

# Characteristics of the Wise Man, 1-9 Rough Draft of Outline

**Post by "Cassius" of June 1, 2020 at 8:56 AM**

Here is an example of the conflict, in a place I saw this morning where i will need to genericize the message so as to maintain confidentiality.

The context is that one of us (not me) pointed out to a new contact (not someone who posts here as far as I know) that there were significant differences between Epicurus and Benthamite utilitarianism.

The post from "our side" was responding to a positive comment about Bentham, and made the point:

*.... Bentham was not Epicurean-- Epicureans are most definitely not social utilitarians. The only reason we would want to "add to the sum total of human happiness" is if that was the most effective way to increase our individual pleasure. Personal pleasure always is central, which is the point I thought you were making on the post.*

Below is the reply from this new person, which I believe to be incorrect, but which states the problem clearly. I have highlighted and underlined (this was not in the original) the point being made, which is the point that I do not believe can be supported by Epicurean philosophy, and in fact made impossible by it. While we can and I would say SHOULD choose this course in many cases, there is nothing in the philosophy that calls for this kind of "natural rights" conclusion. What would be the source of such a "right"? Who or what would vindicate it?

We can choose such a system because it may in our context give us pleasure to participate in it and pain not to do so, but would anyone really advocate that ALL people deserve such respect in ALL situations? It's easy to think about examples of people who we believe we justifiably detest, and to whom we would not recognize in them a "right" for them to experience pleasure in ways with which we violently disagree. The ultimate insight of Epicurean cosmology is that the universe doesn't say who is right and wrong, and that if we expect 'our' view of pleasure and pain to be implemented it is entirely up to us to do so.

Here's the excerpt of this person's reply:

*"I don't think that Bentham is in conflict with classical Epicureanism on any of these questions, and I don't think his position is 'counter' to classical Epicureanism, but rather a development of it: an attempt to build a more universal system on solidly Epicurean foundations.*

*The problem with classical Epicureanism, and the one that Bentham sets out to solve, is what happens when one person's pleasure conflicts with another's.*

**The crucial and I think deeply ethical point is the egalitarianism in Bentham: the idea that MY pleasure should not take priority over YOURS, no matter who I am, what my status is, how rich I am, how intelligent I am, or whatever. Each individual has an equal right to have their happiness respected.**

*I think that there is an interesting distinction between a) taking responsibility for something, b) working towards something, and c) respecting the right to something.*

*A) I can only take responsibility for my own happiness. This is in fact a Stoic doctrine, other people's happiness is outside your control and you should not be suckered into trying to deliver it.*

~~I can work towards the happiness of those around me.~~ *I think we can all agree that this is a wise course of action as this happiness is reflected back. I think you agree on this.*

*C) I respect the equal right of other people to pursue their own happiness. (As you can see 'equal' means in society at large, not in my own personal priorities: there's a difference). In fact, your message above also agrees with this: when you say 'some will be counter-protesting for their own pleasure', and you don't condemn this action, you are in fact recognizing that equal right.*

*So given this a/b/c set of values, there is no conflict at all between Epicurus and Bentham: one is simply a rational extension of the other.*

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End of excerpt

This is the kind of issue we come back to again and again and again, and need to think clearly about so we understand the implications.