

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

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2021 at 3:03 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

The powerful *should* protect the weak." There's no natural source for this. It simply derives from the humanist idealist perspective of the "intrinsic" value of human life.

The "intrinsic value of human life" has a very religious sound to it, doesn't it?

[Quote from Don](#)

I'm seeing the answer as "none" with the caveat that he also places great value on the life of the individual since this is the ONLY life you get... And we should strive to make it as pleasurable as possible.

That would be my conclusion too, with the emphasis being on the "intrinsic" part because nothing has "intrinsic" value except in relation to its use by a particular living being. As DeWitt says somewhere, only the living have need of morality or ethics (I need to find the particular quote so I don't mess it up, but it is part of DeWitt's conclusion that Epicurus held one's life to be one's greatest good, rather than pleasure, again with the issue being on the precise definition of the words involved, with pleasure being the goal but one's life being more like one's greatest "asset."

[Quote from Don](#)

On the other hand, this idea has been used to rationalize some heinous atrocities throughout history.

I think that this of course is what is said about "hedonism" in general, or the need for some kind of absolute morality in general, that if indeed no supernatural gods exist or no absolute morality exists, civil society is impossible. You recall what Diogenes of Oinoanda had to say about this, right?

Quote

[Fr. 20](#)

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before.

That not only [is our doctrine] helpful, [but also the opposite doctrine harmful, is clearly shown by] the [Stoics as they go astray. For they say in opposition to us] that the god both is maker of [the] world and takes providential care of it, providing for all things, including human beings. Well, in the first place, we come to this question: was it, may I ask, for his own sake that the god created the world [or for the sake of human beings? For it is obvious that it was from a wish to benefit either himself or human beings that he embarked on this] undertaking. For how could it have been otherwise, if nothing is produced without a cause and these things are produced by a god? Let us then examine this view and what Stoics mean. It was, they say, from a wish to have a city and fellow-citizens, just as if [he were an exile from a city, that] the god [created the world and human beings. However, this supposition, a concoction of empty talking, is] self-evidently a fable, composed to gain the attention of an audience, not a natural philosopher's argument searching for the truth and inferring from probabilities things not palpable to sense. Yet even if, in the belief that he was doing some good [to himself, the god] really [made the world and human beings],

Further ---

[Quote from Don](#)

What is an Epicurean response to these kinds of events - historically and contemporary?

Although one could easily argue that what Cassius Longinus was reacting to wasn't in the category of your examples, I don't think there is any philosophical difference between them, and we know what Cassius Longinus, Panza, and other Roman Epicureans did when they thought Caesar had stepped over the line. And of course in that context don't forget the very high-ranking-on-the list PD 6. "Whatever you can provide yourself with to secure protection from men is a natural good."

... as well as Torqatus examples of justifying all sorts of fighting in Epicurean terms, plus his: "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." ... in which "restraint" probably has a very extensive application, at least in my view.

So in summary I don't think an Epicurean has to yield to anyone else in terms of the ferocity of their willingness to defend, with force if necessary, their view of what they think is "right" (meaning in terms of pleasure, of course). An Epicurean would just be clear-sighted and not try to justify his or her actions on nonexistent supernatural gods or absolute moralities.