

“What’s Love Got to Do with It? Epicureanism and Friends with Benefits”

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The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and his followers believed that the good, the ultimate goal of all our actions, is pleasure. By nature all animals pursue pleasure and avoid pain and behave appropriately in doing so. Since human beings are animals too, and particularly intelligent ones at that, the good life for human beings is, the Epicureans argued, the pleasant life. This conception of the good life has an obvious appeal, and not only to college students. But the best strategy for achieving this pleasant life may not be quite so obvious. It may seem safe to suppose that Epicureans would consider all kinds of gratification to be worth pursuing. But in fact they rejected the idea that all pleasures should be sought equally. Epicurus writes: “No pleasure is a bad thing in itself. But the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasures.”¹ Epicurus and his followers also rejected the common opinion that the more pleasant something is, the more vigorously one should go for it. The Epicureans believed that the best kind of pleasure is the purest kind, and the purest kind results in no pain at all. They argued that happiness consists in freedom from pain, and in particular from pain caused by unfulfilled desires. Consequently, it is wise to understand the nature of different kinds of desires in order to lead a happy life. Epicurean ethical philosophy provides a conceptual framework that enables us to easily fulfill those desires that need to

¹ *Principal Doctrine VIII* in Brad Inwood & L. P. Gerson (eds.), *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), p. 32.

be fulfilled and to avoid pursuing or to eliminate altogether those desires that are difficult or impossible to fulfill respectively.

The Epicureans distinguished between two kinds of pain which our natural powers of reason can remove: physical pain and mental distress. Physical pains afflict us only in the present. Mental distress includes unpleasant memories, regrets about the past, present fears, and worries about the future. Since the scope of past and anticipated future pains is much broader than present pangs, which are ever transient, the Epicureans believed that generally mental suffering threatens a pleasant life much more than physical pains do. Physical pains, they argued, tend to be either mild (and so easy to bear) if they are chronic, or relatively short if they are intense. Mental distress includes all kinds of emotional upset and perturbation, including fear, frustration, anxiety, and grief. So the Epicureans offered a set of principles from which they derived arguments designed as therapy for the mental afflictions which ruin peace of mind and painless living. To rid oneself of all those desires which disrupt mental tranquility is to attain *ataraxia*, the ideal state of 'imperturbability.' The fear of death—fear of a future harm—the Epicureans considered to be the greatest obstacle to this life of imperturbability. So the Epicureans developed strategies for eliminating false beliefs that occasion worries about the future and for dispelling false beliefs that generate painful thoughts about the past.

If pleasure results from getting what you want and pain results from failing to get what you want, then two basic strategies suggest themselves for dealing with any desire that arises. You can try to satisfy the desire or you can work to get rid of it. If a certain kind of desire cannot be eliminated because it arises from the natural constitution of human beings, then that desire counts as 'natural' for the Epicureans. Natural desires

may be either 'natural and necessary' or 'natural but non-necessary.' Of natural and necessary desires some are necessary for life itself, some for freeing the body from troubles, and some for happiness. When one is hungry or thirsty, it is because one's body lacks food or drink necessary for its healthy operation. All animals require food and water. Consequently, desires to eat and to drink are natural and necessary for life itself. Eating eliminates the lack of food, thereby removing the pain of hunger and satisfying the desire to eat. Eating thus has a natural limit. Drinking water eliminates the lack that is dehydration, thereby removing the pain of thirst and satisfying the desire to drink. Drinking too has a natural limit. Similarly, wearing clothing and inhabiting shelter to protect oneself from the elements satisfy desires natural and necessary for freeing the body from troubles. But so long as one's clothing and shelter remove the 'troubles' of being too hot, too cold, or too wet, these desires are satisfied, since they too have a natural limit.²

Now the ordinary college undergraduate won't worry much (or at all) about suffering from lacking the clothing, shelter, food, and drink needed to survive. Yet she may still have a host of concerns about certain *kinds* of food, certain *kinds* of drink, certain *kinds* of clothing, and various kinds of fun possessions and means of entertainment. Moreover, the ordinary college student is likely to have concerns about grades, papers, lab reports, tuition, scholarships, loans, part-time jobs, deciding on a major, post-graduate plans, roommates, friends, peers, sororities or fraternities, drinking alcohol and how to behave at parties, and whether, when, and with whom to engage in

² *Vatican Saying XXXIII* reads: "The voice of the flesh bids us escape from hunger, thirst, and cold; for he who is free of these and expects to remain so might vie in happiness even with Zeus" in R. M. Geer (ed.), *Epicurus, Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 68.

sexual activity of one kind or another. This swarm of concerns and associated desires can easily generate many serious worries and thereby threaten her tranquility.

