

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

Post by "Don" of March 23, 2021 at 11:09 AM

If we're taking a deep dive into the meaning of justice and injustice in Epicurus's Philosophy, I'm going all in. Mostly for myself, but y'all are welcome to ride along. Let's hold our breath!

In trying to get a handle on what the last few [Principal Doctrines](#) mean, I'm looking next at 32:

Quote

Saint-Andre translation: With regard to those animals that do not have the power of making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed, there is neither justice nor injustice; similarly for those peoples who have neither the power nor the desire of making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed.

I'm using Saint-Andre's translation because I find it more literal than some of the others. Even so, it's helpful to parse the original text along with it.

Quote

32 Ὅσα τῶν ζῶων μὴ ἐδύνατο συνθήκας ποιεῖσθαι τὰς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν ἄλλα μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι, πρὸς ταῦτα οὐθὲν ἦν δίκαιον οὐδὲ ἄδικον· ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν ὅσα μὴ ἐδύνατο ἢ μὴ ἐβούλετο τὰς συνθήκας ποιεῖσθαι τὰς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι.

Here we find βλάπτειν and its forms again, so we're dealing with intention it seems. But who are these people (εθνῶν) referred to as

μὴ ἐδύνατο ἢ μὴ ἐβούλετο whose situation is similar to animals? They're not (μὴ) ἐδύνατο nor (μὴ) ἐβούλετο...

[ἐδύνατο](#) had to do with having power or the ability to do something.

[ἐβούλετο](#) had to do with making choices or preferences.

So these people (εθνῶν ethnōn, related to English ethnography, ethnicity) had no power and no ability to make choices. It sounds like Epicurus is referring to conquered peoples or those unwilling to choose to make agreements (enemies?).

My unease here stems from the fact that he seems to be equating the situation with these peoples with the situation with animals. We can't make agreements with animals, we can't

make agreements with these peoples, and so there's no justice nor injustice with relation to them.

Is he saying "don't worry about how you treat animals and people with whom you have no covenant"? There is no justice or injustice in these situations is what he's saying. Is this giving credence to "might makes right"? If so, I have some issues. Isn't part of the humanist - humanist not Epicureanism - philosophy that those weaker or less fortunate should be protected by and from those with more power?

Reactions?