

Would Epicurus Say That It Is Better to Suffer Harm Than to Harm?

Post by "Cassius" of September 21, 2022 at 9:32 AM

This question (or the evaluation of the "is it better to suffer harm than to harm?" question) came up in our 20th discussion last night.

Before going further I need to say that I intuitively think that Epicurus would NOT agree with the question/statement. With the usual caveats as to circumstances controlling, it is overbroad and therefore incorrect to think that as a general principle or rule of thumb it is better to suffer harm than to harm. However like many questions in justice (again apart from contextual issues) it's an interesting question to think about. Surely Epicurus would first say that it is better to do neither, but what happens when we find ourselves in a harm situation that we believe to be beyond our control, or "justified"? When we are harmed by someone, is it a safe general rule to say that it is better that we not reply or respond with force or harm of any kind?

We were talking about this in context of whether Epicurus would differ from Buddhism in this regard, and as usual we ran into the issue that Buddhism is hard to pin down on much of anything.

However I should have remembered to bring to the discussion [this better-known statement of the issue](#):

Quote

1 Corinthians 6:7 Context

⁴If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. ⁵I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? ⁶But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. ⁷**Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?** ⁸Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that *your* brethren. ⁹Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, ¹⁰Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

With this commentary by Wesley:

Wesley's Notes for 1 Corinthians 6:7

6:7 Indeed there is a fault, that ye quarrel with each other at all, whether ye go to law or no. Why do ye not rather suffer wrong - All men cannot or will not receive this saying. Many aim only at this, I will neither do wrong, nor suffer it. These are honest heathens, but no Christians.

Putting this issue in context of "turning the other cheek" and similar statements in the "New Testament" (this doesn't necessarily track at all with the "Old Testament") I would say it is pretty clear that a CHRISTIAN would answer the question "Is it better to suffer harm than to harm" with a "YES" -- and thus we have passivism etc of the pre-war "[Sergeant York](#)" model. Maybe in fact that is really the dominant / orthodox Christian position.

But I don't think it is the Epicurean position, and I would site such things as:

[PD06](#). Whatever you can provide yourself with to secure protection from men is a natural good.

[PD14](#). The most unalloyed source of protection from men, which is secured to some extent by a certain force of expulsion, is in fact the immunity which results from a quiet life, and retirement from the world.

[PD39](#). The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus.

[PD40](#). As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbors, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the most certain pledge of security, and, after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied.

Torquatus XVI, Cicero's On Ends Book One: "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."

Of course the big issue that arises in taking action that would end in harm to someone else is "justification." But that is where I would see "It is better to suffer harm than to harm" is overbroad -- I think Epicurus would look to the circumstances and evaluate whether "harming" the other person is (burglar, murderer, etc) is "justified" and consider that as part of evaluating whether to take pre-emptive or retributory action or not.

So I think Wesley is actually correct -- there is a significant distinction between a Christian and an Epicurean in this regard.

Thoughts?