Are all these desires on the same footing? The Epicureans hold that 'vain and empty' desires are not 'natural' desires because they do not arise from any depletion of the body and so have no natural limit. Consequently, desires for political power, fame, wealth, luxuries, jewelry, toys, works of art, and the like count as 'vain and empty' for the Epicureans. All too often the more of these things one gets, the more one wants. Consider an example. One's feet can only wear one pair of shoes at a time, so wanting to own many pairs of fashionable shoes is 'vain and empty,' from the Epicurean perspective. A pair of feet does not hunger for more than one pair of shoes to shelter them, yet one can be fooled by advertisers and fashionistas in our materialistic society into falsely believing that getting more shoes will make one happier. But in fact wanting more shoes than one's feet need endangers one's *ataraxia*. Fancy, trendy, expensive clothing keeps one's body no more comfortable than basic, cheap, readily available clothing. Jewelry, ipods, gaming stations, stereo systems, and plasma television sets provide neither calories nor nutrients for, and remove no pains from, the body. Therefore, desires for such things are neither natural nor necessary. Since inability to satisfy desires for these kinds of things frustrates and perturbs us, the Epicureans urge us to eliminate all such 'vain and empty' desires and limit ourselves entirely to natural desires and mostly to necessary desires.

To maximize our chances of achieving *ataraxia*, wouldn't the Epicureans advise us to limit our desires *entirely* to the natural and necessary ones? Here they make some modest room for natural but non-necessary desires. These include expensive, gourmet

foods and beverages: truffles, caviar, filet mignon, lobster, fine wines, elegant desserts, pricey chocolates, and the like. After all, champagne, espresso, and milkshakes fail to quench our thirst better than water. One can enjoy these delicacies if they happen to be available, since as food and drink they do remove the physical pains of hunger and thirst by replenishing the body.³ But to foster a habitual desire for extravagant viands so as to make one's happiness depend on getting them inevitably causes mental distress whenever such treats are unavailable. Consequently, harboring such a psychological dependency is wildly imprudent because it considerably and unnecessarily risks one's *ataraxia*. So the Epicureans recommend that we be very wise and cautious about our natural and non-necessary desires. The pleasures they afford are real, but they are necessary neither for our survival nor for our peace of mind. Being ever mindful of this reality enables us to be happy in both times of plenty and lean times. We must not allow occasional indulgence in a special treat to undermine our habituated satisfaction with simple food and drink. To believe that we ever *need* rich foods or costly beverages is to fall prey to delusion.

What about sex? The Epicureans considered sexual desire to belong in the class of natural but non-necessary desires. Sexual desires arise from the body (and its hormonal activity) and not from ungrounded opinion, so they are natural. But one can live serenely without satisfying sexual desires, the Epicureans believed, so they are not necessary. Orgasms are undeniably very pleasant, but one must be careful and selective about satisfying one's sexual desires in order to preserve one's *ataraxia*. Epicurus writes:

³ Epicurus says "we believe that... if we do not have a lot we can make do with few, being genuinely convinced that those who least need extravagance enjoy it most" *Letter to Menoeceus* 130, Inwood & Gerson, 30.

I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will provided only that you neither violate the laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbors, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by some one of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm.⁴

First, notice that Epicurus' friend's natural inclination toward sexual passion is *excessive*.

Passions are dangerous because of their extreme intensity, and this extremity usually creates trouble. Epicurus sarcastically encourages his friend to follow his excessive inclination only if in doing so he can avoid all troublesome consequences. One kind of trouble would be violating the law, since excessive sexual passion could lead one to commit adultery, incest, or other deviant, illegal acts. For college students date rape would be a crime of this kind. Another kind of trouble would involve disturbing well-established customs. This would be a serious matter, since such customs facilitate harmonious, cooperative, and pleasant social living. The pursuit of sexual passion could also result in harm to one's neighbor, either physical harm through a minor sexually transmitted disease, or emotional damage (often extramarital sex bruises people's feelings), or both, say through a serious STD or an unwanted pregnancy. Indulging excessive inclination to sexual passion could also result in injury to oneself. This could take the form of an STD, or emotional anguish when one is spurned or betrayed by one's lover, or physical injury at the hands of one's lover's jealous ex-lover, or even an assault by a lover one has jilted. Finally, Epicurus warns that excessive inclination to sexual passion could result in squandering your possessions and money in wooing the person(s) you lust after. Epicurus thinks it impossible to avoid every single one of these many possible harmful consequences. Sooner or later, at least one of these harms will afflict

