

# SOE20 - On mutual advantage

Post by "Todd" of December 30, 2019 at 3:58 PM

Quote from Cassius

there IS NO Epicurean "Golden rule" that we must always treat others as we would want to be treated ourselves because each decision is going to be based on the circumstances of the individuals involved: there are...no across-the-board rules for which there is any authority to say that we should always follow them

This is true, but I think it is also possible to identify some rules (or rules-of-thumb) that are *almost always* useful to follow, in the sense that following them will tend to increase our pleasure. I assume that the identification of these kinds of rules is part of the aim of SoE. That seems like an undertaking that could be valuable to many people; however, it is important to keep any such rules(-of-thumb) in their proper context within Epicurean philosophy, to prevent them being elevated to the status of commandments.

Quote from Hiram

**SOE20: Human relations should be based on mutual benefit.**

The lack of any qualification here is troubling. However, if it is understood that our own pleasure is always the end of any such relations, then it seems compatible with Epicurean philosophy.

Except perhaps in the case of an extreme misanthrope, we are going to have to interact with others in the course of pursuing our own pleasure. If our interactions with others tend to cause pain for them, then they're likely to discontinue the interaction and/or avoid such interactions with us in the future. Since we were presumably seeking pleasure from the interaction, we must now consider ourselves worse off due to the interaction no longer taking place. Therefore, it is in our interest (it will increase our pleasure) if we can find a way to make the interaction pleasurable for the other person as well - i.e., mutually beneficial.

As long as this rule-of-thumb remains subordinate to the principle that our own pleasure is always the ultimate end, then it seems like a reasonable application of Epicurean philosophy.

However...

[Quote from Hiram](#)

Also, in [my piece for Partially Examined Life](#) on "Applying the Epicurean Theory of Justice to Cannabis Legalization", I use mutual advantage to translate an issue that seems abstract into concrete terms: there's the disadvantage for the state of not being able to tax the revenue from illicit cannabis sales, there's the disadvantage for thousands of youth and their families when they're incarcerated at high rates for victimless crimes related to cannabis use and sale, there's the advantage of the potential small businesses that may emerge if legalized, there's the advantages for the medical use of it, etc.

The rule-of-thumb seems to have been elevated to an absolute principle, and the rest of Epicurean philosophy temporarily set aside.

You seem to be putting yourself in the position of one of Plato's philosopher-kings, and saying, "If we do (or do not) force people to behave in a certain way, what will be the most beneficial outcome for society?"

You are presuming first, to know what others will find pleasant or painful. Then you are further presuming that you can predict, measure, and compare the resulting pleasures and pains for all the affected individuals, in order to arrive at a conclusion as to what is most beneficial for society. You will sacrifice the pleasure of some for the supposedly greater pleasure of others. By what standard will you judge?

Pleasure is entirely subjective, and is not reducible to any value that can be compared between individuals. (BTW, I dislike the expression "hedonic calculus" for this reason, as it implies that pleasure can be reduced to a number and used in mathematical equations.)

Your approach seems to me the very antithesis of Epicurean!

Unless, perhaps I misunderstand, and you are only saying that this is the policy that would bring YOU the most pleasure. In that case, I suppose you are acting consistently with Epicurean principles (although in contradiction to SOE20), and I would encourage the rest of your society to overthrow your tyrannical regime! 😊