

Thomas Jefferson's Religious Beliefs

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 28, 2022 at 4:24 PM

<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs>

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 28, 2022 at 4:31 PM

After reading about Jefferson's beliefs (in the above article) I find that he make have somewhat of an eclectic take in his Epicurean perspectives.

Would be curious if any one else has thoughts around this?

Post by “Don” of January 28, 2022 at 5:17 PM

Thanks for the link, [Kalosyni](#) , to the article on Jefferson's beliefs.

I have any number of problems with Thomas Jefferson and remain ambivalent with regards to him. He's never been one of my favorite Founders (I'm more a Franklin fan). I've also never been entirely comfortable with his image being in the header to this forum, but that is entirely [Cassius](#) 's call.

I don't believe Jefferson was entirely an Epicurean, but I'm sure he found facets of the philosophy with which he agreed. He was also enamored with Jesus as a philosopher since he created what came to be known as [The Jefferson Bible](#). He also praises [Epictetus](#) in a number of places including:

Quote

In morality read Epictetus, Xenophontis memorabilia, Plato's Socratic dialogues, Cicero's philosophies.

So, I think Jefferson's "I am an Epicurean" should best be understood as only a part of his philosophical outlook, which appears to me to be quite eclectic if syncretic (to use last week's

Word of Week 😊). As any "gentleman" of the 18th century, he was widely read in ancient Greek and Latin authors. He peppers excerpts from Horace, Cicero, and others throughout his diaries and letters. [Later in his life \(1803\)](#), he wrote:

Quote

I should first take a general view of the moral doctrines of the most remarkable of the ancient philosophers, of whose ethics we have sufficient information to make an estimate: say of Pythagoras, Epicurus, Epictetus, Socrates, Cicero, Seneca, Antoninus. I should do justice to the branches of morality they have treated well but *point out the importance of those in which they are deficient*. (emphasis added)

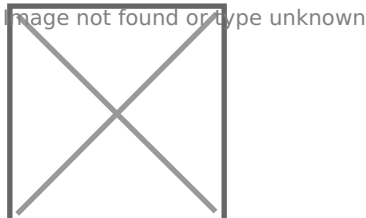
Granted, his letter to Short was in 1819, so *maybe* his affinity toward Epicurus grew since 1803. BUT, as [Kalosyni](#)'s link shows, he was saying things like this in 1823:

Quote

"[T]he truth is that the greatest enemies to the doctrines of Jesus are those calling themselves the expositors of them, who have perverted them for the structure of a system of fancy absolutely incomprehensible, and without any foundation in his genuine words."

He is still defending Jesus against his "greatest enemies" and was not fully committed in any way to an Epicurean path.

For reference, here is a link to the National Archives collection of Jefferson's papers where the term epicur* occurs (i.e., Epicure, Epicurean, Epicurus, etc.):



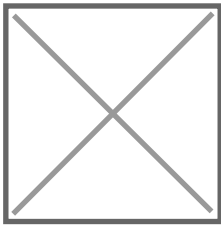
[Founders Online: Search](#)

founders.archives.gov

and simply epicurean

<https://founders.archives.gov/index.xgy?q=Pr...=1511211111&r=1> (includes Short letter)

and here are Short's letters to Jefferson:



[Founders Online: Search](#)
founders.archives.gov

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2022 at 6:26 PM

I would not at all defend Jefferson as an Orthodox Epicurean, but I also take articles like that less seriously than I do Jeffersons own letters which I collect at <http://www.newepicurean.com/jefferson>

He was primarily a politician and was not very straightforward in reconciling his public and private statements.

In my view he serves mainly as a rather transparent way of "legitimizing" those of us who hold Epicurean views yet still want to move somewhat in traditional society. For someone who has no need to do that there's no need to spend much time with Jefferson.

Running a forum on ideas as revolutionary Epicurus while also keeping the lights on can be a tricky business!

As I said in a private exchange recently, I think we are probably more in a 'John the Baptist' stage of preparing the way for the real Epicurean world revolution, than we are the front line revolutionaries ourselves. 😊

So when the time comes for the next Epicurus to arise I won't be at all surprised no matter how much or how little time he or she spends with Jefferson.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 8:34 AM

Quote from [Don](#)

I have any number of problems with Thomas Jefferson and remain ambivalent with regards to him. He's never been one of my favorite Founders (I'm more a Franklin fan). I've also never been entirely comfortable with his image being in the header to this forum, but that is entirely Cassius 's call.