⁴ *Vatican Saying LI*; Geer, 69–70.

the person who gives in to his excessive erotic inclination. When it does he will suffer unhappiness. Though the *desire* for sex in itself is natural, according to the Epicureans, sexual *passion* is fraught with many dangerous, harmful consequences. So not only is it not necessary to satisfy sexual passion to live a happy, untroubled, peaceful life, it is wiser still to *eliminate* this volatile, hazardous emotional disposition. Epicurus concludes that a person never gets any good from sexual passion, and is lucky not to receive harm from it.⁵ In short, sexual passion is of no benefit.

The masterful Roman poet Lucretius, inspired by the wisdom of Epicurus, elaborates on this topic in his magnificent poem *De Rerum Natura*. Having delivered a sweeping attack on the superstitious fear of death and the afterlife as the main enemy of rational living in the third book of this monumental work, in the fourth Lucretius continues to explore the inexhaustible human capacity for delusion by targeting what he takes to be the most debilitating of desires, sexual passion.⁶

Lucretius begins the finale of the fourth book with an account of how images received in dreams cause sleepers to groan, cry out, struggle, speak, and wet their bed clothes. Adolescent boys whose bodies are beginning to produce semen receive images of fair faces with beautiful complexions that trigger ejaculations in wet dreams. Lucretius describes how “the desire arises to emit the seed toward the object of our dire craving,”⁷ and “the body seeks the object that has wounded the mind with love.”⁸ So while sexual arousal and climax are harmless, pleasant biological events, Lucretius

⁵ For a defense of the traditional translation of this text against an alternative reading by Jeffrey Purinton, see Tad Brennan, “Epicurus on Sex, Marriage, and Children,” *Classical Philology* 91 (1996): 346–352.

⁶ My explication of Lucretius owes much to Robert D. Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura IV, 1030-1287* (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

⁷ Line 1048; M. F. Smith (ed.), Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 128. All subsequent quotations of Lucretius are from this edition.

⁸ Line 1049; 128.

considers love to be a wound injurious to the mind. He compares a body pierced by a weapon gushing blood in the direction from which the wound was inflicted to the man “wounded by the darts of Venus” moving toward the beautiful (male or female) body that fired those darts into him. Love is not a benign pleasure unmixed with pain but rather a laceration of the mind. Though love might seem sweet at first, it is in reality pernicious because even when your loved one is absent, images of her continue to invade your thoughts and her name rings incessantly in your ears. These relentless stimuli plague the mind with emotional turbulence, robbing it of its peace. They are so aggravating, so disruptive of mental calm that Lucretius urges the afflicted lover to shun these images and to abstain from all that feeds the affliction. The treatment he prescribes is drastic:

turn your attention elsewhere: you should ejaculate the accumulated fluid into any woman’s body rather than reserve it for a single lover who monopolizes you and thus involve yourself in inevitable anxiety and anguish. The fact is that feeding the ulcer increases its strength and renders it inveterate: day by day the frenzy grows and the misery is intensified, unless you obliterate the old wounds with new blows and heal them while still fresh by taking at random some random-roaming Venus, or unless you divert the motions of your mind into some other channel.⁹

Just as Epicurus believed that no good comes from sexual passion, Lucretius sees love as a psychological obsession that must not be fueled. Feeding the obsession makes it grow into a frenzied madness. Lucretius prescribes two possible cures for the lovesick lover: (1) to have intercourse with any woman *except* the object of his monomania, or (2) to think about something other than passionate love and sex.

Sexual activity with any partner satisfies the desire for orgasm, but sexual activity with the individual who inflames one’s erotic passion only serves to intensify that agitating, passionate love without extinguishing it or even diminishing it. By hooking up

⁹ Lines 1064–1073; 129.

with any random partner, Lucretius thinks the lovesick lover can divert his mind from its obsession and heal the old erotic wounds of that obsession with “new blows.”

Alternatively, the fixated lover can divert his mind from its obsession by simply thinking about any subject other than sex: watching sports, playing sports, walking in the park, manual labor, playing video games, listening to tame music, doing laundry, or — what should be a daily priority for college students — working on one of his classes. This second strategy seems quite sensible.

