1

Squaring the Epicurean Circle:
Friendship and Happiness in the Garden

Benjamin Rossi

Epicurean ethics has been subject to withering ancient and contemporary criticism for the supposed irreconcilability of Epicurus's endorsement of friendship and his ethical egoism. On the one hand, Epicurus claims that friendship is an immortal good (VS 78), that it 'dances round the world the world announcing to us all that we should wake up and felicitate one another' (VS 52), and he even claims that every friendship is worth choosing for its own sake (VS 23).[1] Clearly, for Epicurus, friendship is a central pillar of the good life.

On the other hand, Epicurus is clear that the sole rational norms for evaluating actions and desires are one's own pleasure and pain. For example, he writes that '[i]f you do not on every occasion refer each of your actions to the natural goal but turn prematurely to something else in avoiding or pursuing things, your actions will not accord with your reasoning' (KD 25). The natural goal is *aponia* and *ataraxia*, the absence of physical and mental pain. Epicurus's egoism seems to permit only a level of commitment to friendship commensurate with its hedonic value, and it definitely rules out endowing friendship with intrinsic value.

This tension has been ably articulated by contemporary philosophers, most notably Mitsis 1988, ch. 3 and Annas 1993, ch. 11. More recently, Evans 2004 has suggested that a plausible Epicurean response begins by explaining why friendship is valuable for Epicurus. Evans 2004, 416 focuses on passages in which Epicurus grounds the value of friendship in the confidence it affords.[2] Evans goes on to argue that this confidence provides a direct egoistic justification for the purportedly other-valuing and self-sacrificing behaviors Epicurus prescribes.

In my first section I develop Evans's suggestion further by putting flesh on the notion of confidence. Specifically, I explain the nature of the mutual aid Epi-

---

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from Long and Sedley 1987. Text abbreviations are as follows:

SL = Seneca's *Letters*
DNR = *De rerum natura*
Ep. Mec. = *Letter to Menoeceus*
KD = *Key Doctrines*
VS = *Vatican Sayings*
DF = *De finibus*
DL = Diogenes Laertius

[2] Many scholars have noticed this. See Rist 1972, 135; Long 1986, 305; O'Connor 1989, 169-173; Konstan 1997, 110; O'Keefe 2001, 276-278.

curean friends expect from one another, arguing that a shared conception of the human *telos* structures the confidence that characterizes friendship. I connect Epicurus's endorsement of friendship to the Epicurean Garden, and I argue that Epicurean friendship can be understood and justified only within the context of that community.

In my second part I return to two contemporary criticisms of Epicurean friendship. The first criticism focuses on the problem of free riders. If Epicurus grounds his justification of friendship in the confidence of friends' help, then the fact that some friends cannot be counted on to reciprocate help apparently threatens to undermine the whole enterprise. The second criticism points to a seeming inconsistency in Epicurean doctrine. VS 23 suggests that the Epicurean sage will intrinsically value his friends, but according to Epicurean teaching, only pleasure is an intrinsic good. I argue that both criticisms can be adequately addressed once we understand Epicurean friendship in greater depth.

I. The Nature and Value of Epicurean Friendship

Epicurus clearly thinks that friendship and aid are closely connected. He claims, for example, that friendship 'originated in benefitting' (VS 23). Indeed, some of his remarks suggest that he believes friendship is partly defined by concrete beneficial acts and shared expectations about future and possible aid. VS 39 apparently provides a criterion for assessing whether a person is someone's friend based on her propensity to look for help: 'One who is always looking for help is not a friend, nor is one who never associates help with friendship. For the former trades sentiment for recompense, while the latter cuts off confident expectation in regard to the future.' Epicurus's point is that X is a friend of Y only if X expects help from Y in the right way; she is neither so needy that the relationship loses its charm and becomes a burdensome charitable obligation for her friend, nor so independent that she does not seek help in times of need.[3]

This last point underscores the importance of confidence in Epicurus' conception of friendship. VS 34 is the clearest statement of the point: 'It is not our friends' help that we need so much as the confidence of their help.' Epicurus's insight is that friendship is a robust good: its goodness is grounded not just in actual acts of assistance, but more importantly in the knowledge of merely possible acts of assistance a friend would provide were they needed.[4] I may be very rich and unlikely to lose my wealth, but the knowledge that my friend would still care for me if I became poor is crucial to the kind of confidence I derive from my friend. Conversely, if I knew that my friend would abandon me unless I remain rich, this would critically undermine the sense of security I derive from my friendship even if I never actually become poor. Hence, confidence consists in the knowledge that a friend can be counted on to come to my assistance across a

---

[3] I will come back to this point about confidence being a part of Epicurus's *definition* of friendship in section 2.

[4] I take the concept of 'robust good' from Philip Pettit's recent work, particularly his 2011 Uchrio Lectures at Oxford University: www.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/lectures/2011.

range of possible circumstances. Combining this point with Epicurus's claim that expectations of help partly define friendship, we can say that for Epicurus, X and Y are friends only if X and Y appropriately, truly, and justifiably expect each to help the other across a range of possible scenarios in which X or Y are in need.[5]

Epicurean friendships are valued for, and partly defined by, mutual acts of assistance and shared expectations of such acts in possible future scenarios. But what is the nature of the help that friends can provide? Answering this question will help us understand why friendship is so valuable for Epicurus and ultimately why many of the criticisms of Epicurean friendship miss their mark.