For some reason I woke up thinking about this today and this comment comes to mind:

Although I am not interested in seeing us "play to the crowd," most of us live and work among people who are almost exclusively non-Epicurean, and know little about Epicurus.

At some point it becomes a logical and reasonable question for them to ask:

"I've never really heard of Epicurus, or anyone who said that they were Epicurean. Those views you are talking about sound pretty underground to me and actually bordering on evil. Of course I know you and I like you, but can you name me one reputable person over the last three hundred years who has labelled themselves an Epicurean? Hopefully you can name more than one obscure name, but if you can't, maybe we better talk about getting you some medical help. I know this great counselor who specializes in Dialectical Behavior Therapy!"

My comment to that:

I've heard people suggest names like Christopher Hitchens and all sorts of people who have said one or two good things about Epicurus, but there are very few who come anywhere close to embracing his entire philosophy, much less actually committed to writing "I too am an Epicurean."

I think this is a legitimate conversation topic with the outside world, so I think we need to work on our response. I know Nate has produced a very good list of historical Epicureans, and I think Don has done something similar in terms of a time frame or time line analysis.

I will start a new thread and link to those two sets of materials and let's see what we can do to expand this.

Let's continue this part of this thread in the new location: [Historical References on the School of Epicurean Philosophy - Ancient World To Today](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 1, 2022 at 10:17 AM

Regarding the fear that "non-Epicureans" will misperceive us, and will say to us:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Those views you are talking about sound pretty underground to me and actually bordering on evil.

This idea is something that needs to be "unpacked"...the fear that others will see Epicureans as evil. And it means we have more work to do, since there is a clear moral understanding within Epicureanism, which is that causing harm to others will most often result in less pleasure for ourselves and for those we love, as well as much more pain in the long-term. And so we act according to ethical values just like everyone else, however the understanding of "why" and "how" is slightly different.

Christianity is the source of the modern twisted concept of "evil". Otherwise we would simply say "causing harm". Is there a thread comparing Epicureanism with Christianity?

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 10:28 AM

Epicureans have been unpacking this for 2000+ years

Lucretius Book One:

Brown:

[80] But in these things, I fear, you will suspect you are learning impious rudiments of reason, and entering in a road of wickedness. So, far from this, reflect what sad flagitious deeds Religion has produced. By her inspired, the Grecian chiefs, the first of men, at Aulis, Diana's altar shamefully defiled with Iphigenia's blood; her virgin hair a fillet bound, which hung in equal length on either side of her face. She saw her father, covered with sorrow, stand before the altar; for pity to his grief the butchering priests concealed the knife. The city, at the sight, overflowed with tears; the virgin, dumb with fear; fell low upon her knees on the hard Earth; in vain the wretched princess in distress pleaded that she first gave the honored name of Father to the King; but hurried off, and dragged by wicked hands, she, trembling, stood before the altar. Alas! not as a virgin, the solemn forms being duly done, drawn with pleasing force to Hymen's noble rites, but a chaste maid, just ripe for nuptial joy, falls a sad victim, by a father's hand, only to beg a kind propitious gale for Grecian ships. Such Scenes of villainy Religion could inspire!

Humphries:

I fear that, in these matters, you may think

You're entering upon a path of crime,
The A B C's of godlessness. Not so.
The opposite is true. Too many times
Religion mothers crime and wickedness.
Recall how once at Aulis, when the Greeks,
Those chosen peers, the very first of men,
Defiled, with a girl's blood, the altar-stone
Sacred to Artemis. The princess stood
Wearing the sacred fillets or a veil,
And sensed but could not see the king her father,
Agamemnon, standing sorrowful
Beside the altar, and the priests near-by
Hiding the knife-blade, and the folk in tears
At what they saw. She knelt, she spoke no word,
She was afraid, poor thing. Much good it did her
At such a time to have been the very first
To give the king that other title, Father!
Raised by men's hands and trembling she was led
Toward the altar, not to join in song
After the ritual of sacrifice
To the bright god of marriage. No; she fell
A victim by the sacrificing stroke
Her father gave, to shed her virgin blood-
Not the way virgins shed it - but in death,
To bring the fleet a happy exodus!

