Friendship Amongst the Self-Sufficient: Epicurus

You desire to know whether Epicurus is right when, in one of his letters, he rebukes those who hold that the wise man is self-sufficient and for that reason does not stand in need of friendships. This is the objection raised by Epicurus against Stilbo and those who believe that the Supreme Good is a soul which is insensible to feeling.

- Seneca, Epistles 9.1

The hedonist Epicurus enjoins us to live a life of pleasure through the temperance of desire. Not to seek what is inappropriate for us as mortals, but to enjoy our mortal needs satisfied Epicurus’ whole philosophy is directed toward the achievement of such a natural self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*). But while self-sufficiency is a condition crucial to the entirety of Hellenistic thought, to speak of an “us” in connection with it is problematic. Epicurus’ withdrawal from society would seem to suggest that the self-sufficient life, if attainable at all, is lived in isolation, needing nothing from others. Yet we would hardly esteem a life without friends to be desirable in the least, and neither did the ancients. Both in Aristotle and throughout the entire Stoic tradition, the philosophy of Epicurus’ day wrestled with the relationship between self-sufficiency and friendship. Thus it should come as no surprise that within the works and references handed down to us by and about Epicurus there should occur some mention of friendship; what is startling, however, is Epicurus’ unabashed advocacy of it. Epicurus is obviously aware of the tension in his position; to be sure, according to the now-lost letter cited by Seneca above, Epicurus himself charged the Stoics with excluding friendship from self-sufficiency. This is a flaw in Stoic theory, and for Hellenistic thought this amounts to a flaw in the Stoic way of life. To avoid a counter charge of hypocrisy, for the accuser to not fall prey to his own accusation, Epicurus must reconcile self-sufficiency and friendship. And Epicurus does just this, but not simply to make of friendship a quiver in his bow against the Stoics. Rather, to be a friend is in our nature, it is what is most natural to our existence. Isolation, solitude, loneliness, these are the result of adherence to the empty beliefs of society by Epicurus’ account. A life without friends is a life diseased, pained, and in need of succor. Perhaps it would not be too much to say that Epicurus advocates self-sufficiency simply as a precondition for friendship. In order to understand how the self-sufficient (near) gods of Epicurus could ever be friends, it is necessary first to consider exactly what self-sufficiency means for Epicurus. After this, an explication of friendship in the transmitted Epicurea will show that while friendship may appear contra self-sufficiency, for Epicurus it forms the very height of self-sufficiency—the ultimate
moment in his therapeutics of pain.

The originality of Epicurus’ position is best viewed in its contrast to the Aristotelian and Stoic attempts to throw a bridge between self-sufficiency and friendship. In each of these cases, friendship is 1) based on a certain identity between friends, and 2) undertaken out of need or in consideration of its usefulness. Precisely these criteria, sameness and utility, are the death of friendship. And while Epicurean friendship will attempt to avoid both of these, it will nonetheless stand in a peculiar relation to them as well. Before proceeding to friendship as it is lived in the Epicurean manner, a brief presentation of the competing views of friendship, Aristotelian and Stoic, is in order.

As is well known, the issue of friendship is addressed at length by Aristotle in his *Ethics*. Here, the self-sufficient individual lives a life of study (*theorétikos bios*) in the service of wisdom (*sophia*), and this is the happiest life available for a human to lead. Such a person is not without friends according to Aristotle, but his solution to the problem of self-sufficiency and friendship appears as something of a modified narcissism. Aristotelian friendship is an egoistic extension of self-love onto others insofar as they resemble that self; it is a loving of oneself in others.² Aristotle friendship falls squarely within the bounds sketched above:

1) The excellent and virtuous individual needs friends; the self-sufficient life would be incomplete for Aristotle without their presence. Why does he/she need them? "The excellent person will need people for him to benefit" (NE 9.9.1169b14). Insofar as generosity is a virtue, the virtuous individual will express this virtue. Who then better to express it toward than one’s friends? Especially since, for Aristotle, these must also be virtuous individuals. Benefiting such folks, then, enables one to make a virtuous expression of generosity toward the people best suited and able to receive it. By benefiting one’s friends, one expresses a virtue to its fullest, and thereby best benefits oneself. There is a need of the friend in Aristotle if one is to live a virtuous life.