A satisfactory answer requires a brief overview of Epicurus's view about the sources of unhappiness. For Epicurus, physical pain and spiritual distress are the primary obstacles to achieving *aponia* and *ataraxia*. We can do what we can to mitigate physical pain by arranging our lives so as to be confident that we will satisfy our natural and necessary desires for food, drink, and basic shelter. But for Epicurus, mental anxiety or 'disturbances of the soul' (DF i 55) is far worse than any physical pain. These anxieties have their source primarily in false opinions about death and the afterlife, the gods, the limits of pleasure and pain, and value. False opinions seem to have two negative products. They directly give rise to mental distress, as in the case of false beliefs about death (Ep. Men. 124). Perhaps more importantly, they also generate 'empty' desires that are unstable and productive of more pain than pleasure in the long run. Empty desires generated by false opinions are hard to satisfy, leading to stresses 'many times greater' (KD 8) than the pleasures they secure: 'What is insatiable is not the stomach, as people say, but the false opinion about its unlimited filling' (VS 59). False opinions can also make us desire things that are unreliable sources of freedom from pain. Epicurus says that 'what releases the soul's disturbance and produces worthwhile joy is neither possessing the greatest wealth, nor public recognition nor respect, nor anything else which is dependent *on indeterminate causes*' (VS 81, my emphasis). The point here is that those who try to seek security through wealth, fame, or power are engaged in a futile enterprise, since these contingent material and social guarantors of freedom from pain are vulnerable to chance and frustration.[6]

The remark about indeterminate causes in VS 81 also helps explain the importance of what Epicurus calls 'sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance, and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion' (Ep. Men. 132). Epicurus associates this kind of reasoning with the virtue of 'prudence', which he explicitly distinguishes from philosophy (Ep. Men. 132). Philosophy as an inquiry into the cosmos will help us banish false opinions about god, death, the afterlife, and the limits of pains and desires (KD 11-13). Prudence will yield knowledge about the worldly causes of pleasure and will help us weigh prospective pleasures so that we do not choose

---

[5] The 'appropriately' here registers the point made in VS 39, which suggests that expectations of aid can be improperly calibrated.

[6] See also DNR v 1105-1175 and the discussion of KD 8 in Mitsis 1988, 53.

pleasures that, in the long run, cause us more anxiety.[7] Epicurus's moral psychology features a strong view about the relationship between false opinion and desire. Opinion is 'the basis and essential necessary condition' (Nussbaum 1986, 35) of desire. As we have seen, its presence generates the desire in the first place, and its removal removes not merely the justification or rationale for the desire, but the desire itself. Given this strong view, Epicurus claims that the solution to the problem of 'empty' desire is philosophy and prudence.[8]

Epicurus points to two sources of false opinions, society and the flesh—enemies without and within the Epicurean Garden. As we have seen, for Epicureans the competitive striving for wealth, fame, and political power in ordinary society generates and sustains false opinions about how to achieve the good life. For this reason, it is crucial that Epicureans withdraw from the 'prison of routine business and politics' (VS 58). This doctrine provides a clear and direct rationale for the Garden. However, Epicurus also seems to believe that the flesh is a source of false opinion, specifically about the limits of pleasure and pain:

> The flesh considers the limit of pleasure to be boundless, and only infinite time makes it possible. But the mind, having gained a reasonable understanding of the end and limit of the flesh, and having expelled fears about eternity, furnishes the complete life, and we no longer have any need for time without end. (KD 20)

Even within the Garden, there is a constant threat to mental tranquility arising from our bodily natures. Therefore, the withdrawal from social life is necessary but not sufficient for happiness. What is required, in addition, is the continual reinforcement of Epicurean doctrine against the claims of the flesh.

Epicurus's ethical recommendation, then, consists partly in simplifying our desires, paring away those unnatural, unnecessary, and insatiable desires for things that offer only an unreliable or unstable source of pleasure (Ep. Men. 127). Given his view about the relationship between opinion and desire, he thinks that

---

[7] Here I disagree with Nussbaum's conflation of the 'art of reasoning' aimed at dispelling false opinion with philosophy based largely on Sextus's claim that Epicurus defined philosophy as 'an activity that secures the happy life by means of arguments and reasoning' (Nussbaum 1986, 36). This directly contradicts Epicurus's careful distinction between prudence and philosophy (Ep. Men. 124). While both are arts of reasoning and both are necessary for happiness, they are concerned with different things and probably employ different inferential methods.

