

Toward A Better Understanding of Epicurean Justice And Injustice (With Examples of "Just" and "Unjust")

Post by "Cassius" of March 22, 2021 at 6:58 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I can't shake the idea that it has to be possible to determine if an action or law is just or not. Why else would Epicurus devote so many of the [Principal Doctrines](#) to justice?

Maybe we need to be very precise as to what it is that justice relates to. For example what does "courage" relate to? Will power? What does "temperance" relate to? Self-control? What does "wisdom" relate to? Practical application of knowledge?

In all of those areas, I think Epicurus is saying that the only test *in that area of human life* is whether it is the positive virtue, or the "un-" reverse of that virtue, is whether the particular display of that virtue in fact leads to pleasure, or in fact leads to something else, under the circumstances then and there existing. As a result it would never be possible to judge beforehand whether the action is wise, or just, or prudent, or whatever, until we know the result.

Perhaps the area of human life that "justice" relates to is simply "our relationship with other people" and the question involved is "does this or that relationship in fact lead to pleasure for each person concerned, or does it lead to pain for one of more of the people concerned?"

Is it possible that the question of just or unjust is as simple as that?

I don't think the question of whether a thing is wise, or courageous, or prudent/temperate has any other meaning --- citing Torquatus:

Quote

XVI. It remains to speak of Justice, to complete the list of the virtues; but this admits of practically the same treatment as the others. Wisdom, Temperance, and Courage I have shown to be so closely linked with Pleasure that they cannot possibly be severed or sundered from it. The same must be deemed to be the case with Justice. Not only does Justice never cause anyone harm, but on the contrary it always adds some benefit, partly owing to its essentially tranquilizing influence upon the mind, partly because of the hope that it warrants of a never-failing supply of the things that uncorrupted nature really needs. And just as Rashness, License, and Cowardice ever torment the mind, ever awakening trouble and discord, so Unrighteousness, when

firmly rooted in the heart, causes restlessness by the mere fact of its presence; and if once it has found expression in some deed of wickedness, however secret the act, yet it can never feel assured that it will always remain undetected.

The usual consequences of crime are, first suspicion, next gossip and rumor, then comes the accuser, then the judge; many wrongdoers have even turned evidence against themselves, as happened in your consulship. And even if any think themselves well fenced and fortified against detection by their fellow men, they still dread the eye of heaven, and fancy that the pangs of anxiety night and day gnawing at their hearts are sent by Providence to punish them. But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one's fellows?

Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, lust, gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more; inasmuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint rather than for reformation. Men of sound natures, therefore, are summoned by the voice of true reason to justice, equity, and honesty. For one without eloquence or resources dishonesty is not good policy, since it is difficult for such a man to succeed in his designs, or to make good his success when once achieved.

On the other hand, for the rich and clever generous conduct seems more in keeping, and liberality wins them affection and good will, the surest means to a life of peace; especially as there really is no motive for transgressing since the desires that spring from nature are easily gratified without doing any man wrong, while those that are imaginary ought to be resisted, for they set their affections upon nothing that is really wanted; while there is more loss inherent in Injustice itself than there is profit in the gains it brings.

Hence Justice also cannot correctly be said to be desirable in and for itself; it is so because it is so highly productive of gratification. For esteem and affection are gratifying, because they render life safer and fuller of pleasure. Hence we hold that Unrighteousness is to be avoided not simply on account of the disadvantages that result from being unrighteous, but even far more because when it dwells in a man's heart it never suffers him to breathe freely or know a moment's rest.

If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure.

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And of course all that is in context of how the subject was introduced:

Quote

Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science, but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure.

Now maybe there is a limit to the point that the action can only be judged in retrospect, in that given our experience in human nature, we can guesstimate based on past percentages that certain courses of action are more likely to lead to pleasure than others. But the point which proves the rule is still that the only reason we desire the quality is that it brings pleasure. We may not be able to apply the talent or quality perfectly, because we cannot predict the future and we cannot take all circumstances into account. But in fact in order to even come close to applying these qualities as one would want to apply them, one needs to take into account as much experience and as much information as one can possibly apply toward the subject. And all of those experiences and pieces of information were the result of their prior contexts and circumstances, so there was never any art of seeing through to the will or god or to anything absolute, but simply doing the best job we can possibly do to evaluate all the circumstances and calculate our actions based on them to lead to pleasure. And surely if we thought that there was any other goal (such as pursuing the virtue in and for itself) we would miss our ultimate goal because we took our eyes off of pleasure as the final goal.

Quote

22. We must consider both the real purpose, and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.

The apparent point of 22 being that we are considering the real purpose (pleasure) and all the evidence available to us (which does NOT include any objective definition of the virtues) if we are to avoid doubt and confusion and do our best under the circumstances with which we are faced.