2) Friendship is based in a sameness between friends. In a fascinating passage of the *Ethics*, Aristotle informs his audience that friendship as an expression of concern for another or care for another is grounded in feelings originally felt towards the self. Friendship is an extroversion of this originally self-directed feeling out onto others, and its force is stronger or weaker to the extent that the friend in question more or less resembles this original object of affection, the self:

> The decent person, then, is related to his friend as he is to himself, since the friend is another himself. [NE 9.4.1166a30]

Like seeks like but it would prefer identity, and the friend is liked insofar as he or she mirrors the self. What is decent about friendship has nothing to do with how it relates to others, because the very "otherness" of these others is elided and of no consequence to friendship. Friendship does not expand my horizons of understanding, does not introduce me to differences of culture, class, or race. What is worthy of friendship in the friend is none of this, but rather how well they repeat what I know of myself, how easily I may contemplate myself in them.

These two moments of supposed friendship, utility and identity, recur in the Stoic concern for friendship, extending from the school’s founder, Zeno of Citium, on down to the Romans Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius some five hundred years later. With the Stoic construal of self-sufficiency as
the proper performance of one’s part within a whole (rather than as any attempt to be a whole unto oneself), the place of friendship shifts, but its importance does not.

1) Friendship for the Stoics is an expression of reason. The entire first book of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* can be read as a thanking of friends and relatives for their exemplary role in the Emperor’s life. They have provided him in reason and can choose to bring his/her particular share of reason freely into alignment with nature (*kata physin*). Through such an act, reason comes into a knowing relation with itself, and the sage is brought into accord with nature. Reason, perhaps, is nothing other than this self-reflective movement for the Stoics. Now, insofar as other individuals are likewise rational agents, the friendship of one rational mind to another is again a knowing relationship of reason to itself. The Stoic project of being in accord with nature, then, is furthered by the Stoic’s being a friend. Consequently, the Stoic sage must be a friend in order to fully express his/her accordance with nature. As with Aristotle, friendship is necessary to fully express one’s virtue.

2) Friendship is only possible amongst the rational (and therefore virtuous). Diogenes Laertius notes of Zeno that his book *Republic* was criticized for presenting the virtuous alone as friends (DL 7.33). And while Epicurus may find friendship possible only among the self-sufficient, what he has in mind could not be further from the Stoic ideal. This is best seen in Epictetus, who in agreement with Zeno four hundred years later. In his lecture "Of Friendship" (*Discourses* 2.22), Epictetus considers friendship as only possible when the potential for a conflict of interest between the friends has been removed. Dogs seem to play friendly with one another, Epictetus claims, but throw a piece of meat between them and you will see how much that friendship is worth. So too with humans. Any value attributed to an object which is not my own makes for a possible conflict of interests. Since this item that I value (the valuation is, of course, up to me) is not my own, because it is inessential to me, this item can be separated from me, taken, stolen, stripped from me, etc. Worse, it can also become the object of another’s interest as well. Only when my interest is wholly coincident with my moral purpose (*proairesis*), which alone is entirely my own, will I come to value what cannot be taken from me, what is essential to me. In refusing to value what could be the possible object of an altercation or argument, I am thus ready to befriend another who is in similar condition, “For then this will be my interest—to keep my good faith, my self-respect, my forbearance, my abstinance, and my co-operation, and to maintain my relations with other men” (*Discourses* 2.22.20-21). In withdrawing all claims to the external world, the Stoic removes the source of all possible conflict as well. The resultant indifference, however, seems an absence of ill will, rather than any positive form of friendship.

