

SOE20 - On mutual advantage

Post by "Hiram" of December 30, 2019 at 10:21 AM

In reply to [Cassius](#) ' feedback:

Quote

SOE20: Human relations should be based on mutual benefit.

Objection to SOE20: This one pretty well sums up what I see as the major problem with the analysis behind most of the objections above, because it has "humanism" written all over it. Epicurus did not write in terms of "human relations" but in terms of humans pursuing pleasure individually and in groups. The last ten [PD10](#)'s make absolutely clear that while "justice" is an agreement not to harm or be harmed, it is also absolutely clear that there is no way to enumerate such agreements in absolute terms, and it is also clear that such agreements are to be broken immediately when they become disadvantageous to either party's pursuit of pleasurable living. The clear point of these final PD's is that 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 ideal virtues, no supernatural morals, no across-the-board rules for which there is any authority to say that we should always follow them. In this formulation, "mutual benefit" is not only hopelessly vague, but the "mutual" part has absolutely no foundation whatsoever and in fact the clear thrust of many other doctrines is the opposite. [PD10](#) emphasizes that depravity has no absolute definition; that everything must be judged by its result, and the only standard that nature has set is that we find pleasure desirable and pain undesirable. This is the same issue where Catherine Wilson is hopelessly off base when she injects her on social preferences into Epicurean philosophy. In referring to her I give her credit in the recent podcast interview that she admits that she is outside Epicurean orthodoxy in doing so, but the matter isn't just being "outside" orthodoxy -- it turns Epicurean philosophy on its head for ANYONE at ANY TIME to suggest that their own moral or ethical preferences are anything but personal to them.

This is a VERY important issue because this helps us to connect theory with practice, which is one of the purposes of the Tenets.

Mutual benefit is not "hopelessly vague". In fact, it made it to the last ten [Principal Doctrines](#), and we know from Epicurus' sermon "against empty words" that the founders were adamant about avoiding vagueness.

One of my main critiques in my review of [Wilson's last book](#) had to do with her lack of connecting policy that she calls for with mutual benefit. If she had discussed the advantages versus disadvantages for the people involved, then she would have been making a complete Epicurean case for her policy solutions. There's a whole section on mutual advantage in the book review. Here is the most relevant portion:

Quote

If Wilson had appealed to the sources while explaining the concepts of justice / morality, she would have encountered repeated references to “mutual advantage” and this would have added credibility and clarity to her arguments.

If she had relied, again, on the first principles (in this case, the last ten of the [Principal Doctrines](#)), her explanation of how Epicurean philosophy provides moral guidance would have been much more cogent and complete. The fact that [an area the size of Delaware has been declared unlivable](#) in Louisiana has economic effects, and the building of new dams there and in other coastal regions would result in the spending of billions of dollars that would have to come from the pockets of tax payers. The problems generated by climate change are not abstract. If they are discussed in concrete, measurable, observable terms as they are directly experienced, then the issues of mutual advantage and disadvantage may be addressed. This is how Epicurean morality works, and Wilson wasted an opportunity to encourage her readers to philosophize like Epicureans about these issues.

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.

Now, if someone is an armchair philosopher, this does not apply. But SoFE is meant to promote the teaching mission of the Epicurean gardens, and particularly encourages Epicurean content creators to create vlogs, essays and other content where they figure out ways to demonstrate that EP can be applied and give moral guidance in the modern world. So learning how to argue cases based on concrete instances of mutual advantage is essential for content creators who wish to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of EP.

For this reason, I wanted a Tenet focusing on mutual advantage.

Post by “Elayne” of December 30, 2019 at 11:28 AM

Hiram, Epicurus described subjective pleasure as the only way of knowing what is good, which means "advantage" can only be understood as meaning something that increases pleasure. No one would be confused reading his words in that full context. A condition can't be a benefit other than through pleasure, because there's no other measure of benefit.