Regarding the first strategy, however, we may wonder how getting new wounds could help old ones heal. How can casual sex with ‘random-roaming’ partners quell an erotic obsession with one lover? Epicureans sharply distinguish the desire for physical gratification through orgasm from the passionate desire to fuse with one special mate. Since this fusion is both physically and psychologically impossible, such a desire is futile. The biological desire for orgasm is simple to satisfy and fully satisfiable since it has a natural limit. Any comely body can satisfy it equally well. But erotic obsession with a special individual stems from the groundless opinion that *only* one person is a satisfactory sex-partner. The problem is that this fixated passion cannot be satisfied by any sex act because it is a stubborn, disordered condition of the *mind*—a delusion—not an innocuous, transient impulse of the *body*. Psychological obsession cannot be healed by sex with that body which is the very object of the mind’s fixation. Sex satisfies the body and is a natural pleasure. Love crazes the mind and leads to heartache. So Lucretius thinks the lover’s impassioned mind can be distracted by means of physically gratifying sex with persons that do not make it lovesick. This prescription aims to disabuse the mind of a fantasy, namely, the false belief that sex with she who

monopolizes he who is love-crazed is a good thing because it heals the lovesickness and returns his mind to a calm, unfrustrated, happy state.

Indeed, Lucretius believes that sexual activity untainted by passionate love is free of painful consequences. “For it is undeniable that the pleasure of intercourse is purer for the healthy-minded than for the lovesick.”¹⁰ So when college students embroiled in passionate affairs suffer heartache, would an Epicurean advise them to hook up with one (or more) of their friends or mere acquaintances for casual, loveless sex? Isn’t this precisely a pitch for the convenience of no-strings-attached ‘friends with benefits’? Don’t Epicureans believe that Tina Turner’s 1984 single “What’s Love Got to Do with It” is right that loveless sex is far better than love, which is inevitably bittersweet and often sheer agony? As tempting as it is to interpret Lucretius to be recommending loveless sex with pals, I will argue that, from the Epicurean perspective, this is not, in fact, wise for most college students in most situations. Before making that argument, however, further study of the Lucretian pathology of erotic love is needed.

In contrast to the unpenalized sex of non-lovers, Lucretius describes how impassioned lovers rush and fumble in frenzied, clumsy lovemaking, uncertain of what to squeeze and roughly kiss first, often hurting each other, spurred by their erotic madness. Lovers vainly hope that the same body that enflamed their passion can also extinguish it, but the reverse happens. The more ardent sexplay they have, the more fiercely their hearts crave more. Food and drink replenish physiological voids in the body, so they easily sate our hunger and thirst. But the visual image of a beautiful face is an impalpable image, Lucretius explains, it fills no emptiness in the body and quenches no longing in the heart. Rather, “lovers are deluded by Venus with images: no matter how

¹⁰ Line 1075; 129.

intently they gaze at the beloved body, they cannot sate their eyes; nor can they remove anything from the velvety limbs that they explore with roving, uncertain hands.”¹¹ But their gazing and groping “is all in vain, since they cannot take away anything from their lover’s body or wholly penetrate it and merge into it.”¹² Even after their orgasms, the escape of the deranged lovers from their raging passion is all too brief.

Then the same madness returns, and they have another fit of frenzy: they seek to attain what they desire, but fail to find an effective antidote to their suffering: in such deep doubt do they pine away with an invisible wound.¹³

Sexual activity only satisfies sexual desire of the body. But passionate love is ‘an invisible wound’ because it is a gash in the mind for which there is no bodily remedy.

Many other ills multiply from love, according to Lucretius. Love consumes and exhausts the lover’s strength. His life is ruled by his beloved. Love makes him neglect his duties and ruins his reputation. Love gobbles away his wealth (echoing Epicurus here) as he buys for her lovely slippers, jewels, gowns, tiaras, imported cloaks, draperies, dainties, banquets, entertainments, drinks, perfumes, and flowers. Notice that with the exception of the fancy foods and drinks that count as objects of natural but non-necessary desires, all these other gifts fall squarely in the class of objects of vain and empty desires. Consequently, there is no natural limit for purchasing, owning, or wearing such superfluous items. They are entirely for show. Neither does gifting them promote the lover’s *ataraxia* in any way, nor does receiving them enhance his beloved’s *ataraxia* at all. They are not real benefits. In fact, showering the mistress who has mastered his heart with lavish gifts likely reveals rather than eases his feelings of doubt, regret, and insecurity.

¹¹ Lines 1101–1105; 130.

¹² Lines 1110–1111; 130.

¹³ Lines 1118–1121; 130.

