

Compassion in Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2022 at 9:21 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

So then I thought... Buddhism, which has been a long time influence in my life, has "suffering" as a seminal concept, as we all know. And would it be any surprise then that compassion is likewise a Buddhist primary motif, which it is, especially from the Dalai Lama and other Mahayana versions, but to greater or lesser extent it pops up in most of the strands of Buddhism. Suffering is also a big deal in Christianity. The passion of Christ, etc. Perhaps Epicureanism just didn't and doesn't have suffering as such a center piece. Although certainly aware of it and concerned to address what we generally find translated as "pain" in EP materials, is it not simply the case that Epicurus put the positive in front, not the negative? His focus was more on pleasure, not on escaping pain, right?

I agree with Don's "yes." I will also say that it is important to keep in mind that given the logical foundation of Epicurus, which characterizes the ONLY two guides given by Nature as pain and pleasure, the two terms at that "logical" level are largely interchangeable: Pursuing Pleasure IS Avoiding Pain, and vice versa. Those are the only two guides given by Nature, so if you are motivated by feeling, you are doing one or the other.

But having made that observation, I agree that it is critical to analyze which motivation is to be followed (1) at any particular moment, or for the long term, or for any span of time or (2) in terms of significance to the individual who is feeling the pleasure or pain.

Each person has the free will to decide which he is going to pursue, or whether to end his life and pursue neither.

I think it is clear from the shortness of life and many sayings that focus on pleasure and point away from suicide except in extreme circumstances that Epicurus held that Nature gave us Pleasure as the thing to pursue, and so while we are alive (and if we want to look at Nature as a mother) while we can follow Nature's guide and stay alive) our prime directive is to pursue pleasure, even at the cost of some amount of pain which we find to be worthwhile. If ANY amount of pain was deemed to be intolerable, the only way to implement that kind of philosophy would be suicide.

So whenever you're confronted with some basic unchallengeable observation like "some amount of pain is required to stay alive" then I think we have to assume that Epicurus understood that too and embraced it and worked with it, or else he would have explained why not. Instead, Epicurus was very clear that we sometimes in fact choose pain, so in my view that

eliminates the possibility that Epicurus was saying to avoid all pain at all cost.

I don't see that I clipped another quote to comment on, but I also agree with the implication of some of the above posts that worldviews that focus on suffering and the elimination of suffering are in fact depending on the continuation of suffering for their existence, and they have extremely severe foundational problems. Yes Epicurus focuses a lot on alleviation of suffering, but he does so in the context that the purpose of life is pleasure, and the two go hand in hand toward the goal of living a completely pleasurable life, which is in fact largely achievable by most people in most circumstances, and by all people to at least some degree,.

[Quote from Don](#)

I seem to remember reading somewhere (a while ago!) that the predominant ethos in ancient Greece was to do everything you could for your friends and associates and do everything you could to crush your enemies. The world was divided into friends/enemies.

"No better friend, no worse enemy" is the phrase that comes to my mind in this. I actually believe that Epicurus would and did endorse that, BUT with the caveat stated in [PD39](#) and implied in other places (the reason for this thread) that we do all we can to treat people as friends, or at least not as aliens, before we regretfully conclude that they are in the category of those who we exclude from our lives, or who are "enemies of Hellas," or who we decide are only fit for restraint rather than reformation, or we decide pursuant to [PD06](#) that there is essentially no limit to what we can and should do to protect ourselves from such people, or who according to Diogenes Laertius are "vile."

But to repeat for emphasis, I do think Epicurus held that there are essentially no "good" or "evil" people who are intrinsically evil, and that we can and should work to make everyone whom we can into a friend. All the while keeping a clear head that we are not always going to be successful, and that the safety and happiness of ourselves and our friends is sometimes going to require treating some people as enemies.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

You put your finger exactly on something that felt fishy about this subject. Compassion seems to be self-defeating as a virtue since it requires that others are in and remain in pain, which is not a state of affairs I prefer.

Perhaps love or benevolence is a better word to capture the proselytising spirit in the above quoted?

It seems more Epicurean in spirit to state the goal positively: there are many reasons to prefer people even outside my circle of friends to live according to nature and be free

of unnecessary suffering. Therefore adopting an attitude that helps bring this about is appropriate. This attitude is love (or benevolence).

Yes absolutely. The way this is worded reminds me of a topic I have always found interesting but not fully understood nearly as much as I would like. In my reading of Nietzsche I see that he took a strong position that "pity" (another word that we possibly ought to include in this analysis) is a very negative thing (it in fact "killed God" in his view). Further, Nietzsche or others (I can't recall) took the position that Aristotle held much the same view. If Aristotle held it, this attitude toward pity may well have deep roots in the Greek viewpoint. I don't think we should dismiss this out of hand as inconsistent with compassion, I frankly don't have a good grip on exactly what the reasoning is, and I think we ought to understand it explicitly before we dismiss it.

And to add to the complexity, I have a feeling this view of pity is related to the Greek view of "hope," which we know was among the "evils" (or sins or whatever) that had been confined into Pandora's box before she opened it and let the rest of the sins escape. Why was "hope" classified as a bad thing and in the box? Presumably that was due to a close parsing of the issues involved in "hope" and we probably ought to perform the same exercise as to "pity."

I think we already have discussed and probably established to the satisfaction of most that even compassion has a limit, in that if we allow ourselves to be immobilized by sorrow over the condition of those who are suffering, we would never take any steps toward the alleviation of those problems. So probably there is something related to that in the analysis of pity and hope.