Despite their differences, Aristotle and the Stoics agree in characterizing the friendship of self-sufficiency in terms of necessity and identity. The resources are available in the Epicurean corpus for the reconstruction of a distinctly Epicurean friendship vastly different from these. Rather than securing friendship by necessity within the interiority of identity, Epicurus takes it as an opening of the self-sufficient individual onto the natural world.

1) I neither need nor need not my friends. Self-sufficiency is considered by Epicurus inseparable from a certain freedom (*eleutheria*). And while “The greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom” (ER 6.77/BVC 77), most savory in this fruit is the pleasure that accompanies freedom from need. The achievement of this release, however, requires a conversion in how one lives one’s life;
Epicurus’ treatment of desire is meant to facilitate this change. Epicurus divides desires along two axes, the necessary/unnecessary and the natural/unnatural: “Of desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary, and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as a result of a groundless opinion” (ER 5.29/DL 10.149). Epicurus’ naturalism is evident in the absence here of any unnatural and necessary desires. There is nothing that one might need that is not natural; conversely, there is nothing that nature cannot supply to the address of one’s needs. This amounts to a restatement of the claim that natural existence is self-sufficient. Now Epicurus does not call his followers to abandon desire ex toto, but only desire in its unnatural and unnecessary forms. These are desires inappropriate for the mortal, unattainable in principle, or the result of society’s empty opinions (kenodoxiai). They are desires that know no natural measure, the desire for fame, for example. How much fame is enough? There is no end to the desire and thus no possibility for its satisfaction. Such insoluble desires bring with them ever-present pains and pangs of dissatisfaction; all these are to be excised. To be sure, desire remains, though now only in its natural forms, both necessary and unnecessary. Epicurus distinguishes the necessary and unnecessary desires by reference to pain, “The desires which do not bring a feeling of pain when not fulfilled are not necessary” (ER 5.26/DL 10.148). Natural and necessary desires, the desire to eat and to drink, for example, bring pain and ultimately death when not satisfied. But it is crucial to note what this entails: every living being, insofar as it is alive, has already satisfied these natural and necessary desires to some extent or another. Consequently, the only desires which could trouble the soul by their unfulfillment are the unnecessary ones (there again being no unnatural and necessary desires for Epicurus). Epicurus occupies himself most with these. As the unnecessary desires are precisely that, unnecessary, there is no pain felt at the lack of their object. Unnatural and unnecessary desires are to be abolished outright, however difficult this may be. But natural and unnecessary desires are free for the enjoyment, as long as one keeps one’s head in this. The empty opinions of others, however, tend to make of these unnecessary objects luxurious necessities (fine food and clothing, for example). This makes what should be a matter of free enjoyment into a cause for concern, and this thereby hinders enjoyment. An inverse relation would seem to pertain between pleasure and utility, “He who has the least need of tomorrow will approach it with the greatest pleasure” (ER 149/U 490).

Need obstructs pleasure. But it is not only that the one who has the least need will approach the world most pleasurably, but rather that the world will be most pleasurable to the one who needs it least. The transformation is not only in how I approach the world, but in how the world appears to me as well. Through the treatment of desire, by bringing the soul to a state of satisfaction, Epicurus simultaneously frees the world from that soul’s utilitarian impositions. The world can now show itself as something other than a workshop of tools for the satisfaction of needs. Existence in itself is pleasurable for Epicurus—this is, in effect, the sum of his thought—need obscures this fact, and so to remove the need is to restore the pleasure. Pleasure is always free, when constrained by need it is lost, diminished, perverted. The removal of pain (the satisfaction of necessities) is the highest pleasure for Epicurus because it reveals this natural world denuded of calculated utility. In this satisfied condition of the soul, the unnecessary pleasures of existence may be freely enjoyed. Best of all, this life liberated from utility is available to all the living, for necessity has always already been met. Epicurus’ many claims to rival even Zeus in happiness when provided with a mere barley cake and some water stem from this conception (DL 10.11; DL 10.131; ER 159/U 602). The treatment of desire is not performed for parsimony’s sake, but rather, “We have been keen for self-sufficiency, not so that we should employ inexpensive and plain fare under all circumstances, but
so that we can be of good cheer about them” (ER 48/U 135a). Enjoyment is a way of letting the unnecessary remain unnecessary, of not demanding that the unnecessary always be present, i.e., of not making of the unnecessary a need. To enjoy is to let things be their own measure and to withhold from them the standard of utility, to let them go when their time has come. Release from need is crucial to the project of restoring natural pleasure to the world and humanity. ⁵

