no grasp on what "suavity" means, and I didn't think DeWitt adds anything to explain it. He just assumes I know what it means and keeps using it.

Being suave or having suavity didn't seem all that positive from what I was seeing in various dictionaries. Without looking anything up, it conveyed being smooth, cool, or slick in The Fonz sort of way. But I read some definitions as being pleasant to the extent of being insincere. Wiktionary at least has "The quality of being sweet or pleasing to the mind; agreeableness; pleasantness" which doesn't help a lot for me.

[Bryan](#) 's bringing up χαρις is much more helpful to what Dewitt is trying to convey.

Post by "Cassius" of June 4, 2026 at 10:26 AM

Since suavity appears to be more Latin than Greek we probably need to look more to the Latin use of it.

[Quote from Don](#)

I freely admit I have no grasp on what "suavity" means,

I suspect that this is a very bad thing for the culture if even Don finds the word to be highly suspicious (as I do myself).

Certainly the times have changed and calling someone "gentlemanly" has lost all of its earlier appeal, at least in many circles. Must all gentlemen be back-slapping good-old-boys? Was that always considered to be the case? I suspect not.

And I completely agree that "Smooth" in terms of character has many more negative connotations than bad ones.

But I am old enough to suspect that this wasn't always the case, I would think courtesy and grace (especially but not always under pressure) and gentlemanliness had strong positive means that are separate and apart from "gratitude" in the sense of a transactional appreciation for what someone has done for us.

The discussion so far indicates to me that it would be well worth while separating out the "good aspects" from the "bad aspects" of what is being referenced here. The pendulum seems to have swung way too far to the side of insincerity on something that should not be lost. And it does look like there were significant attacks against Epicurus (wording as to Colotes etc) that need to be understood in terms of a proper appreciation of good qualities, rather than insincere flattery. Must all flattery be "insincere"? Can't we praise someone or something without being guilty of manipulation?

This looks to be another area where it is going to be necessary to look to the Roman sources for better preserved discussion of what is going on. The quotes from Cicero and Augustine and about Atticus seem particularly promising if the words being used are forms of suavitas.

Certainly foods can be oversweet, but sweetness is often and even generally (?) desirable. And it wouldn't in general conversation be normal to call a man "sweet."

Latin definition for: suavitas, suavitatis

suavitas, suavitatis

noun

- declension: 3rd declension
- gender: feminine

Definitions:

1. charm, attractiveness
 2. sweetness
- **Age:** In use throughout the ages/unknown
 - **Area:** All or none
 - **Geography:** All or none
 - **Frequency:** Frequent, top 2000+ words
 - **Source:** General, unknown or too common to say
-

Post by “Cassius” of June 4, 2026 at 11:26 AM

Also the word "unctuous" comes to mind.

I can think of numbers of people who will remain unnamed who have that kind of sickly-sweet demeanor.

On the other hand (despite it being my least favorite part of her book) Frances Wright spends her Chapter One describing Epicurus in terms that probably are close to "suave" but in an entirely positive way.

Post by “Pacatus” of June 4, 2026 at 11:42 AM

I recall Hiram Crespo also using the word suavity in his book (*Tending the Epicurean Garden*).

Post by “Don” of June 4, 2026 at 10:32 PM

Definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary

SUAVITY

Meaning & use

1.†

1.a.c1450–1661 Sweetness or agreeableness to the senses; esp. sweetness (of taste), fragrance (of odour). Obsolete.

1.b.1614–1821 † Sweetness (of sound, harmony, expression).

2.a.1594– Pleasurableness, agreeableness; plural delights, amenities. Now only as coloured by sense 4.

2.b.a1617–80 † A state of sweet calm in the soul when specially favoured by God; plural feelings of spiritual sweetness or delight. Obsolete.

religion

3.1508–1649 † Graciousness; sweetness of manner or treatment. Obsolete.