A mighty counselor, Religion stood
With all that power for wickedness.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 10:30 AM

The Christianity Comparison thread, but I don't think we have a chart:

[Epicurean Philosophy vs. Christianity](#)

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 1, 2022 at 11:13 AM

A further comment in regard to:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But in these things, I fear, you will suspect you are learning impious rudiments of reason, and entering in a road of wickedness. So, far from this, reflect what sad flagitious deeds Religion has produced. By her inspired, the Grecian chiefs, the first of men, at Aulis, Diana's altar shamefully defiled with Iphigenia's blood;

A new definition of "evil":

Evil is not only the harmful or hurtful act itself, but the "unreasonable" justification of the harm or injury by those committing the act, and/or the unreasonable justification by those who are in the same tribe and/or who believe they benefit from the act.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 11:18 AM

There's a lot to talk about in that post, probably starting with the basic issue of whether "good" and "evil" have an absolute existence in themselves, or are entirely relative.

There's also the issue of the relationship of pleasure to good and pain as evil.

We've talked about some of these before and we can do this here or in the older threads. It's possible we'll split this out after we talk a while too.

But here are the two older categories where we explored these issues:

[The Relationship Of Pleasure To "Good" And The "Highest Good"](#)

[The Relationship of Pain To "Evil"](#)

(The latter link is new)

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 11:23 AM

Ok that categorization isn't going to work. I will re-split them:

[The Relationship Of Pleasure To "Good" And Pain To "Evil"](#)

[Pleasure as The Highest Good \(And Is Pleasure the "Only Good"?\)](#)

Post by “Matt” of February 1, 2022 at 11:31 AM

Ah yes Good vs. Evil and whether they exist as absolutes...the great debate.

I feel these threads will be very active. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 11:35 AM

Ok massive reordering of Ethics forums to put these near the top:

[The Relationship of Pleasure and The Highest Good \(And Is Pleasure the "Only Good"?\)](#)

[The Relationship of Pleasure To Absence of Pain And Disturbance](#)

[The Relationship Of Pleasure To "Good" And Pain To "Evil"](#)

[Types of Pleasures - Discussion of Specific Pleasures of All Kinds](#)

[The Relationship of Pleasure To Virtue](#)

[Emotions In Epicurean Philosophy](#)

Post by "Cassius" of February 1, 2022 at 11:58 AM

Kalosyni one of the closest threads is this one started by Joshua: [Is Pleasure the Only Good?](#)

Post by "Cassius" of February 1, 2022 at 11:59 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

Ah yes Good vs. Evil and whether they exist as absolutes...the great debate.

It seems to me that despite the emotion involved, the largest part of this question is "definitional" and even "logical" so probably every time it's discussed with newer people, it needs to be hit home that there can be a lot of emotion and personal attachment involved in discussing this. Right [Don?](#) 😊

Post by "Matt" of February 1, 2022 at 12:56 PM

I could go very deep into this subject.

I wonder if “logic” could ever play into this at all? Since the subject matter is entirely subjective and cultural. Without absolutes or metaphysical evil, this would make for a very good discussion.

But probably “user” beware, because this line of discussion could get intense quick.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 1:03 PM

Logic in the sense of parsing definitions and categories. It's largely a word game until you connect back to emotions / pain / pleasure.

But that too begs the question between whether there is any "natural" connection between words and perceptions, and for that we might have to call in Godfrey and Don on visualization issues 😊

Post by “Joshua” of February 1, 2022 at 1:10 PM

Quote

Kalosyni one of the closest threads is this one started by Joshua: [Is Pleasure the Only Good?](#)

I can't even make sense of that post, and I wrote it...

Post by “Matt” of February 1, 2022 at 1:12 PM

Right, and honestly I suspect we will determine that broadly “evil” will ultimately be reduced to a subjective thing that is more in line with something that is culturally “unlawful” or “taboo” as opposed to giving any concrete absolutes that could universally be considered “wrong” in every place and every time.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 1:34 PM

I thought I remembered a line in "A Few Days In Athens" where Epicurus said that there was no good but pleasure, and no evil but pain, but so far the nearest I can find is this in chapter three in regard to virtue. This is related, but not quite as direct. Of course Frances Wright is not really to be accepted as an authority on Epicurus' position, but her views are always interesting:

Quote

“Yes, in a great measure, yet not all together: we are all the wooers of virtue, but we are wooers of a different character.”