Perhaps his conscience experiences a twinge of remorse at the thought of a life spent in sloth and squandered in debauchery; perhaps his mistress has thrown out an ambiguous word and left it embedded in his passionate heart, where it burns like living fire; or perhaps he fancies that her eyes are wandering too freely, or that she is ogling some other man, while he detects in her face the trace of a smile.¹⁴

Jealousies and anxieties like these undoubtedly flare up among college student couples too.

So if a college Joey O'Montague finds himself falling passionately in love with a Julie Capulet in his entomology class, what advice would Joey's Epicurean advisor give him? I suggest that Joey would be sternly cautioned against being seduced by the bewitching fairy tales of romance peddled relentlessly by Hollywood and the popular media. Joey ought to rein in his wild-running imagination from insidious fantasies about how he and Julie will crash together in ecstatic union, serenaded by a swooning soundtrack, to become the Brangelina of their campus, self-heroized in their omnipotent, triumphant love. Such is the stuff that dreams are made of — by the movie, television, and music industries that so reliably and so richly profit by perpetuating these delusions on celluloid and compact disks for our mass consumption. Commercialized, fairy tale romance is big business and a monstrous myth. Lucretius warns that images of idyllic, beatified, electrified, passionate love are ephemeral *images* — mirages — incapable of feeding our real, earthly, embodied human relationships but fully capable of poisoning them. Hollywood stars make horrible models for personal relationships among college students (or any other couples, for that matter). To fall prey to the delusion, the vaunted fantasy, that Julie will be for Joey O. what Angelina Jolie is (portrayed by Hollywood to be) for Brad

¹⁴ Lines 1135–1141; 130–131.

Pitt and vice versa is to bury what could be a healthy, pleasant relationship under an avalanche of utterly unrealistic and ultimately impossible expectations. She is no Aphrodite, even if she is a Homecoming Queen. He is no godlike superhunk, even if he is a Homecoming King.

Hollywood filmmakers and Madison Avenue magazine moguls have armies of make-up artists and post-production wizards to erase all blemishes and the tiniest of wrinkles from the complexions and sculpted bodies digitally perfected to bedazzle us. The media-bloated imagination of a college student can do as much for him when he finds a mortal to idolize and enshrine on his pedestal of love. The benighted, lovesick dreamer will be bitterly disappointed when the fantasy he has so zealously constructed of a perfect goddess is dissolved by the flaws and frailties of what was all along a mere mortal. This is why Lucretius thinks it is easier to avoid being ensnared by love than to free oneself from its nets once entangled. But he believes the dangers of love's mania can still be escaped unless you prevent yourself by deliberately overlooking

all the mental and physical imperfections of the woman for whom you yearn and long. For men who are blinded by passion generally do this and attribute to their mistresses virtues that in reality they do not possess. Thus we find women with numerous defects of body and behavior being fondly loved and held in high esteem.¹⁵

To the poor fool deranged by passion her swarthy skin is "honey-brown," if she is sloppy and smelly, to him she is "beauty unadorned," if she is gray-eyed (considered a defect by the ancients), to him she is "a little Athena," if she is wiry and woody, "a gazelle," if she's a dumpy dwarf, "one of the Graces, a charmer," if a giantess, "a marvel of majesty." If she stammers, she "has a lisp," if dumb,

¹⁵ Lines 1151–1156; 131.

she's "modest," if a chattering, spiteful spitfire, she's "a sparkler," if she's wasting away, she's "slender and willowy," if she's half-dead coughing, she's "delicate." The bulging and big-breasted is "Ceres suckling Iacchus," the snub-nosed is "a she-satyr," the thick-lipped is "kissy-faced."¹⁶ Lovesickness so distorts the lover's perception that his beloved's obvious flaws are hallucinated into traits so lovely that they approach godlike ideals. Love steals the lover away from reality, according to Lucretius.

Contemporary American culture offers different therapies for dissatisfaction with our looks. Today college students pay for tanning treatments and painful hair removal and bleaching procedures. If Julie C. had more to spend, would she buy Botox injections, skin bleaching, liposuction, or plastic surgeries to alter her breasts, tummy, nose, chin, eyes, and invest in whatever bodily "corrections" modern medicine sells? Ubiquitous stereotypes of "perfect" physical beauty, especially concerning body shape, brainwash many students into dangerous eating disorders and self-destructive behaviors, including smoking to control weight. Lucretius' message for us, I suggest, is that for our mental health, we *accept* our bodies and safeguard our physical health rather than worry about our looks.

