

A thought on duty to the whole world, and why virtue must be an instrument to happiness.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 15, 2022 at 4:38 PM

NOTE: [Cassius](#) , please move the thread into the right sub-folder, as I wasn't really sure to where it really belonged. Maybe somewhere in the Ethics section- like in the "Virtue as instrument to happiness" section, or how to live as an Epicurean, but I'm not sure to where exactly.

So, a few weeks ago, I picked up "Strangers Drowning: Voyages to the Brink of Moral Extremity" by Larissa MacFarquhar, and it was the initiator for a lot of thoughts on duty and morality. In this book, the author describes the life of people dedicated themselves to linder the suffering of other people, unknown to them, e.g. people in Africa. Some of the protagonists outright sacrifice their lives and happiness in order to help these poor souls, other gain pleasure and happiness from these noble deeds. But one thing unites them all: they feel some sort of moral obligation, or even of guilt, that forces them to help. They see live as a constant stream of drowning children in Africa, or starved chicken in huge animal farms, and they dedicate the free moments of their lives in order to fight against that.

I think that at least for me personally, that simply isn't a prospect of a life I would like to live through. To help other people brings a sense of fulfillment and pleasure- that's why I want to become a psychotherapist-, but that does imply that there are three ways of looking at the problem of "strangers drowning":

- The first would be to see some sort of moral obligation, or a sense of duty, imposed by God or someone other. That would, as a consequence, mean that every second of your life where you aren't helping in the best possible way, is wasted. You eat too slowly? That's a shame, because you could work during these five minutes and earn 30 pennies, which in turn would allow to vaccinate a child in Africa and save his life from some tropical disease. That's the logical consequence if one says that there is a duty to help others. There isn't a boundary to where you should help, and from where on you should care for yourself- or well, I should better say: you should only care for yourself in the most basic sense, like food and a shelter, because anything else could be deducted to help victims of civil wars. You would live in a constant state of self-deprivation, and although you would in the end help a lot of people, you would sacrifice your own life for it. I don't necessarily want to say that you would sacrifice your pleasure- maybe you gain much more pleasure by sacrificing yourself than not-, but you surely will have missed out on a lot of pleasurable experiences, which require money. Like traveling. Or having a party. Or purchasing a nice candle for Christmas.

- Here, the Aristotelian might jump in and exclaim. "For that, you need moderation- because virtue is the middle of two excesses!" And I will even partly agree with him- moderation often brings a lot of pleasure. But a) where is the middle, and b) who says that such an abstract concept as "helping others" even has a middle? If there's a child drowning, you would jump right in and rescue him. There's no middle ground there. So why doesn't the same apply with strangers in Africa? Basically, the Aristotelian would be forced to debate abstract thoughts with abstract answers. Maybe he would answer that you have to donate a small part of your income, because you can thus keep harmony and balance. In that case, your happiness stands above your total duty to these people, and that smells a bit like Epicureanism. Or the Aristotelian would say that the duty in itself is "in moderation"; e.g., that your duty is to donate 50%, and no more. But then once again, why this number, and not another? Although this concept is a thought I will think though in the future- that duty in itself is "in moderation", this seems impractical. A soldier who says after a year of war that he has to go home because his duty is done would be killed for desertion. Thus, one can conclude that societal duties are without boundaries: you are a soldier for as long as necessary. But when the whole world is a battle field, because everywhere children are starving and adults dying from war, your whole life is a war. So one would once again arrive at the first conclusion.
- Thus, the only remaining consequence would be to reject the abstract concept of duty altogether. There is no such concept as duty, there is no such concept as a "moral law". I only donate money because it brings me pleasure. This thought in itself is really scary, and seems immoral, but so far, I think that it's the only possibility to keep a happy and balanced life without sacrificing yourself for virtue. I think that the Stoics are much better in that; they believe that virtue and duty is the highest good. And well, they may be good police officers and firemen and soldiers. But would I want to be a constant warrior, a constant warrior fulfilling his invisible moral duty, and sacrificing his life for that? Damn, no! This thought only works when you have a paradise which will reward you for your current struggles- but as soon as one rejects the thought of an after-life, the prospect of sacrificing yourself for some abstract moral law becomes way, way scarier than the previous immoral thought of "living your life happily and doing the thing which will bring YOU the most pleasure". Because let's be honest: it's really scary to think of your death as a moment where you realize that your life has been wasted.