But just as the necessary and natural desires constantly recur, making of Epicurus’ thought a way of life, so too does friendship find itself embroiled with necessity. Friendship is not found in the avoidance of utility, but in the confrontation with it. Friendship “takes its origin” from benefit and utility, Epicurus claims in one of the Vatican Sayings, though it is worth choosing for its own sake (ER 6.23, LS 22F1/BVC 23). The possibility of a friendship being useful—and at the same time, of a friend being used, or of being used by a friend—is essential to friendship and coeval with it. A fall into the transactual endangers every friendship, the fragility of which is addressed by Epicurus through the figure of pistis, belief and confidence, i.e., the promise: “We do not need utility from our friends so much as we need confidence [pisteôs] concerning that utility” (ER 6.34, LS 22F3/BVC 34). Confidence is the essence of friendship for Epicurus, each friend must both give and receive the confidence of the others. ⁶ There are three aspects of this phenomenon worth considering:

a) In giving my word, I promise to keep my word. In promising to the other, in giving the friend my confidence, I call myself to a responsibility before that other. I promise that I will later be the same person that I now am, the one who is promising. I promise to remember my promise. But there would be no promise if every time I gave my word I could not help but keep it. A promise takes its meaning from the danger that it may not be kept. By giving my word, I hold myself responsible to the other even if events beyond my control should keep me from holding to my word. By this act, I put the constancy of myself to the test (a trait admired by Epicurus, see ER 6.39, LS 22F4/BVC 39 cited below), and this constancy is a precondition of friendship.

b) I must believe in my friend. I must believe that my friend may be of benefit to me. But to believe this is at the same time to believe that I may some day stand in need of such benefaction. To believe this is to recognize that my self-sufficiency is a performance which must be maintained at every moment. Even granting my acceptance of the fact that I may one day need a friend, I must also have the confidence that this friend will be there for me at this unspecified later date, come what may. I must have faith in their promise. Once again, friendship becomes a question of responsibility, this time on the part of the friend. And once again the self-sufficient individual seems dangerously exposed to chance.

c) I must give confidence of my utility. As friendship is a mutual relationship, one must both give and receive confidence. In my promise, I accept that the friendship about to be entered into may place me in the position of being useful to another. The danger here is that I may be used or exploited by the friend in whom I confide. I may be made a tool or a means for their further ends. Within a philosophy of self-sufficiency such as Epicurus’, being made into an object for another’s gain is the worst of possible fates and the complete antipode to self-sufficiency; it is life’s greatest danger.

In the promise of friendship, then, there is a resolution to constancy in the face of chance and
danger: “one must be willing to run some risks for the sake of friendship” (ER 6.28, LS 22F2/BVC 28). Epicurus opposes the constancy of the true friend (as per point a above) to the two extremes of friendship’s perversions:

The constant friend is neither he who always searches for utility, nor he who never links [friendship and utility]. For the former makes gratitude a matter for commercial transaction, while the latter kills off good hope for the future” (ER 6.39, LS 22F4/BVC 39).

