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## Self-sufficiency as a Product of Prudence

*The theme of the 6th Panhellenic Meeting of Epicureans was “Epicurean self-sufficiency in Greece of contemporary crisis”. On this occasion, Christos Yapjakis of the Athens Garden gave the following speech (English translation is his):*

I am very happy to be here with you in yet another meeting of Epicurean friends. In contemporary Greece the crisis theme prevails, involving a financial crisis but also a crisis of values, while extreme sentiments of anxiety, despair, anger and depression spread like fire in psychologically weak people. Nevertheless, contrary to widespread belief, the crisis is not contemporary but perpetual. Our life experiences a continuous series of summer, winter and spring seasons. In the sense of uncertainty and risk of losing our calm and happiness, there always used to be a crisis and there always will be one. Of course, it is insane to wait for the Universe to be perfect until we become happy ourselves. In difficult times, the Epicurean sage is armored with the virtue of self-sufficiency, because he/she knows that real goods are easily obtained if one has wisdom and faces one’s fears.

Our wise Master Epicurus wrote in his letter to Menoeceus: “We think that self-sufficiency is a great good, not in order that we might be contained always with few things, but so that if we do not have a lot we can be contained with few, being genuinely convinced that those who least need extravagance enjoy it most; and that everything natural is easy to obtain and whatever is groundless is hard to obtain”.

Of course, complete self-sufficiency does not exist for humans. Like any other living organism, a human has certain physical needs in order to survive. Therefore, self-sufficiency is like happiness. According to Epicurus, absolute self-sufficiency characterizes the immortal and blissful material gods who live in the intermundia (metakosmia) and their lost atoms are continuously substituted by others. Nevertheless, the Master gracefully says that “if one has a little water, a little bread and a few friends one may antagonize Zeus in happiness”. Elsewhere, the Master says that “self-sufficiency is the greatest wealth of all” and “the greatest fruit of self-sufficiency is freedom”. And elsewhere: “when the wise man is brought face to face with the necessities of life, he knows how to give rather than receive; such a treasury of self-sufficiency has he found”.

These words were also transformed into deeds by the great Epicurus. His successor as head of the Garden Hermarchus testifies that “the life of Epicurus compared to the lives of other people could be considered a myth, due to his kindness and self-sufficiency”. In addition, Metrodorus, the other kathegetes of Garden and Epicurus’

most beloved friend, assures us that “a free life may not obtain great wealth, because this is not easy without servility to the crowd or the tyrants, but it gains everything in continuous abundance”.

For the Epicurean sage, self-sufficiency is a virtue produced by prudence and by understanding that “poor is not the one who possesses little but the one who desires more”, since “nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little”. According to the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus, the virtue of self-sufficiency is the opposite of greed. Like all vices, greed too has cognitive and affective characteristics that derive from empty, false and harmful beliefs. The viewpoint that external goods are more valuable than prudence, tranquility and friendship lead foolish and greedy people to insecurity, distress, misanthropy and misery. Greed, like any other auto-catastrophic and hetero-catastrophic vice, is characterized by irrationality, lack of self-awareness and damaging influence on social structure. While self-sufficiency coexists with prudence, bravery, justice and friendship, greed coexists with foolishness, cowardice, injustice and solitude.

As a conscious choice, true self-sufficiency may characterize only the prudent Epicurean, neither the extremely ascetic Cynic, nor the inhumanly apathetic Stoic. Self-sufficiency is not itself the goal, but only a means for happiness, and “anyone who does not reason out that there is a limit to parsimony is just as badly off as the one who goes wrong by having limitless desires”. In my opinion, one may not possess self-sufficiency if one has not fully understood and embraced Epicurean philosophy, even if one declares oneself friend of Epicurus, even if one attends meetings of “Gardens” just for pastime purposes but has not studied carefully Epicurean texts and continues to have empty beliefs from previous experiences. I think that the only way for someone to assist oneself in Greece of contemporary crisis, and also to assist others to stand on their own feet by illuminating them, is by fully embracing Epicurean philosophy that liberates the mind and leads to conscious self-sufficiency.

The self-sufficiency of the Epicurean sage is psychological, in the sense that it possesses intellectual and emotional characteristics. It is based on prudence and mental balance that are derived from scientific knowledge of Nature’s limits. It is supported by Canon, Physics, and Ethics of Epicurean philosophy. Understanding Epicurean Physics (and modern Science) presupposes the knowledge that all existing bodies are composed by eternal material atoms which perpetually generate transitory material compounds. The atoms of Epicurean Physics obviously correspond to unbreakable particles and not to the so called “atoms”, the compounds named by 19th century scientists that bear a false name as illustrated by the physical and logical paradox of “atom splitting” in the 20th century.

Understanding Epicurean Ethics presupposes the knowledge that static pleasure (lack of pain and anxiety), or happiness as we simply call it, is the prudent person’s purpose of life. Anyone who asks “and when we are happy, what next?” has not comprehended Epicurean philosophy.

Understanding the Epicurean Canon presupposes the inference of concrete conclusions after observation with human senses or the senses of scientific instruments. Anyone who strongly believes in unsubstantiated theories religious, political, athletic or any other kind has not perceived the scientific basis of Epicurean philosophy and is not able to really reach prudence and mental balance.

Furthermore, as a product of Epicurean sage’s personal virtue of prudence, self-sufficiency leads him/her to friendship, benevolent relationship with like-minded people and others, as well as to sincerity of intentions, words and actions. Epicurean friendship is not characterized by insecurity, irresponsibility, deceitfulness, lack of trust and pronouncement for set rules of typical conduct among pals.

Self-sufficiency is a mental state opposite of exaggeration. A recent study of American psychologists has shown that people that are happy with their lives tend to save more money than unhappy ones, since they do not feel the urge to indulge in shopping therapy.

Self-sufficiency does not only assist one to endure difficult times but also to enjoy what one has. According to Epicurean Saying 35 “one should not spoil what is present by desiring what is absent, but rather reason out that these things that we have were among those that we wished for in the past”.

The Epicurean sage feels self-sufficient, prudent and mentally stable. Can every one of us that claim to be friends of Epicurean philosophy feel that way? Or does everyone at least have the intention and the disposition to try? Since, according to Diogenes of Oenoanda, “the most important ingredient of happiness is disposition, the masters of which are we”.