So, TL;DR: virtue **has to be subordinate to pleasure**. Because in the other case, pleasure becomes irrelevant, happiness and fulfillment don't have any value, in short- your whole life is a simple service to duty, virtue, a higher moral cause. And, as noble as it may sound, in the end, it's a waste of your very limited time. I've only one responsibility- and this responsibility is for myself. I love to help other people, as it brings me joy and pleasure- but in the end, it's only a mean to attaining happiness. That doesn't mean that virtue is irrelevant to me- but I recognize that I've only ONE life, and that there won't be a God in the afterlife. Sadly 😞

Well, that was some time invested there. I hope that my thoughts are more or less clear; at least for me, it was very helpful to sort them. Maybe this can help some other drowning Internet stranger out there 😊

P.S.: Now I'm gonna delve into Aristotle, because the idea of a "limited duty", or of a duty "in moderation" still seems very interesting. Gonna update when there's something new 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2022 at 5:59 PM

Well presented Smoothiekiwi. Another two examples that I often think of are local animal shelters and nursing homes. It's not even necessary to think about Africa. All you have to do is think about the fact that all of us have local animal shelters or nursing homes where nice animals and people are suffering and would be happy to have any attention we would be willing to give them.

And the costs to us of doing so would be minimal.

But yet, for the most part, none of us donate a minute of our time or a cent of our money to help suffering people or animals "right down the street."

I am not saying that these decisions not to help are to be condemned or praised - bit the point before the house is that if you let yourself think of these things too much you could pretty much destroy your own mental health.

The point of my writing this is that it seems clear to me that we have to come to terms with how to analyze these issues, and Epicurus' worldview seems to me the best way to make sense of it all and actually apply a philosophically sound analysis to the problem.

Post by “Matt” of January 15, 2022 at 6:47 PM

And other than deliberate human actions that cause suffering such as terrorism and war ...the rest is literally nature doing what nature does. Flooding villages, toppling cities with earthquakes, ravaging with viruses, all totally random, no rhyme nor reason. Just the typical “behavior” of the universe. No moral discrimination on nature’ part, everyone and anyone can fall victim to any one of these events without prejudice. It’s all chance...and ultimately however much responsibility a person wants to feel for the suffering of others in the world is very, very subjective.

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2022 at 6:57 PM

It is difficult to even discuss these things but we have to confront them if we have any hope of being able to take a reasonable position and stick by it. It is probably safe to say that every normal person has a painful reaction to seeing others in pain, or even thinking about others in pain, but what we do with that ability to feel that pain has to be handled prudently. We can't collapse in despair at the pain of the human condition, and yet it's also pretty clear that we should not ignore it, because we often can't - the pain of others will often impact us even if we try to love in a cave.

The whole issue has to be handled intelligently based on "the way things are"

Post by “Matt” of January 15, 2022 at 7:22 PM

Related to the suffering of the world. It's one of the premises within Buddhism that I vehemently disagreed with...that life's constant is suffering which ultimately creates dissatisfaction, which dovetailed into the metaphysical premise that samsara (reincarnation) doesn't end until you get off the "wheel" of rebirth through various disciplines. I always felt super uncomfortable with these premises.0

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2022 at 10:56 PM

Yes that comes awfully close to the idea that "it would be better never have to have been born" which may be true in some terribly tragic situations but is not generally true.

Epicurus seems to have specifically denounced that idea in the letter to Menoecus (is that the way you interpret it [Don?](#)) and even if there is some ambiguity in the phrasing I certainly think he would if asked precisely.

Post by “Don” of January 15, 2022 at 11:20 PM

I never thought of the "breaking the cycle of samsara/rebirth" as akin to "better never to have been born" but I can see where that could be inferred.

Oh yeah, Epicurus was NOT cool with that sentiment! He hits this hard in 126-7:

Quote

So, the one who exhorts, on the one hand, for the one who is young to live nobly; and, on the other hand, the one who is old to come to an end nobly is a good-hearted simpleton not only because life is to be welcomed but also because the practice of living well, nobly, and beautifully and the practice of dying well, nobly, and beautifully are the same. But far worse is the one who says, on the one hand, it is well not to be born; or, on the other hand,

"failing this, to pass through the gates of Hades as soon as possible."

[127] On the one hand, if what they say is persuasive, how does one not depart from life? For this is readily at hand, if indeed one was to resolve oneself steadfastly to this. If, on the other hand, this is in jest, one is foolish for making fun of things which do not admit of this.

