

Contrasting Traditional Greek vs Platonic vs Epicurean Views of Justice

Post by “Little Rocker” of December 23, 2022 at 3:38 PM

Plato is a slippery bastard who says different things in different places, so it's always difficult to pin him down. In Plato's Apology, for example, Socrates definitely recognizes an obligation not to harm others, at least one's fellow citizens, but he grounds that obligation in *self-interested* reasons. Namely, if you make someone worse, then you are yourself more likely to suffer injustice as a result. So, if I make my neighbor a worse person, then I have reason to fear that they will harm me. That, in some sense, is a quasi-Epicurean argument. Whether that gives you a prudential reason to *improve* people for self-protection is less clear, but I can at least imagine some cases that might motivate an Epicurean to make an attempt at 'frank speech' to strengthen or restore a relationship. For the most part, though, I think people who significantly violate trust get exiled from an Epicurean community. But those are just idle musings.

In case you're curious, I've attached the relevant passage from Republic 1, which is a mess of an argument for a number of reasons. The upshot is that a person cannot make someone a worse person and call it justice.

To me the biggest difference between Epicurus and Plato on justice is that for Epicurus, we create justice through an agreement. For Epicurus, justice simply doesn't exist until we make it. For Plato, justice is something we discover--it exists prior to (and independent of) any experience or agreement. That's not to say that Epicurus does not build objective criteria into his conception--he has empirical mechanisms for critiquing agreements in terms of their ability to achieve security for members. The objectivity for Plato, by contrast, comes from an abstract perfection that exists independent of human agents.