[8] This is one of many places where we might be tempted to dismiss Epicurean ethics. Surely the strong view about the responsiveness of desire to belief is false; for one thing, how does this view accommodate the phenomenon of *akrasia?* I have two responses here. First, this sort of view is not confined to the Epicureans; it can also be found in some Stoic and Platonic writings. Second, and more importantly, a more charitable reading of Epicurus on this point would restrict the claim to a philosophical elite, rather than 'the dissipated'. We might balk at the elitism implied in such a restriction, but notice that unlike Aristotle, Epicurus does not categorically foreclose the possibility of practicing philosophy for certain groups. So, for example, he does not restrict women from the Epicurean community (indeed there are accounts of female philosophers in the Garden); unlike Aristotle, he exhorts both the young and old to practice philosophy (Ep. Men. 122); finally, he does not explicitly exclude the lower classes.

we can accomplish this simplification by rejecting false opinions about death, the gods, the afterlife, and the limits and sources of pleasure and pain. We can do this by employing two arts of reasoning, prudence and natural philosophy, in a context in which the major sources of false opinion, society and the flesh, are either cut off or are under our control.

In extant accounts of communal life in the Garden and in a few passages in Epicurus's writings, we see that Epicureans relied to an extraordinary degree on friends for all of the therapies that would, in their view, lead them to happiness. These therapies were precisely the aid that Epicureans expected from their friends.[9]

The Garden is a society of friends committed to happiness as Epicurus conceived it. Hence its constitution is ordered to the Epicurean end and designed to overcome the obstacles to *ataraxia.* First, as has been noted, the Garden is removed from ordinary social life. This serves a twofold purpose: it cuts off a major source of false opinion, and it secures its members from mental and bodily harm. This is a part of the confidence-grounding security of life in the Garden that it shares with just communities.

More positively, the Garden offers a space for shared pleasurable activity. The Epicureans, as we have seen, stressed the ease and simplicity of true pleasures, the objects of natural and necessary desires. Epicureans would be expected to share the simple bodily pleasures of a common banquet together. Seneca reports Epicurus's claim that 'you should be more concerned at inspecting whom you eat and drink with, than what you eat and drink. For feeding without a friend is the life of a lion and a wolf' (SL 19.10). Epicurus seems to be picking up on the idea that shared enjoyment of a meal enhances its pleasure. Hence, the practice of coming together to enjoy a meal itself served as means of warding off bodily pain and of satisfying natural and necessary bodily desires. The involvement of friends in this practice served to enhance its pleasure.

Most importantly, friendship within the context of the Garden was the most important means of reinforcing Epicurean doctrine against the insistent claims of false opinion, emphasizing the promise of the Epicurean way of life, and guiding the budding Epicurean along his path to happiness. It performed this function directly through shared philosophical activity largely in the therapeutic mode. O'Connor suggests that the groups in which Epicureans studied philosophy in the Garden were not typically research seminars, but were probably more like 'refresher courses to shore up any erosion in the central commitments of the participants' (O'Connor 1989, 171). If so, this conforms well with the central aim of Epicurean philosophy I have sketched above, which is to dispel false opinions that are the source of empty desire and replace them with true ones. As I suggested, reinforcement of central Epicurean doctrine was conceived as an ongoing necessity given the insistent claims of the flesh. We can also see examples of friends performing this therapeutic function in some of Epicurus's writings. The *Letter to Menoeceus* concludes with an exhortation to study its contents 'night

---

[9] For what follows I am indebted to the description of the Garden in O'Connor 1989.

and day by yourself and with someone like you'. Epicurus writes in his *Letter to Idomeneus* (as reported by Diogenes Laertius) that the pain of dysentery is counterbalanced by the 'joy in my soul at the memory of our past discussions' (DL x 22). Epicurus does not say what these conversations with a fellow Epicurean philosopher were about, but we can reasonably infer that many of them concerned Epicurean doctrines.

Friends also helped shore up Epicurean doctrine indirectly, by furnishing paradigms of Epicurean good living. This is best illustrated by the school's hero cult to Epicurus and its other founders. The common banquets were devoted to public remembrance of the Epicurean founders and meditation on teachings of the Master, including a public telling of tales of exemplary biography. For example, the story of Epicurus's tranquility in his final hours might be read to the assembled community (O'Connor 1989, 168). The aim of these cultic celebrations seems to have been to experience the enjoyable memory of the goodness of the departed heroes and take inspiration from their examples (O'Connor 1989, 171). However, there is no great difference between living and dead heroes: either can be the source of comfort and confidence.[10] Hence both dead exemplars and living friends can provide exemplars of the Epicurean good life. Epicurus notes the importance of friends as exemplars at VS 61: 'Most beautiful too is the sight of those near and dear to us, when our original kinship makes us of one mind; for such a sight is a great incitement to this end [the natural good].'

The most important functions of friendship, then, are to help alleviate bodily pains and to reinforce Epicurean doctrine through teaching and example, shoring up one's psychic defenses against false beliefs stemming from various sources. This is why friendship is crucial not only for the first-order work of eliminating physical pain and mental anxiety, but even more, for the second-order confidence that the in times of need the friend can be counted on to perform this work. Nestled in a community of friends committed to mutual aid and a shared conception of the good life, the individual Epicurean can rest easy knowing that his friends in Garden will help him through difficult periods and shepherd him to happiness.