The mutual promise of friendship opens a relationship between the friends in which the inescapable danger of utility is accepted. In both of the above cases of corrupted friendship there is a consolidation of friendship along one side of the useful/useless divide. As a consequence, there is an interruption of the reciprocity that is essential to friendship. In the first case, where utility is always sought, the friend cannot freely give, nor can I return my gratitude. Here the free act of friendship (and we should recall the connections between freedom and pleasure) is calculated with an eye to its benefit and return. When the friendly act is done for expected repayment, my gratitude is likewise inculpated in this calculable exchange. I no longer freely thank the friend, instead that thanks is made part of a repayment. In the second case, where friendship is never linked to use, the friend cannot receive my promise of utility. There is no danger that I might be used by the friend. The friend does not recognize him/herself as ever possibly being in need. The friend who does not link friendship to utility has not confronted the danger of ever standing in need or of ever being needed by another. Such uncontrolled and unaddressed dangers will almost certainly return to disturb the soul, destroying our good hope for the future. This hope, it should be noted, is felt in the present. In this second case of false friendship, then, there is no faith expressed between the supposed friends, and thus no bond of friendship. And in both cases, the reciprocal assumption of a danger is lost in favor of a more secure and decidedly unfriendly position. Dangers must be faced and assumed, otherwise troubles may ensue. The maintenance of the danger is central to friendship. Transcending utility, friendship is neither useful nor useless, but always in danger of becoming one or the other of these.

2) Friendship individuates. Given that friendship involves a risking of self-sufficiency, there still remains the problem of sameness to contend with. Are the Epicurean gods of self-sufficiency not, in some fundamental sense, the same? If the therapy of desire has brought the individual back to a natural state, free from the empty beliefs of society and liberated from the calculative project of reason, if the treatment has removed all pain from the body and distress from the soul, what is left to distinguish one such individual from another? Friendship amongst these folk will be yet another friendship based in a sameness between the friends. In a very real sense, pain is crucial to identity —“Name me your relation to pain and I will tell you who you are” one could say.² Pain individuates and keeps us from becoming indistinguishably perfect and happy. However, to think that pain can be wiped out once and for all is ridiculous, hunger and thirst always return and with them their attendant pains. The belief that the stomach is inexhaustible is a false one, writes Epicurus (ER 6.59; LS 21G4/BVC 59), yet so too is the belief that once satisfied it will never hunger again. The self-sufficiency which Epicurus seeks is a natural self-sufficiency, and there is nothing unnatural about pain. Self-sufficiency must be a way of comporting toward this.

The temptation to see in Epicurus’ work a flight from pain must be resisted. Perhaps his thought is
best construed in two parts, one destructive and negative, the other, constructive and positive. In the first and preparatory part, the false beliefs of society and the overdependence upon reason are attacked. The details of Epicurus’ philosophy here stand as so many curatives to the troubles of the soul in society; to the apprehensions arising from the thought of a predetermined universe, for example, Epicurus offers as antidote his counter-notion of the swerve; to the fears of death, the thought that the latter is nothing to us, etc. In this manner, Epicurus seeks to bring it about that his followers live lives of completion, untroubled, never desiring more than is appropriate, never carried away by the empty fears of society.

Whereas in the first stage pain seems the enemy (most commentary remains at this stage), in the second and positive stage pain is embraced as inalienable from life. Only in friendship is self-sufficiency first attained, for only in friendship is pain as an argument against the pleasure of life refuted. This is perhaps what is most Epicurean in Nietzsche as well, the thought that pain is no reproach for life. The friend accepts nature as both pleasant and painful. Treating our desires, we eliminate the unnatural ones and carefully choose the unnecessary ones. In this way, our lives are more complete and full of satisfaction. They become richer within the limits of nature. In this condition, we are able to properly befriend. Otherwise put, we become poor in desires in order to become rich by nature so that we may risk our treasury in friendship with the other. In accepting this risk, we choose to live dangerously, confronting the greatest danger of becoming an object for another. Friendship is thus a choosing of the pain which makes one who one is, a friend. Insofar as I am most naturally the self-sufficient individual that I become through friendship with another, my friend is constitutive of myself. Friendship makes the friends who they are.