“And may she not then favor one more than another?”

“That is a question,” replied the Gargettian, playfully, “that each will answer in his own favor. If you ask me, he continued, – with one of his sweetest tones and smiles, “I shall say, that I feel myself virtuous, because my soul is at rest.”

“If this be your criterion, you should with the stoics deny that pain is an evil.”

“By no means: so much the contrary, I hold it the greatest of all evils, and the whole aim of my life, and of my philosophy, is to escape from it. To deny that pain is an evil is such another quibble as the Elean’s denial of motion: that must exist to man which exists to his senses; and as to existence or non existence abstracted from them, though it may afford an idle argument for an idle hour, it can never enter as a truth, from which to draw conclusions, in the practical lessons of a master. To deny that pain is an evil seems more absurd than to deny its existence, which has also been done, for its existence is only apparent from its effect upon our senses; how then shall we admit the existence, and deny the effect, which alone forces that admittance? But we will leave these matters to the dialecticians of the Portico. I feel myself virtuous because my soul is at rest. With evil passions I should be disturbed and uneasy; with uncontrolled appetites I should be disordered in body as well as mind — for this reason, and for this reason only, I avoid both.”

“Only!”

“Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it.”

Theon was about to break forth in indignant astonishment: the sage softly laid a hand upon his arm, and, with a smile and bend of the head demanding attention, proceeded; “The masters who would have us to follow virtue for her own sake, independent of any pleasure or advantage that we may find in the pursuit, are sublime visionaries, who build a theory without examining the ground on which they build it, who advance

doctrines without examining principles. Why do I gaze on the Cupid of Praxiteles? because it is beautiful; because it gives me pleasurable sensations. If it gave me no pleasurable sensations, should I find it beautiful? should I gaze upon it? or would you call me wise if then I gave a drachma for its possession? What other means have we of judging of things than by the effect they produce upon our senses? Our senses then being the judges of all things, the aim of all men is to gratify their senses; in other words, their aim is pleasure or happiness: and if virtue were not found to conduce to this, men would do well to shun her, as they now do well to shun vice.”

“You own then no pleasure but virtue, and no misery but vice?”

“Not at all: I think virtue only the highest pleasure, and vice, or ungoverned passions and appetites, the worst misery. Other pleasures are requisite to form a state of perfect ease, which is happiness; and other miseries are capable of troubling, perhaps destroying, the peace of the most virtuous and the wisest man.”

“I begin to see more reason in your doctrine,” said the youth, looking up with a timid blush in the face of the philosopher.

Display More

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 1:43 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Logic in the sense of parsing definitions and categories. It's largely a word game until you connect back to emotions / pain / pleasure.

To restate this, I think this is one of the big aspects of the canon of truth. The senses and pain and pleasure (and presumably anticipations) can present something to us on a perceptual level which is repeatable and therefore verifiable from that standpoint. But is there any OTHER standpoint other than this perceptual level at which something can be considered absolutely the same for everyone at all times and places? I doubt that is possible under Epicurean philosophy, and in fact it's probably pretty clear that it is not.

Are all words (even "pain" and pleasure") purely a matter of definition in our conscious minds, that become locked in only when we attach them to a certain set of perceptions? I tend to think so, especially when we consider that different languages use entirely different words for what we consider to be the same things.

But the whole process of language is not really chaotic or random either. We're all wired in similar ways, and take pleasure and pain in similar things, and see, hear, touch, smell, and taste in similar ways. So it would be natural that we might also process perceptions into opinions (and assign those opinions labels) in similar ways.

So there can be expected behaviors within certain natural lanes of travel without there being any intent, or providence, or absolute standard giving rise to "absolutes" in these areas.

Or so it would appear to me today.

Post by "Matt" of February 1, 2022 at 2:00 PM

What crossed my mind after reading this was ultimately nature directs human behavior. So for an explicit example (since I made a joke about this in another thread) Cannibalism is usually considered pretty taboo...today anyway! And is often considered by "most" people to be "wrong" or "evil." In historical extreme survival situations where death is imminent, humans have resorted to cannibalism. Now the question becomes at what point is cannibalism considered evil and by what standard? Nature or human edict?