4.a.1815– The quality or condition of being suave in manner or outward behaviour; bland agreeableness or urbanity.

4.b.1852– plural. Suave actions.

1852Cajoled by the attentions of an electioneering politician with more ease than Aunt Chloe was won over by Master Sam's suavities.

H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (U.K. edition) viiiCitation details for H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 12, 2026 at 10:55 AM

This is interesting regarding the word "suavity" (from Google):

The shift from describing sensory or spiritual sweetness to describing human manners occurred gradually between the **late 16th century and the mid-18th century**, solidifying into its modern definition by the early 19th century.

The evolution happened in distinct stages, heavily influenced by changing social structures and the French language.

1. The Transition Stage (Late 1500s-1600s)

During the Renaissance, writers began applying the concept of "sweetness" metaphors to human speech and interactions. Rather than just describing heaven, a person's voice or disposition could have a pleasing, gentle quality.

- **1640s:** The derivative word *suaviloquy* emerged, meaning "sweetness of speech". At this stage, the word still implied a natural, gentle disposition rather than calculated, sophisticated social etiquette.

2. The Influence of French Court Culture (Late 1600s-1700s)

The true catalyst for the modern meaning was the French word *suavité*. In the French court, *suavité* evolved to mean a refined, polished, and agreeable social presence. As English high society began obsessively mimicking French etiquette—spearheaded by figures like Philip Stanhope, the 4th Earl of Chesterfield, who popularized the concept of modern etiquette in the mid-1700s—the English definition of "suavity" shifted from internal kindness to external behavior.

3. The Solidification of "Suavity of Manners" (Late 1700s-1815)

By the late 18th century, the exact phrase "**suavity of manners**" became a standard idiom in the English language to describe a gentleman or lady who possessed sophisticated, worldly, and smooth social graces.

- **1780s-1800s:** Historical biographies and legal records from the late Georgian era routinely praised notable figures, politicians, and educators for their "suavity of manners" to denote high breeding and an ability to charm others in public life.
- **1815:** Lexicographers note that by this year, the modern definition of "suave" and "suavity"—meaning **smooth or urbanely agreeable**—became established as a meaning, eclipsing the original "sweetness" definition.

The word "suavity" underwent a linguistic process known as **semantic pejoration**—where a positive word gradually takes on negative, condescending, or untrustworthy connotations.

A shift to a negative description occurred during the **mid-to-late 19th century**, directly following its peak as a compliment in Victorian high society.

The transition from a genuine virtue to a red flag happened in two distinct phases:

1. The Victorian Backlash (1850s-1880s)

By the middle of the 19th century, the industrial revolution had given rise to a massive new middle class. To climb the social ladder, people heavily studied etiquette books to mimic the

"suavity of manners" used by the aristocracy.

Because anyone could now memorize these smooth manners, society began to view extreme suavity with suspicion. Writers, social critics, and the public realized that a highly polished exterior could easily be a mask for deception, greed, or manipulation.

- **The "Slick" Professional:** During this era, novelists began attributing "suavity" to villains, hypocritical politicians, untrustworthy lawyers, and swindlers to emphasize how their charm was being used to lower their victims' guard.
- **The "Bland" Critic:** By 1880, dictionary definitions began incorporating terms like "**blandly agreeable**" to describe suavity. In the Victorian lexicon, "blandness" implied a total lack of spine, authentic character, or moral conviction.

2. The 20th-Century Link to Insincerity (1900s-Present)

By the early 20th century, the modern negative nuance was completely cemented. Today, labeling someone's behavior as "suavity" or calling a man "suave" is often a double-edged sword or a backhanded compliment. It subtly implies:

- **Superficiality:** The charm is artificial, practiced, and lacks genuine warmth or depth.
- **Calculated Intent:** The smooth behavior is being deployed intentionally to get something—whether it is a salesman closing a deal, a politician hunting for votes, or a seducer breaking hearts.
- **Unctuousness:** Much like the word *oily* or *slick*, it suggests a personality that is a little *too* perfect, making it feel slimy and inherently untrustworthy.