For most of us, things like having nontoxic air and water increase pleasure more than causing pain, but it is against reality to say this could be absolute or universal, or that deciding to use hedonic calculus will in every case make people agree on specific environmental policies/goals or even find it wise to participate in politics or activism. That's idealism. We are not neurologically the same.

It's certainly reality-based to observe that combining efforts with those who agree on a policy is a way to increase one's pleasure, and I have done a lot of that. And it's reality to observe that within the same species, there is often a lot of overlap in what causes pleasure. But none of that overrides the direct feelings of pleasure for a specific individual.

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2019 at 1:07 PM

I think Elayne has the correct point here.

[Quote from Hiram](#)

Mutual benefit is not "hopelessly vague". In fact, it made it to the last ten [Principal Doctrines](#)

I do not see "mutual benefit" as written into the last ten [principal doctrines](#). The last ten essentially state that there is no such thing as absolute justice, which is Elayne's point. Now if the parties involved in a relationship agree to certain terms (not to harm or be harmed) then that is what we call "justice," but if the two parties end their agreement, for whatever reason, then there is no more justice. That's really all the last ten are saying, they are NOT saying that a particular set of facts constituting justice "is always good" or "injustice is always bad" any more than any other set of facts are laid out to be good or bad in the context of any other virtue.

The entire point of the virtue analysis is that there IS NO absolute virtue.

But Hiram you take from that starting point that you should endorse particular policy prescriptions that apply to everyone as something that would be endorsed in the name of

Epicurus???

I do not follow that analysis at all!

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! 😊

Post by "Hiram" of December 30, 2019 at 5:50 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But Hiram you take from that starting point that you should endorse particular policy prescriptions that apply to everyone as something that would be endorsed in the name of Epicurus???

I do not follow that analysis at all!

no but I think I addressed this elsewhere minutes ago, this is at the heart of your confusion with what I've been saying.

Pd 38-39 make this clear. Policies can be just, for a time and under certain conditions. These conditions involve mutual advantage for concrete people involved. Their "justness" should be articulated in those terms.

The immediate example that comes to mind is when Hermachus, who was a Scholarch, said that people should consume certain animals if they were too numerous in order to control the population. Here, policy is being called for based on advantage. Less competition for food between our species and theirs if the animals eat what we do, plus more food sources for those who consume those animals.

And so an Epicurean should feel free to call for policy based on advantage, and this has nothing to do with applying always and in every circumstance and for everyone; only for those involved, in the case of Hermachus, whoever inhabits a land overrun by too many rabbits eating their carrots, for instance.

Of course once the population is under control then this may no longer be just because of the disadvantage of letting them be extinct and never being able to enjoy rabbit again, and the disadvantages of their large numbers not existing anymore..

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2019 at 6:46 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

Of course once the population is under control then this may no longer be just because of the disadvantage of letting them be extinct and never being able to enjoy rabbit again, and the disadvantages of their large numbers not existing anymore..

I think we continue to disagree here. I personally have a lot of affection for all animals and I would have to be a vegetarian if it were up to me to kill my food. However I don't think that "justice" is involved here, and certainly not any kind of weighing "extinction" as some kind of

duty to nature or to rabbits in general. I definitely think that a strong case can be made for me and others like me who agree to band together to defend a population of animals to prevent them from going extinct, even at the cost of inflicting some pretty strong harm on the humans who disagreed. I think we see this kind of conflict going on now in parts of Africa in regard to animals such as elephants, but that's just one example of many and probably a poor illustration.

So I hold up my credentials on cruelty to animals against anyone, but I do not believe that there is any form of Epicurean "justice" involved in this, because Epicurus says that there is no such thing as absolute justice and the only kind that exists to even discuss is something that arises from agreement, and we have no such agreement with (most) animals.

As for that material on Hermarchus and vegetarianism, I also find that material difficult to trust and not nearly as clear as we would need in order to be confident of it.

So to repeat back the quote that I pasted above, I hear you talking about advantage in a way that sounds correct, but then you take that away with your conclusion that that "justice" is involved, because there was never any agreement with those rabbits in the first place.