Andrew Mitchell
California State University-Stanislaus

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Notes:

1. In citing the works of and concerning Epicurus, I have employed a parenthetical citation scheme (citing first the English translations separated by a slash from the Greek texts) wherein the following works are cited by the given abbreviations:

   For the English:

   For the Greek:
   - BVC = *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*. Trans. and Ed. Cyril Bailey. [Used only for the “Vatican Collection” of sayings; chapter V.a]
   - U = *Epicurea*. Ed. H. Usener.
Long and Sedley Vol. II presents the original texts for all of LS. Full bibliographical information for all of the above is available in the bibliography.

2. Gregory Vlastos had questioned whether Platonic love ignored what was particular about the individual in an appreciation of what was of the ideal in the beloved, the idea of the beautiful, for example. A similar criticism could be made of Aristotle, what is particular about the individual is passed over in an appreciation of what is similar to the lover in the beloved. In this Aristotelian position, then, the self would take the place of the idea. See “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” (Vlastos, 1-34; see especially pages 31-32).

3. Such an endeavor, however, must remain speculative as too little remains of Epicurus’ work to speak with any great certainty. Nevertheless, this is entirely in keeping with Epicurus’ own doctrine of inferring from the evident to the non-evident. As long as our suppositions about the role of friendship in Epicurean life accord with what remains of the Epicurea, our reconstruction can be said to enjoy a certain validity. And yet this would still be to treat Epicurean thought as a doctrine. Quite to the contrary, Epicurus’ philosophy is inseparable from its therapeutic deployment. The beliefs that one would hear Epicurus espouse would vary according to the illness suffered (if you are not worried sick about the determinism that seems to adhere to all atomisms, then Epicurus need not speak to you of “the swerve” in atoms). Contradiction is not a damning charge for Epicurus, because truth stands in the service of life for him. The valuation of life over truth, this is the only doctrine of Epicurus. Thus while a presentation of Epicurean friendship must rely on the most skeletal of sources, its true validity will lie in how it helps us understand friendship and be better friends here and now. Whatever is said must have relevance for today.

4. Laertius reports the Epicurean claim that “Sexual intercourse…never helped anyone, and one must be satisfied if it has not harmed” (DL 10. 118). Sex would appear to be a natural but unnecessary desire then, its absence does not necessarily bring pain. But just because it does not bring help to the individual this is no reason to dismiss it outright. And Epicurus does not do so. Necessary desires when satisfied necessarily help us, they remove pains. Natural and unnecessary desires neither help nor hurt us necessarily. Finally, unnatural and unnecessary desires necessarily hurt us. The intermediate position of the natural unnecessary desires in this context places them at the center of the Epicurean therapeutics of desire. He does not preach against them, but their enjoyment may prove too difficult for the novice. To enjoy these unnecessary desires and to not make of them necessities, to take free pleasure in the unnecessary, this is the highest achievement.

5. Note that while both Aristotle and the Stoics identify friendship as a means to express a virtue which would otherwise go unexpressed, for Epicurus there is nothing to be gained in friendship. This is its greatness, pleasure, and, ultimately, virtue. For Epicurus virtue is inseparable from pleasure (DL 10.138), is for the sake of pleasure and a means to pleasure (ER 12/U 509; ER 19.42, LS 21L/Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 3.18.42), and to be honored only insofar as it produces pleasure (ER 37, LS 21M/U 67). In the words of one Epicurean, “I spit upon the honourable and on those who vainly admire it, whenever it produces no pleasure” (ER 151/U 512).

6. One can glean this importance from the following statement in the Vatican Collection, “The wise man feels no more pain when he is tortured (than when his friend is tortured, and will die on his behalf; for if he betray) his friend, his entire life will be confounded and utterly upset because of a lack of confidence [apistian]” (ER 6.56-57/BVC 56-57).

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**Bibliography**

**Editions of Epicurus:**

**Other Works:**

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