II. Two Contemporary Criticisms of Epicurean Friendship

The Free Rider Problem

In various passages, Epicurus recommends behaviors that seem to be at odds with his egoistic hedonism. According to Epicurus, a genuine friend will run risks for the sake of friendship (VS 28) and feel no more pain when he is tortured than when a friend is tortured (VS 56-57). According to Diogenes Laertius x 121, Epicurean friends are even expected to be willing to die for a friend. Evans 2004, 419 suggests an objection to Epicurus's hedonistic justification for friendship based on these passages:

      It is not difficult…to imagine scenarios in which the sage esti-

---

[10] So, e.g., the hero cult existed before Epicurus's death, as is shown by the provisions of his will (DL x 18).

> mates that his heroic deeds stand virtually no chance of being reciprocated by his friend… But if the sage is justified in believing that his risk in this case will have no return, then it seems his Epicurean principles counsel him to cut and run…if this is right, then the sage's friendships simply cannot provide him the security he seeks.

Evans's point is that Epicurus's justification for friendship on the grounds of mutual confidence is self-undermining, since it requires that Epicurean friends can be counted on in various actual or possible scenarios. Some of those scenarios will involve no hedonic gain and some risk of pain for the Epicurean sage, as the passages above suggest; in these situations she will 'cut and run' insofar as she is hedonistically rational. But every Epicurean is aware that her Epicurean friends are under the same rational pressure to forego helping their friends when there is no, or very little, possibility of aid in return. If every Epicurean is aware of her Epicurean friends' dispositions to cut and run, then everyone's confidence is undermined. In short, the rational temptation for each Epicurean friend not to help her friends who are incapable of reciprocating—to free-ride on her friends—undercuts the whole enterprise.

The key to resolving this problem is demonstrating that the sage's provision of aid to the friend is rational by Epicurus's lights even when she has little expectation of reciprocation from the friend. Evans attempts to solve this problem by arguing for the hedonic penalties of withholding help to the non-reciprocating friend and the hedonic benefits of uncompensated help. He pursues the first strategy by appealing to Epicurus's response to Gyges cases. Epicurus claims that 'it is impossible… [for the thief] to be confident that he will escape [punishment], even if he escapes ten thousand times in the present circumstances. For until his demise, it is unclear that he will escape' (KD 36). Evans suggests that Epicurus can generalize the point to the friendship case. If the sage withholds help from a friend in need, her reliability as a friend would be under immediate general suspicion, and her friends would stop trusting her to come to their aid. But if her friends stop trusting him and she knows this, then she in turn would be rational to stop trusting them, since her friends would be rational not to come to her aid if they know she will not come to theirs. This leaves the sage friendless, which would be devastating to her well-being. Hence, the consequences of detection and the anxiety that the knowledge of those consequences would cause should rationally persuade the sage not to withhold help from her friend. Evans 2004, 419-420 then argues that not only are there hedonic penalties in withholding help, but there are hedonic benefits in providing it even with the knowledge that it will not be reciprocated: 'Not only will X suffer terribly if he falls short of helping Y; he will acquire far greater security if he *succeeds* in helping Y. For if he does, his reputation for reliability among his current friends will be strengthened, as will his prospects for acquiring new ones.' In other words, the sage's provision of aid to the non-reciprocating friend helps ensure that her other friends will provide aid for her. Evans 2004, 420 acknowledges that this justification for

uncompensated help requires a weakening of Epicurus's original account of friendship, which required mutual trust between friends: 'X need not trust Y in order for them to be friends, X at least needs to trust *that* by helping Y, he himself will be helped—whether by Y or by those other than Y who are aware of X's helpful acts.' He concludes that in the Epicurean Garden, this condition can be met, so genuine friendship is possible.

Evans's solution seems plausible, but it is not clear that the problem to which he draws our attention is so pressing for Epicurean friendship. To begin with, it is clearly not the case that Epicurean philosophy would counsel helping *any* friend who is unlikely to reciprocate. To see why, consider the distinction between an untrustworthy friend, a friend who cannot be counted on to help his friends, and an incapacitated friend, who due to no fault of his own is unable to reciprocate help in kind.[11] In the case of an untrustworthy friend, the lack of expected reciprocity clearly does justify, by Epicurus's lights, a policy of 'cut and run'. And in this case, the temptation of the Epicurean not to help the untrustworthy friend does not threaten the fabric of mutual trust for the entire community of Epicurean friends, provided that the untrustworthy friend is publicly unmasked as such. Moreover, the mere possibility that some of the sage's friends are untrustworthy should not prevent him from carefully forming friendships in the first place, especially in the context of an Epicurean community. For in this context, as Evans notes, 'the worst case scenario for the Epicurean sage is that the trust he has in his false friend…turns out to be misplaced. But in that case he will be able to fall back on the help of his true friends'.[12]

This leaves us with the incapacitated friend who cannot reciprocate help through no fault of his own. The examples are of this sort: the non-reciprocating friend is sick, at death's door, or 'perilously short on resources and without prospects' (Evans 2004, 419). Let us consider first the impoverished friend. As we saw, the Epicurean Garden is a community designed to relieve the bodily and mental stresses of ordinary social life. It is also a place where budding Epicurean sages learn to simplify their desires. Hence, Epicurean friends will require very few resources, and those resources that they need will be, as Epicurus claims, easy to obtain. There should be very few if any situations in which a person is so lacking in resources that she and her friend are unable to partake in the simple pleasures, e.g., of the common banquet. Hence, there should be very few if any situations in which an Epicurean cannot anticipate any reciprocation or assistance from a resource-poor friend, at least if that reciprocation takes the form of objects that can satisfy the natural and necessary desires.