Obviously nature directs us not to partake in this activity on any regular basis (humans anyway, animals are another story) but it does sometimes drive people to do things they would otherwise never consider doing. Yet still...will society still judge the act as evil? Though nature directs our behavior and is entirely neutral to the action, it ultimately is the human laws and taboos that decree something is "evil" or "wrong" based then entirely on circumstances which we would need to dissect situation by situation to determine if something "unlawful" happened by societal standards.

Post by "Matt" of February 1, 2022 at 2:06 PM

A certain Dr. Lecter has appeared as a guest in the forum all of a sudden.

Post by "Matt" of February 1, 2022 at 2:39 PM

I will say I have also meditated on particular widespread groups that operate outside their own societal laws that perform “evil” acts. Such as the various central and South American cartels and crime syndicates. These people are literally the worst of the worst, and perform acts so heinous it would be a mental labor to describe them or categorize them...by “most” people’s standards they are truly evil. Not unlike other historical groups like certain pirates and even the Vikings fall into this category.

I would otherwise consider crime groups as fringe outliers. However, the sheer numbers of people who associate with them (either by force or choice) illustrate that they are almost communities within larger nations. When I meditate on this I see that these people continue to exist by performing absolutely gruesome acts day by day, and the larger part of the world typically condemns them as evil, however my personal revulsion is not based necessarily on the fact that my own society considers these acts as unlawful nor because of an ad populum argument that because the majority of the world rejects them as wrong or unlawful, I do as well...my own internal instinct tell me it’s “wrong” based on my natural experiences and empathetic reaction. So ultimately this explanation goes against my earlier statement above that we might define evil as purely “unlawful” since I subjectively have a natural revulsion to these acts... so it may not be possible to pin any definition of evil down to one particular source such as culturally unlawful or purely against nature or unnatural, because to the cartel member who is just trying to survive under their own set of circumstances , they are doing what they think is necessary to do so....even if I consider it gruesome, their government considers it unlawful and the majority of the world condemns it, it isn’t “universally wrong” because it is an accepted form of living among a large population of people who consider what they do necessary to survive.

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2022 at 3:52 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

Yet still...will society still judge the act as evil?

I have pretty well come to peace with that question myself. What "society" thinks is relevant only insofar as society has the power to punish offenses against its collective decision-making. What "society" concludes is often as inverse to the "truth" of a matter (let's say from the perspective of Epicurus for present discussion) as it is accurate to the truth. Society's opinion is of relevance to lots of things, but not to there being any absolute truth of the matter.

Post by “Don” of February 1, 2022 at 10:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Logic in the sense of parsing definitions and categories. It's largely a word game until you connect back to emotions / pain / pleasure.

But that too begs the question between whether there is any "natural" connection between words and perceptions, and for that we might have to call in Godfrey and Don on visualization issues 😊

There's some discussion of definitions and the Epicurean aversion to them in Philodemus's On Anger. Still digging through it, but it's been interesting. Not ready to report back in yet.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 2, 2022 at 12:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But that too begs the question between whether there is any "natural" connection between words and perceptions, and for that we might have to call in Godfrey and Don on visualization issues 😊

Without any specific cites on hand, I would just speculate that the most "natural" connection between words and perceptions comes from the language and the environment that a person is exposed to in the womb and in infancy.

Post by “SimonC” of February 2, 2022 at 2:18 AM

There is at least one sense in which Epicureanism is "evil" - that, in for example Nietzsche's view, the term "evil" was created to describe precisely any ethical system different from christianity, or from ascetic ideals in general.

It might be better to frame the discussion in terms of "good" vs "bad", or "healthy" vs "unhealthy".

Post by “Matt” of February 2, 2022 at 8:44 AM

Since we are not explicitly talking about this in terms of Epicurean philosophy, it still might be helpful for us to conceive of where ideas of evil began in history. In theological terms evil is usually associated with some supernatural presence that represents “negative” qualities, darkness or chaos. Either a god or a spirit. Evil deities were prevalent in the myths of the near east and responsible for many human problems. The Persians had Ahriman the dualistic hostile spirit that was the opposite of the Lord of Wisdom Ahura Mazda. The Egyptians had Set, who was the god of chaos, who murdered Osiris. The Hebrews had various hostile spirits and fallen angels such as Azazel and Semjaza, which eventually evolved into the Christian devil and Satan. Sometimes these spirits were “gods” of neighboring hostile nations like Baal or Dagon, that were identified as evil. What’s interesting is that the Greeks didn’t have a specific diabolical deity that they identify as “evil.” The Greeks seem to have seen all the gods being capable of benevolence and evil, just like people. Whereas the other groups seem to have identified one or a group of gods as “good” and others as evil.