Post by “Hiram” of December 31, 2019 at 10:16 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So to repeat back the quote that I pasted above, I hear you talking about advantage in a way that sounds correct, but then you take that away with your conclusion that that "justice" is involved, because there was never any agreement with those rabbits in the first place.

If the people in the community AGREE to protect a species, then this is their agreement and it's THEIR posited justice, not because they owe a duty to the rabbits but because they owe an agreement to each other. (I think a similar case is argued by [Lucretius when he discussed the origin of friendship](#), and he said that people agreed to not harm those weaker than themselves--what comes to mind is my autistic niece who is non-verbal, but elders in the community have agreed to protect her)

*Then, too, did neighbours 'gin to league as friends,
Eager to wrong no more or suffer wrong,*

And urged for children and the womankind

Mercy, of fathers, whilst with cries and gestures

They stammered hints how meet it was that all

Should have compassion on the weak.

So the source for Hermarchus is Porphyry

<http://societyofepicurus.com/hermarchus-on-...ent-of-animals/>

Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2019 at 11:07 AM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

If the people in the community AGREE to protect a species, then this is their agreement and it's THEIR posited justice, not because they owe a duty to the rabbits but because they owe an agreement to each other. (

OK then we may not be so far apart on this, but I think the issue here is that the Epicurean terminology of justice is so different from non-Epicurean usage, just like it is with "gods," that discussing "justice" without making the Epicurean context very clear ends up being more confusing than helpful.

Let's take the example you give, that a certain set of people agree among themselves to protect animals, and then presumably one person violates the agreement and kills a rabbit. In what sense does it help anything to describe the result as "unjust"? And I am not sure that Epicurus would describe that result as "unjust" either.

I think we have had this discussion before and I have the same issue. Is every breach of every agreement "unjust?" I don't think that is likely that Epicurus was suggesting that, at least not in any sense of the word "unjust" that is in common usage today. Would you suggest another definition of "unjust" that you think Epicurus would apply to that situation (of killing the rabbit despite the agreement not to)?

Post by “Elayne” of December 31, 2019 at 11:20 AM

I would say that an essential criterion for injustice is that it causes pain. I agree with Epicurus that you won't be having pleasure if behaving unjustly and vice versa. So if no pain happens, either from empathy or fear or reprisal, how can an action be unjust?

Those who had the action committed against them may still feel a sense of injustice through the prolepses, the intuitive pattern recognition of asymmetry. And that is how it is for them. There's no quality called justice inherent in the action. It's in the eye of the beholder.

Post by “Hiram” of December 31, 2019 at 11:30 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think we have had this discussion before and I have the same issue. Is every breach of every agreement "unjust?"...

hmmm I don't know if EVERY breach of an agreement is unjust, but PD 37 does not shy away from saying "**whatever in the needs of mutual association is attested to be useful, is thereby stamped as just**, whether or not it be the same for all". So the justness is tied to the utility in mutual association.

In the case of rabbits that overrun a field and eat the farmers' carrots, it's useful to kill them for the farmers (who get to keep, eat, and sell more carrots) and for the people who enjoy rotisserie rabbit. So here, the PD is saying positively that killing and eating the rabbits is "just" for as long as this utility persists ("for the time being, it was just", it says).

PD 38 also does not shy away from saying that, as per EP, there are laws that are NOT just when judged by their consequences. Presumably, what is being said here (to answer your question) is that "breaching that agreement" would be just, because the law is unjust?

The point, in the end, is that the original Epicureans DID pass moral judgment on laws and policies, and that they **appealed to the material utility and the observable consequences of the laws**. Notice this is consistent with how Epicurus says that we think empirically concerning the actions based on the results observed from any course of action ([On Nature, Book 18](#))

Quote

38. Where without any change in circumstances the conventional laws, when judged by their consequences, were seen not to correspond with the notion of justice, such laws were not really just....