Now consider the sick or dying friend. The key point here is that the sick and dying friend's inability to reciprocate *in kind*—that is, with the same kind of help

---

[11] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address this distinction explicitly.

[12] As this remark suggests, the argument relies on the assumption that, as Evans 2004, 420 puts it, 'friendship is nested in a relatively broad community of Epicurean agents'. Outside of this context the arguments seem significantly less compelling. It is notable that Epicurus, in recognition of the risk of untrustworthy friends, counsels us to be careful in selecting friends (VS 28).

that the Epicurean might provide for him—does not entail that the friend is incapable of providing a significant hedonic benefit to the Epicurean. Recall the Epicureans' striking emphasis on meditating about and memorializing exemplars of the Epicurean good life. As we saw, these practices were a key component of Epicurean therapy in the Garden because they illustrated the promise of the Epicurean ideal, shored up confidence in Epicurean doctrine, and helped guide Epicureans to happiness. Now the sage confronting the death or debilitating sickness of a friend is also given the opportunity to witness a confirmation of Epicurean doctrines such as the limits of pleasure and pain or the nature of death. We can imagine this happening in two ways: directly, through the friend's exemplary equanimity in the face of death and pain; and indirectly, through the friend's recitation of Epicurean teachings. Moreover, the sage helps make this exemplification of Epicurean doctrine possible by ably assisting her friend, soothing his anxieties and caring for his body. Now, if her friend overcomes his sickness, this can serve as an example of how to bear illness; and, of course, her friend can now be counted on for help like any other friend. If her friend dies, he can serve as an example of fearlessness and equanimity in the face of death. The remembrance of this 'performance' of a good death can have a lasting personal and communal importance, as we see with the memorialization of Epicurus's behavior on his deathbed. Strange as it may seem to us, for the Epicureans even the death of a friend was not a cause for mourning, but for remembrance (VS 66). The reason, as we have seen, is not that Epicureans thought a figurative immortality could take the place of actual immortality. The remembrance of dead friends was entirely aimed at helped the living cope with the insistent threat of bodily pain and mental anxiety. By helping to shore up confidence in Epicurus's teachings, the death or sickness of a friend could be a powerful source of confidence, hence pleasure, for the sage. My account turns Evans's objection almost on its head. Far from being a problem for Epicurus's hedonistic rationale for friendship, the sick or dying Epicurean friend is a positive boon to the Epicurean.

Beyond Evans's specific examples of friends unable to reciprocate, there is a more general point to be made. The important question raised by Evans's objection is whether Epicurus can adequately maintain an essentially egoistic but unselfish model of friendship. The friendship is egoistic because for each party to the relationship X and Y, X's justification for entering into and persisting in it rests entirely on the hedonic benefits accruing to X, and the same applies to Y. It is an unselfish model because it counsels taking on great burdens for the friend and helping her when she is in need. Evans is right that selfishness would undermine the whole friendship enterprise. To see that Epicurean egoism does not require selfishness, I argue, it helps to consider what life in the Garden would be.[13] Because Epicurus proposes to simplify desires, eliminating the desires for money, power, or fame that often bring human beings into conflict, there will be no exploitative relationships among Epicureans grounded in these pursuits. Epicureans will not require great resources to make their friends' help worthwhile

---

[13] This is how O'Connor 1989, 186 characterizes his strategy.

for them. What Epicureans need is fellowship, a community committed to meditation on the philosophy that justifies a certain conception of the good life and celebration of dead or living exemplars to support its members' pursuit of that life. Therefore, the principal form of mutual aid friends are to provide one another is psychological, not material; and the sorts of behaviors with salutary psychological effects on others can be both actions (as in the case of exemplars) and conversations. In this context, it becomes very hard to imagine cases in which a friend in the Garden would be unable to reciprocate an Epicurean's help, even if it is not reciprocation in kind. Hence, there should never be a rational temptation to cut and run because of the inability of a friend to compensate for help.

It might be objected that my solution to the problem of free riding requires the Epicurean to take a perverse pleasure in the suffering of his friend. Surely this cannot be what Epicurus wanted. But this is a misunderstanding. First, the Epicurean is not taking pleasure in the *suffering* of his friend, but in his friend's fearlessness and equanimity in the face of his suffering. More importantly, while my account offers a hedonistic justification for helping even poor, sick, and dying friends, there is no reason why an Epicurean need be motivated by only such considerations in particular circumstances. Again, there is nothing in his writings to suggest that he forecloses the possibility of close personal bonds, as long as they are compatible with his strict hedonist egoism. As I have tried to show, Epicurus has no general reason to think that, at least in the Garden, these sorts of conflict between relationships and reason will occur. To be sure, Epicurus does seem aware that close personal attachments can cause us to be inordinately pained by the death of our friends (VS 66). But we are only so pained if we have failed to fully internalize Epicurean doctrines about death and the limits of pleasure and pain. Hence, there is no reason that the Epicurean sage will mourn his friend inordinately.[14] Moreover, developing dispositions of benevolence and care towards friends is justified for the Epicurean to the extent that they encourage the development of such dispositions in the friend—dispositions upon which the Epicurean can rely and which ground his confidence.[15]

---

[14] See Evans 2004, 421-423 for further explication of this point.

