A Response to the Reply of William O. Stephens to “Friendship Amongst the Self-Sufficient: Epicurus”

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It was my view in treating of Aristotelian friendship that human friendship is the modification of a bond that runs throughout all of animate nature. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle explicitly names “natural” friendships those tending between parent and child, and “not only among human beings but also among birds and…animals” (*NE* 1155a20). Friendship here is not solely a human endeavor; all of life enjoys a bond with others, and Aristotle often names this “friendship.” One could go so far as to see such an affiliative bond as written into the notion of animation. In *De Anima*, Aristotle specifies that not any material can be a body that will come to bear soul. Rather, if there is something common to souls it is “the first actuality of a natural body which has organs” (412 b 5-6). Only those materials sufficiently complex in their organization can be animated. Now this organization is nothing other than a set of relations, or an *affiliation*, between organs. The organic itself is already relational and this relationality is integral to all animation. The human being, who is “political, tending by nature to live together with others” (*NE* 1169b17) lives this affiliation as friendship. But animals live it, too, in their own way and through their own “natural” friendships. The presence of the logos certainly transforms human friendship into something beyond the ken of the animal, but human friendship is still a particular taking up of a biological fact. It is for this reason that I insist on human life as needing friends, be that life lived in contemplation or in action (as *bios theôrëtikos* or *bios phronimos*). In either case, what is at stake are lives (*bioi*) and insofar as humans live finite and animate lives, they need friends. The divine mind would not need friends, true, and the theoretical life is the closest to this unattainable ideal. But this proximity can never erase the biological situation of life, even (especially) the contemplative one. These at least would be the broad strokes of my position.

As to the Stoics, I call the attempt to live one’s life as a part in a play or as a role assigned by nature, an attempt to live one’s life as a part of nature. Epictetus: “Remember that you are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be: short if he wants it short, long if he wants it long. If he wants you to play a beggar, play even this part skillfully, or a cripple, or a public official, or a private citizen. What is yours is to play the assigned part well. But to choose it belongs to someone else” (*Encheiridion* 17). Professor Stephens calls this as an attempt to live as a whole. To be sure, there is a kind of wholeness ingredient to the Stoic lifestyle, but this wholeness is found only in being a part of nature’s active performance. In other words, in being rational. In this way, by wholeheartedly playing one’s part, there is nothing lacking from the part. Aurelius says of such a Stoic life that even death “does not overtake an unfinished life, as if a tragic actor were leaving the stage before completing the drama or playing through his part” (*Meditations*, III. 8). He never questions that to live is to play a part in the rational action (naturings) of nature. It is thus far too weak a statement to say (as Professor Stephens does) that such a life “also harmonizes with the rational structure of nature itself” (2, my emphasis). The Stoic life is a part of nature’s naturings, and
the task of remaining such is a never ending one. It is thus wrong to think that the position of the Stoic sage (practically a regulative idea) “cannot be lost once achieved” (3). It is the very test against such a loss that makes the sage a sage.

Finally, two points in regard to Epicurus. First, with respect to Epicuruean pleasure, it is my fear that the Epicurean has been confused with the Cyrenaic hedonist (on Cyrenaic and Epicurean differences concerning the nature of pleasure, see D.L. X. 136-138). Cyrenaics act for immediate pleasure, damn the consequences. There is no deferral of gratification here, as one finds in Epicurus (“Even some bodily pains are worthwhile for fending off others like them”; ER 6.73; BVC 73). The Epicurean is quite willing to suffer a minor pain now to avoid a larger one in the future (this is why, for example, Epicureans observed traditional religious festivals; to not do so would have brought them more scorn and displeasure than it was worth; on this see Philodemus the Epicurean’s On Piety, ER 55-56; U 387, 157).

Second, with respect to Epicurean friendship, Professor Stephens finds it hard to reconcile the altruism of friendship with natural desire. For a third time he and I disagree on the nature of nature. My point here is related to the above. The Epicurean does not seek to live like an animal, in the sense of irrational brute or cretin. That the human is a rational, civilized, and domesticated animal is without doubt for Epicurus. The “empty opinions” of society have implanted unnecessary desires in us that must be uprooted. The human cannot change the fact that it is human. Epicurean thought is not a call to give up the logos (what could this mean?). On the contrary, Epicureanism is an attempt to cure the fevered soul by bringing it to a recognition of its own properly human nature as a finite being. One cannot say of Epicurus as Voltaire said of Rousseau, “to read your book makes one long to go on all fours” (letter of 8/30/1755). To call this position “Nietzschean” is baffling; a philosophy of renouncing desire and halting at “natural” limits is a philosophy strictly in contradiction with one that would emphasize self-overcoming as a never ending process.

Friendship truly is “rather strange” (1).

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