"The Good" Grief: Pity and Self-Sacrifice in Epicureanism

How should an Epicurean behave? The extant literature glorifies the ideal disciple as one undisturbed by false realities and by concerns irrelevant to their own well-being. The image of an enlightened Epicurean is likened to a hero who has surmounted the illusory deceptions of the universe girded only by rationality and armed with the scientific knowledge procured by their divine leader - like Hercules or other classical heroes, the Epicurean achieves this feat alone through their own wits and a tool forged by a god. Epicurus' own withdrawal from society would seem like further evidence for isolation, yet his retreat was accompanied by friends. This tension between self-sufficiency and friendship is recognized by Epicurus in a lost letter mentioned by Seneca in which he argues that we are naturally inclined to form friendships (Seneca, *Epistulae* 9.1). What has not been addressed by Epicurus, however, is whether an Epicurean should extend their concern outside their social group. In other words, is there any compulsion to help those one does not know?

Surely based on the lives of the most prominent Epicureans there exists such a compulsion. Epicurus himself developed a philosophy for others to achieve happiness and Lucretius as well spent sleepless nights adapting this philosophy for a Roman audience. These are not the actions of local sages working in remote communities, but of philosophers wishing to engage in contemporary debate and spread their wisdom beyond their immediate environment. By operating extensively outside of their social network, both undertake the burdens of others who could never repay them. By doing so, the Epicurean benefactors sacrifice their *ataraxia* in order to help outsiders achieve their own. The motivation for these Epicureans to go beyond their own prescriptions, I argue, is pity. Similar to how the soul has a natural proclivity for

friendship, there is also a predilection for benevolence, specifically the strong caring for the weak with no expectation of a return.

The crux of this argument will be focused on the latter part of Book 5 of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* where he explains the beginning of civilization. Here, specifically *ll.* 1011-1023, Lucretius designates the nuclear family as the foundational social unit for civilization and pity as its driving force. Having been enraptured by their wives and children as well as having recognized their loved ones' impotency in the current configuration of cohabitation, men began to create social contracts with their neighbors. In human history thus far, there has been a notable lack of aggression among the pre-civilized humans, their pact, however, urges *nec laedere nec violari* (5.1020) "neither to harm nor to be harmed." The wording of the original pact as well as the lack of prehistorical abuse among men leads me to think that the men did not have a concrete reason to fear each other, but out of deep affection for their loved ones, developed anxiety from a natural proclivity to protect who cannot fend for themselves. Hence an in Epicurean conception of the world, those stronger are propelled by an innate idea to help the weak and this reflex to pity establishes society.

I then will relate this argument to the large role of pity in *De Rerum Natura,* and in a broader scope, Epicureanism as Lucretius often fashions the reader or non-realized Epicureans as children, and Epicurus and himself into paternal-type roles. Like the pre-civilized men, Epicurus and Lucretius are not only self-sustained, but also take pains to assist those unable to care for themselves. Due to their ability to take on more cares and a distaste in seeing others suffer, Epicurus and Lucretius sacrifice their own continuous enjoyment of *ataraxia* to help others. With this in mind, I propose the following schema of accomplished Epicureans: the good Epicurean and the Good Epicurean. The good Epicurean would be a faithful follower of the

teachings, who thrives within their small group of friends and, most importantly, has reached *ataraxia* whereas the Good Epicurean would be a teacher trying to convert others. Although the Good Epicurean has reached *ataraxia,* they choose to step out of their own bliss due to a sense of pity and subsume the cares of others without expecting a return. The Good Epicurean defies Epicurean tradition in a similar way any Epicurean friendship does (for both increase one's worry), but both also arise from an innate feeling in the soul that compels one to care for others. This schema does not entail a hierarchical difference between the two. The good Epicurean is not a miserly scrooge of happiness and the Good Epicurean is not a rebellious saint. Instead, the goal of this framework is to consolidate the behavior of those benevolent Epicureans within the philosophy as well as analyze the function of pity in Epicureanism.