[15] David O'Connor pointed out to me in conversation that another way to avoid the free-rider problem is to stress psychological identification with a friend as a reason for helping her. On this view, because friends identify with one another, a friend's attachment to her friend's good does not just expose her to more risk. Rather, a friend's confidence that she will help a friend in need will be a source of comfort for her. Moreover, with the extension of (self-) concern to the friend, the friend's attitudes towards her friend must be disciplined by the same Epicurean attitudes towards the friend's death, injury, and risk that apply to her attitudes about herself. I like this line of thought, and there is some evidence that at least later Epicureans tried to make this move, perhaps in response to free rider worries. For example, Plutarch reports that the Epicureans 'in fact say that it is more pleasurable to confer a benefit than to receive one' (*Against Epicurean Happiness* 1097A). Torquatus claims that Epicurean friends 'rejoice in [their] friends' joy as much as [their] own and are equally pained by their distress' (DF i 68). The difference between the two claims—Epicureans finding helping *more* pleasurable in Plutarch's quotation, while finding it *equally* pleasurable in Cicero's—shows, perhaps, how Epicurean thought might have developed and diverged over time. However, there is little evi-

The Intrinsic Value of Friendship

VS 23 asserts that every friendship is choiceworthy in itself (πᾶσα φιλία δι' ἑαυτὴν αἱρετή· ἀρχὴν δὲ εἴληφεν ἀπὸ τῆς ὠφελείας). Both Mitsis 1988, 104 and Annas 1993, 237 claim that VS 23 provides strong evidence for the view that, for Epicurus, friends exhibit altruistic concern for one another: they will and should be intrinsically motivated by considerations of others—e.g., of their well-being or good.[16] But as O'Connor 1989, 185 and O'Keefe 2001a, 279 point out, the doctrine actually states that *friendships*, not *friends*, are choiceworthy in themselves. The two claims do not amount to the same thing: 'one can value the relationship with one's friend for its own sake…without thereby having a disinterested concern *for the good of one's friend*' (O'Keefe 2001, 279, emphasis in the original).

One reading of VS 23, then, is that Epicurean sages should desire to form and maintain friendships not just for their extrinsic properties but for some intrinsic property or properties of the relationship itself. I think this idea can be vindicated within the framework of Epicurean ethics. My strategy depends upon the claim put forward in section 1. There I argued, drawing principally on Epicurus's discussion at VS 39, that the sage's confidence that friends will provide for her is an essential component of, and partly defines, friendship. I defined confidence as true, justified, and appropriate expectations that the friend will help across a range of actual or possible scenarios in which the sage is in need. Evans 2004, 218 says that confidence 'is itself a mental pleasure *qua* lack of worry about the catastrophic pains that one's friends can reasonably prevent'. If this is the case, then in choosing to form a friendship, one is also choosing to have a true justified confidence in the help of one's friend, and this confidence, *qua* a part of *ataraxia*, is worth choosing for its own sake. Therefore, friendship as confidence is choiceworthy for its own sake.

I will consider two objections to this claim. First, it might be thought that the evidence for confidence being a *defining feature* of friendship for Epicurus is rather thin. As we saw, VS 39 states that one who is always looking for help is not a friend, but neither is someone who never associates friendship and help. I take this to mean that someone who does not have properly calibrated expectations of help from another fails to qualify as a friend; hence, friendship is partly

---

dence to suggest that Epicurus himself put any emphasis on the notion of identification and the pleasures of helping others. The point might be put this way. There are two ways to deal with free riding problems in the Garden: either extend the scope of self-concern or pare back the sorts of desires that bring people into conflict in communities. I believe that Epicurus *could* rely on either strategy, but likely did rely on the second, since his wider philosophical project already involved the drastic simplification of the sage's desire set.

[16] In making their case for the Epicurean commitment to altruism, Mitsis and Annas lean even more heavily on Cicero's discussion of Epicureanism in DF i, particularly at i 66-70. For my purposes I will pass over this discussion since it involves a later interpretation of Epicurean teaching that quite possibly incorporates doctrinal innovations introduced in response to criticisms from other philosophical schools. For my purposes it is not important whether such motivation qualifies as genuinely altruistic, although for discussion see O'Keefe 2001, 270.

defined by properly calibrated confidence. It might be objected at this point that not all criteria for judging whether a thing is an F are part of the definition of F-ness. A distinctive by-product of smelting is slag, so many archaeologists use the presence of slag at an archaeological site as decisive evidence for blacksmithing at that site (Fagan ed. 1996, 528). But no one would define smelting even partly as the production of slag. In a similar fashion, we might think of genuine friendship as productive of confidence. The idea might be that friendship is a mutual commitment to providing help, and this mutual commitment is sufficient for mutual confidence. On this reading, VS 39 says no more than that where there is no such confidence, or there is an improper degree of confidence, we can justifiably judge that the relationship is not properly characterized as a 'friendship'. But this does not mean that friendship is partly defined by confidence.