What about Brangelina and other hyper-beautiful people? Lucretius insists that even if your beloved is totally gorgeous from head to toe, she isn't so special because (1) there are others like her, (2) you have lived without her until now, and (3) she behaves no better than an ugly woman. New beauties, supermodels too, crop up like weeds and you didn't (and don't) need any of them to live happily. Moreover,

¹⁶ Lines 1159–1169.

since supercouples divorce with the seasons (or faster), their outward beauty fails to reflect their inner characters. The Epicurean lesson is plain. Obsession with physical beauty is a pathological fixation with mere appearance, and such a psychological fixation is a debilitating disease. Planet Hollywood proclaims: 'image is everything.' Lucretius wants to dispel this delusion with the sober wake-up call: 'image is illusion.'

The many ills Lucretius has catalogued are experienced, he maintains, even in love that is steadfast and successful. But "when love is frustrated and unrequited, the miseries you can spot with your eyes shut are countless."¹⁷ For college students, emotionally inexperienced as they are and under considerable academic, social, and sometimes athletic pressures, these miseries can include depression, alcoholism and binge drinking, crippling driving accidents, drug use, eating disorders, attempted suicide, and suicide.¹⁸ These troubles ruin one's academic progress and worse. Therefore, the wisest Epicurean advice for Joey O. and Julie is for them to cool it, to stay focused on their studies, to prepare for and attend every class, to take notes attentively and participate in class, and to complete and turn in their assignments on time. They will be better off remaining study buddies, at least until the semester ends.

What if they really like each other a lot? The Epicureans considered desiring friends to be in the class of natural desires necessary for happiness. Friendship is hugely

¹⁷ Lines 1142–1144; 131.

¹⁸ For a physically healthy young adult to kill himself out of depression or despair would be unwise and unwarranted, according to Epicurus: "But the many... sometimes choose [death] as a relief from the bad things in life. But the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him..." *Letter to Menoeceus* 125–126, Inwood & Gerson, 29; "He is utterly small-minded for whom there are many plausible reasons for committing suicide" *Vatican Saying* XXXVIII, Inwood & Gerson, 38.

important for achieving *ataraxia*. Epicurus beams about it: “Friendship dances through the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.”¹⁹ But friends are not just for happy times. When college students are distraught, to whom do they turn? When they need a sympathetic ear or a shoulder to lean, on whom do they rely? When they are in conflict with their parents or siblings or bosses or co-workers, who provides emotional support? Amid romantic disasters so devastating that they may even consider suicide, who is there to help them regain perspective? Their friends, naturally. “Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one’s whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship.”²⁰

Desires to engage in sex with others are natural but not necessary for life, for freeing the body from troubles, or for happiness. Desires to have friends are natural and necessary for happiness. So I argue that the Epicureans would advise college students to avoid having sex with their friends in order to protect their friendships. Epicurus writes: “Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; but remember that what you now have was once among the things only hoped for.”²¹ As tempting as it may be to upgrade a friend to a ‘friend with benefits,’ friendships can be counted on to last much longer than either bouts of sexual passion or the flings which they punctuate. The conclusion of Book Four of *De Rerum Natura* seems to lend support to my argument. Lucretius explains that “a woman with little pretension to beauty” can, by what she does, by her obliging, gentle, and pleasing conduct, and by “the neatness of her person,” accustom a man to spend his life with her.²² He adds that “mere habit generates love.”²³

¹⁹ *Vatican Saying* LII; Geer, 70.

²⁰ *Principal Doctrine* XXVII, Inwood & Gerson, 34.

²¹ *Vatican Saying* XXXV; Geer, 68.

²² Lines 1277–1282; 134.

I understand this kind of love not to be the tumultuous, crazed love of sexual passion, but rather the painless, soothing, abiding love of a person. This suggests that personable, amiable conduct, consistently *friendly* behavior, can sometimes create the kind of love upon which a strong, lasting marriage is founded. The best lifelong companions more often emerge from a group of good friends than from the stage of a beauty pageant. Perhaps a key insight of Epicurean philosophy is that good friends are far more reliable, and so ultimately more desirable, than good sex. If so, the wise Epicurean chooses to populate his tranquil, happy life not with 'friends with benefits,' but with friends.²⁴ Friends *are* the real benefits.

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²³ Line 1283; 134.

²⁴ For an argument that the direct egoist hedonism of Epicureans is compatible with friendship, see Matthew Evans, "Can Epicureans Be Friends?" *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004): 407–424.

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