Post by "Cassius" of June 12, 2026 at 12:23 PM

We very much need articles addressing the nature of "good manners" both in general and here on the forum. We know that Epicurus did not hesitate to use mocking words against his philosophical enemies, and we know that he strongly advised "frank speech" in ways that are direct but constructive. Kalosyni if you have any interest in this I hope you will help in that project of getting together some advisory material on this.

We want frank and direct exchanges here on the forum because we have a lot to do that needs to be accomplished, and we need to be efficient. On the other hand we also want it to be clear that this is Epicurean **Friends** and not Reddit. Tone and diplomacy and sticking to subjects are major problems on internet forums, and we've failed to investigate and address this subject for far too long, despite the clear pointers that we have from the section written by DeWitt.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 12, 2026 at 2:36 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We very much need articles addressing the nature of "good manners" both in general and here on the forum. We know that Epicurus did not hesitate to use mocking words against his philosophical enemies, and we know that he strongly advised "frank speech" in ways that are direct but constructive.

I don't think that the use of mocking words against philosophical enemies is constructive, and it goes against suavity. (I like to think that Diogene Laertius got that aspect of Epicurus wrong).

Also....VS79. The man who is serene causes no disturbance to himself or to another.

Post by “Cassius” of June 12, 2026 at 3:22 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I don't think that the use of mocking words against philosophical enemies is constructive, and it goes against suavity. (I like to think that Diogene Laertius got that aspect of Epicurus wrong).

Also....VS79. The man who is serene causes no disturbance to himself or to another

That's why we need this discussion. It is clearly established in the texts that Epicurus and other Epicureans did exactly that (referred to philosophical opponents or at least their opinions in mocking terms). Yet Epicurus and his followers (Atticus' biography is an example) were considered by their friends to be a model of proper living.

If certain of us today have a definition of suavity that excludes the combination of graciousness toward friends with frankness toward enemies, then the burden is on us to understand way. I think it's relatively easy to find a way to reconcile the evidence rather than conclude that we are smarter than Epicurus on that point. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of June 12, 2026 at 3:28 PM

I would say analysis of this issue goes right along with analysis of the issue of the proper aspects of anger as referenced by Philodemus. If we don't have the integrity and presence of mind to feel righteous anger when ourselves or especially our friends are suffering serious harm, then we don't have the integrity and presence of mind to feel true love or compassion or graciousness or any other natural emotion when those are appropriate. As humans, pain is something we want to avoid, but we need to listen to Nature's signals and not suppress them. When it is natural and appropriate to feel pain, we need to feel it, just like the wise man cries out when under torture, but nevertheless remains "happy" in the broader sense of the word.

Post by “Bryan” of June 12, 2026 at 4:05 PM

Plutarch also records a long list of mocking epithets. In an effort to explain the apparent antagonism between the epithets and VS79, I think we can look at:

ΚΔ 39 "He who has best composed himself regarding his lack of confidence from external circumstances is the person who has made things kindred for the cases in which this is possible, and for the cases in which this is not possible [*at least has made*] things not foreign. However, for as many cases as he could not even to do this: he made himself unmixed (and removed as many as it was profitable to accomplish this)."

This leave us with:

τὰ ὁμόφυλα δ οἱ ὁμόφυλοι	kindred things & people	we enjoy them for their own sake
τὰ οὐκ ἀλλόφυλά δ οἱ οὐκ ἀλλόφυλοι	not foreign things & people	we enjoy them for mutual benefit
τὰ ἀλλόφυλά δ οἱ ἀλλόφυλοι	foreign things & people	we enjoy not interacting with them

And for those people who "we enjoy not interacting with" it seems also possible to "enjoy critiquing them" even to the point of "enjoying critiquing them with critical epithets."