Given the paucity of evidence for many of Epicurus's claims, it is difficult to say with certainty that this is not what he meant. However, VS 39 is not the only place where Epicurus closely associates friendship and confidence. There is, for example, evidence that Epicurus thought confidence to be not only a by-product of the relationship, but an essential enabling condition for it. At KD 40, Epicurus says that 'those who had power to eliminate all fear of their neighbors lived together accordingly in the most pleasurable way, through having the firmest pledge of security; and after enjoying the fullest intimacy, they did not grieve over someone's untimely death as if it called for commiseration'. There is good reason to believe that the 'most pleasurable' form of association here is friendship. First, Epicurus's claim that within these associations, the people did not grieve over someone's untimely death echoes Epicurus's injunction to feel for our dead friends 'not by mourning but by thinking of them' (VS 66). In addition, it appears that Lucretius is echoing KD 40 when he writes, 'neighbors began to form friendships, eager not to harm one another and not to be harmed' (DNR v 1013). The only difference between these passages is that Lucretius explicitly identifies the relationship between neighbors as *friendships*. If we accept that Epicurus is describing a form of friendship here, then we have some reason to conclude that the 'by-product' picture of confidence does not fully capture its role in Epicurus's theory of friendship. Instead, these passages suggest that confidence is an essential enabling condition for friendship as well as one of its most important fruits.[17] Combining these points with the absence of evidence for there being any other feature that Epicurus thought distinctive of friendship, we are warranted in tentatively concluding that friendship partly consists in confidence in a friend's help.

Another objection focuses not on the relationship between friendship and confidence, but on the relationship between confidence and *ataraxia*. On the view of O'Keefe 2001, 286, confidence in one's friends grounds, but cannot be identified with, absence of mental disturbance. He points out that Epicurus typically claims having correct beliefs about the workings of the world are the grounds for one's

---

[17] KD 40 and the Lucretius passage also suggest that Epicurus may have believed friendship is possible outside of the Garden. I suspect he did not, but I will not pursue that question here.

tranquility (KD 11-13). If confidence is cashed out as having correct beliefs about the help one will receive from one's friends, then it follows by parity of reasoning that confidence is the grounds of, but not identical to, *ataraxia.* The problem is that this grounding relation seems insufficient to support claims about friendship's *intrinsic* value.[18] This objection is compelling, and to address it adequately would require an extended discussion of Epicurus's theory of pleasure. I cannot hope to do justice to the complexities of his position here, so in what follows I merely offer a sketch of a possible response.

We should begin by distinguishing between two possible accounts of pleasure.[19] On one common view, notably articulated by some 19th century British empiricists, pleasure is a particular kind of private feeling verifiable through introspection. Most importantly for our discussion, on this view pleasure is essentially subjective and separable from its sources; it is a feeling over and above the activities or processes that give rise to it. On a second view, pleasure is understood not as an immediately felt quality but as the realization of some perceived good or the satisfaction of a desire. On this 'dispositional' view, pleasure is 'some further description of the manner in which someone realizes a perceived good, engages in an activity, or perhaps attends to that activity' (Mitsis 1988, 21); for example, on some dispositional views pleasure is the *attainment* of what seems good to the agent.

Mitsis convincingly argues that Epicurus's varied pronouncements on the nature of pleasure are consistent with a dispositional view—albeit a version of this view with which many contemporary dispositionalists would disagree.[20] On Epicurus's view, *katastematic* pleasure is the state of having one's natural and necessary desires satisfied and of having confidence that they will be satisfied (VS 33). Moreover, for Epicurus, the formal conditions on *eudaimonia*—in particular, the requirements that happiness be self-sufficient and complete—dictate that *katastematic* pleasure is not a momentary episode of satisfaction, but a stable, persisting condition. Hence, sages will rationally form second-order desires toward their future desire satisfaction: they should care about future pleasures and pains. There are many problems with Epicurus's fully articulated view—again, Mitsis 1988 offers an excellent overview—but for our purposes these central claims suffice. Now, vindicating a partial identification of present *ataraxia* with present confidence about friends' help requires pinpointing some natural and necessary desire whose satisfaction is conceptually connected to confidence.

It might be objected at this point that we can partly avoid the difficulties of relating confidence to desire by positing some natural and necessary desire for

[18] O'Keefe 2001, 285-286 also points out that confidence cannot be all there is to *ataraxia*, since the latter depends not merely upon confidence in one's friends but also having other beliefs (e.g., about god and the afterlife) that make the sage trust that the future holds nothing to fear. This subtle point does not affect my main claim that confidence just is a part—but necessarily the whole—of *ataraxia*.

[19] For a fuller discussion of these alternatives, see Mitsis 1988, ch. 1. I am greatly indebted to Mitsis's discussion in what follows.