I always get a kick out of the fact that Epicurus is quoting Theognis's poem in that line before 127. It tickles me because Epicurus resolves the $\mu\epsilon\nu$ (on the one hand) in his own writing using the $\delta\epsilon$ (on the other hand) in Theognis's poem. That's some clever writing!

Sorry, went off on a little tangent there.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of January 16, 2022 at 3:45 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

that if you let yourself think of these things too much you could pretty much destroy your own mental health.

Yes, that's exactly my point. The only way to solve it would be to harden your mind, to sacrifice empathy for reason- one should only be compassionate, but not attached to the subject. To me, that really smells like Stoicism, the „destroying the mental health“ part included. But that's a discussion for another thread 😊

[Quote from Matt](#)

and ultimately however much responsibility a person wants to feel for the suffering of others in the world is very, very subjective.

Well yes, but then the issue of „when you would be in such a catastrophe, wouldn't you be happy to receive help?“- issue comes up. And probably exactly for that reason, Epicurus set autarchy in such a high position; that in order to apply this mindset, you must be prepared that no one from outside will donate to you when something happens. Your friends will help you... wow, that actually makes sense, and that's the way nature has been! We didn't run to some distant tribe when we saw a big flood there- instead, we stayed on our side of the river and helped our friends. But by replacing our natural built-in empathy for friends and people we see, with a reason-concluded compassion for distant victims, we essentially override our emotions with reason. Damn, the Stoics again- get out of this forum! You're not welcome here!

[Quote from Matt](#)

Related to the suffering of the world. It's one of the premises within Buddhism that I vehemently disagreed with...that life's constant is suffering which ultimately creates dissatisfaction, which dovetailed into the metaphysical premise that samsara (reincarnation) doesn't end until you get off the "wheel"of rebirth through various disciplines. I always felt super uncomfortable with these premises.

Yep, absolutely agree. Life is full of suffering, that's true, but it's also full of pleasure. If suffering would „override“ any pleasure, then I could just as well kill myself. It's the only logical conclusion for me. Except when we introduce samsara and nirvana- but that's the same logical escape like Christianity: that at the end, something will reward your suffering.

Post by “SimonC” of January 16, 2022 at 4:30 PM

I agree with your critique of utilitarianism: it is difficult to motivate limiting the number of morally relevant people, which leads to the conclusion that you should probably sell all your property and give to charities, which is clearly unacceptable even to utilitarians.

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

P.S.: Now I'm gonna delve into Aristotle, because the idea of a "limited duty", or of a duty "in moderation" still seems very interesting. Gonna update when there's

something new 😊

You'll find plenty of material! Virtue ethics is very popular in contemporary philosophy and there is a lot written.

I will say that I haven't gotten a satisfactory explanation from a virtue ethicist about what virtues *are*, why is being generous a virtue and being cruel not? I recently listened to an interview with Julia Annas, who seemed to think that this is simply obvious, which seems like you would just end up with whatever is accepted in your culture. Aristotle proposed to look at what virtuous people do, but that is a circular definition since you can't know who is virtuous without knowing what the virtues are. And it seems that Aristotle's own proposed virtues are not universal since he was writing specifically for Greek noblemen.

Post by “Cassius” of January 16, 2022 at 5:03 PM

[Quote from SimonC](#)

I agree with your critique of utilitarianism: it is difficult to motivate limiting the number of morally relevant people, which leads to the conclusion that you should probably sell all your property and give to charities, which is clearly unacceptable even to utilitarians.

You're probably right that that is unacceptable even to utilitarians, so that may not be part of their philosophy (I am not sure what Bentham wrote in full).

But that's pretty much exactly the box in which Christianity has itself. And the early Christians seem to have taken that literally and attempted to adapt communism (I believe the reference is in the book of Acts). And as a result of that being the logical conclusion of their doctrines they corner themselves into the point where modern Christians pretty much have to admit that they are not good Christians by definition, since they don't sell all their belongings, given them to the poor, and devote themselves to a life of ascetic religion. And to justify THAT, they have to resort to excuses like saying that they are "not perfect, just forgiven...." and similar excuses.

They've set up a paradigm that is impossible for them to achieve and live a life of guilt as a result, if they bother to think about it.

That's very different with Epicurus - the goals are achievable and realistic and very much not "suicidal."