[20] For discussion, see Purinton 1993, Mitsis 1988, ch.1, Rist 1972 ch. 6.

friendship itself.[21] On this view, the desire for friendship is on a par with hunger and thirst. O'Keefe 2001, 280-284 presents a formidable series of objections to this view. Most importantly, since Epicureans believe that all mental pleasures depend on bodily pleasures (DF i 55), they would resist positing a natural and necessary desire for friendship, rather than for the bodily pleasures friendship provides. Indeed, all of the other natural and necessary desires Epicurus lists are desires whose objects are physical and whose satisfaction consists in the first instance in the restoration of one's bodily constitution to some state of equilibrium. Since I agree with O'Keefe on this, I have nothing to add to his objections here. However, the point that for Epicureans mental pleasures depend on physical pleasures sets an important condition on the adequacy of my solution to the problem of relating desire and confidence. With this in mind, it is important to emphasize that the dependence of mental pleasure on bodily pleasure (and similarly for pain) does not entail that we must be occurrently experiencing bodily pleasure in order to be experiencing mental pleasure.

I propose two claims. First, we have a natural and necessary desire for security: that is, we have a natural and necessary desire that our first-order desires in the future will be satisfied and not frustrated. This desire is satisfied if and because we believe that our future first-order desires will be satisfied. The KD 40, KD 8, and KD 7 passages that I examined above seem to provide some support for this claim. As we saw, Epicurus there seems to assume that even non-sages—those who are interested in indiscriminately maximizing future satisfactions or in acquiring wealth and power—are concerned about future desire satisfaction. The disagreement with Epicurus is about how to best achieve this end. This suggests that Epicurus assumed a widespread agreement about the importance of caring about our future selves. Moreover, as we have seen, Epicurus wants to vindicate the rationality of such caring, since he thinks that the Epicurean sage will be concerned about his future states. Epicurus tends to believe that any desire whose satisfaction is rational is natural and necessary.

The second move is to see confidence as, at least partly, a description of the state of satisfaction of this second-order desire. This requires a modification of my original definition of confidence. On the revised view, confidence is a complex state composed not merely of true justified expectations (beliefs) about friends' help but also of *katastematic* pleasure. This is consistent with Epicurus's dispositionalist view about pleasure, which sees pleasure as a description of an agential state or process with respect to some good. On this view, confidence is a state of satisfaction with respect to the desire for security. This account would grant O'Keefe's point that expectations about friend's help grounds pleasure. However, the account insists that confidence does not consist in these expectations alone. Rather, confidence encompasses both the expectations and the pleasure. Furthermore, the account meets the condition of adequacy that relates mental pleasures to bodily pleasures: the satisfaction of a person's desire for security depends on expectations that future bodily needs will be met.

---

[21] For similar proposals see Long and Sedley 1987, 137 and Rist 1972, 131.

There is no textual evidence that Epicurus thought of confidence in this way, but I do think that it is a plausible way of distinguishing between mere belief and confidence. There are surely many different kinds of confidence. I can be confident, for example, that it will snow tomorrow; that the horse I bet on will win the race; that my loved ones will be safe from harm; and that my friends will help me. All of these states seem to involve some belief about the future, but some of them also involve affective states in virtue of which it seems more appropriate to describe them as states of confidence rather than belief or conviction. If Epicurus can plausibly think of friendship as characterized by confidence and of confidence partly as a state of satisfaction of our desire for security, then he can vindicate his claim that friendship is intrinsically valuable. For in choosing to form a friendship, we are 'choosing' a state of satisfaction with respect to a natural and necessary desire, and this is just what *katastematic* pleasure is for Epicurus.

Conclusion

I have argued that Epicurean friendship can be understood as a crucial component of mental and physical tranquility in the Epicurean Garden. Within that context, the problems that seem to arise for an ethical theory committed both to hedonistic egoism and friendship can be adequately addressed. Epicurus's theory is not defeated by free-rider problems. Further, even the apparent incompatibility between his egostic hedonism and his endorsement of friendship as an intrinsic good in VS 23 can be reconciled if we understand confidence as a complex state composed of both beliefs and pleasure.

Department of Philosophy
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame IN 46556

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annas, J. 1993. *The Morality of Happiness.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Armstrong, J. 1997. 'Epicurean Justice' *Phronesis* 42: 324-334.

Evans, Matthew. 2004. 'Can Epicureans Be Friends?' *Ancient Philosophy* 24: 407-424.

Fagan, Brian M. ed. 1996. *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Konstan, D. 1997. *Friendship in the Classical World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Long, A.A. 1986. 'Pleasure and Social Utility—The Virtues of Being Epicurean' 283-324 in H. Flashar and O. Gigon edd. 1986. *Aspects de la Philosophie Hellenistique.* Genena: Fondation Hardt.

Long, A.A., and D.N. Sedley 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers. Volume 1: Translations of the Principle Sources, with Philosophical Commentary.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mitsis, Phillip. 1988. *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Nussbaum, Martha. 'Therapeutic Arguments: Epicurus and Aristotle' 31-74 in M. Schofield and G. Striker edd. 1986. *The Norms of Nature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Connor, D. 1989. 'The Invulnerable Pleasures of Epicurean Friendship' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30: 165-186.

O'Keefe, T. 2001. 'Is Epicurean Friendship Altruistic?' *Apeiron* 34: 269-304.

Purinton, J. 1993. 'Epicurus on the Telos' *Phronesis* 38: 281-320.
Rist, J. 1972. *Epicurus: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.