Perhaps this might be useful for a linguistic purposes of how various populations define “evil” in this sort of theological and mythological context. Supernatural entities that represent the occult, black magic, darkness, witchcraft, diseases, disasters, war, famine, drought, madness etc.

Post by “Matt” of February 2, 2022 at 8:46 AM

I recommend all of Jeffery Burton Russell’s books for research into the subject of the anthropological origin of evil.

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2022 at 10:23 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

Since we are not explicitly talking about this in terms of Epicurean philosophy,

We're going to have to figure out some way of clarifying that. It's like with "Gods" -- the definition is so different in Epicurus vs the non-Epicurean traditions that the words mean dramatically different things. In analogy to Epicurus saying that supernatural gods don't exist, but "real ones" do, we've got a situation where we (and probably Epicurus) refer to "evil" all the time, but do not mean anywhere near the same thing as does society at large. In Epicurean terms I would say there is no such thing as "absolute evil" (other than perhaps "pain" in a generic sense) just as there are no supernatural gods.

Unless we keep this clear the conversations are going to be hopelessly confused.

If anyone wishes to argue or imply that there is such a thing as "absolute evil" (in all circumstances; all times, all places, to all people) it would probably be good for them to state that explicitly so it can be fleshed out.

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2022 at 10:26 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

There's some discussion of definitions and the Epicurean aversion to them in Philodemus's On Anger.

Yes Cicero states something similar. I suspect we're going to find that that is an overbroad statement, and that Epicurus used definitions just like anyone else, just with explicit caveats as to their limitations.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

It might be better to frame the discussion in terms of "good" vs "bad", or "healthy" vs "unhealthy".

And that reminds me of a significant section in DeWitt's book where he suggests that Epicurus viewed pleasure almost in terms of "food" or at least analogous to health vs disease.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 2, 2022 at 12:07 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

Cannibalism is usually considered pretty taboo...today anyway! And is often considered by “most” people to be “wrong” or “evil.”

[Quote from Matt](#)

Obviously nature directs us not to partake in this activity on any regular basis (humans anyway, animals are another story) but it does sometimes drive people to do things they would otherwise never consider doing. Yet still...will society still judge the act as evil? Though nature directs our behavior and is entirely neutral to the action, it ultimately is the human laws and taboos that decree something is “evil” or “wrong” based then entirely on circumstances which we would need to dissect situation by situation to determine if something “unlawful” happened by societal standards.

The Epicurean philosophy is not to live by solely by nature's instincts but to use reason for the most pleasureable life:

Principle Doctrine 5:

"It is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously; and whoever lacks this cannot live joyously."

If civilization ended and cannibalism became the only way to survive, I can imagine that an Epicurean would sacrifice themselves or give themselves up for another's food because at that point "the party is over" meaning that a joyful life wouldn't be possible anymore, and it would also be chosen since "[death is nothing to us](#)".

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2022 at 12:14 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

If civilization ended and cannibalism became the only way to survive, I can imagine that an Epicurean would sacrifice themselves or give themselves up for another's food because at that point "the party is over" meaning that a joyful life wouldn't be possible anymore, and it would also be chosen since "[death is nothing to us](#)".

I agree with that, but with the critical caveat that the issue would not turn so much on "civilization" but on those who are our family and "friends" (which would be an interesting issue to tackle as to who fits that). In other words there are people whose existence are critical to us, and people who we have essentially no relationship to, so it would be important to make that distinction. But in the sense of "the world of living human beings" for example if the entire earth were being destroyed by a meteor there wouldn't be much to argue about 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2022 at 12:26 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

however my personal revulsion is not based necessarily on the fact that my own society considers these acts as unlawful nor because of an ad populum argument that because the majority of the world rejects them as wrong or unlawful, I do as well...my own internal instinct tell me it's "wrong" based on my natural experiences and empathetic reaction.

This point made by Matt here strikes me as essentially the exact same argument made by, and extended in great detail, in Jackson Barwis' "[Dialogues Concerning Innate Principles](#)" (his response to John Locke on the blank slate theory). I continue to recommend that to anyone interested in developing the argument. Here he makes Matt's point in other words:

Quote

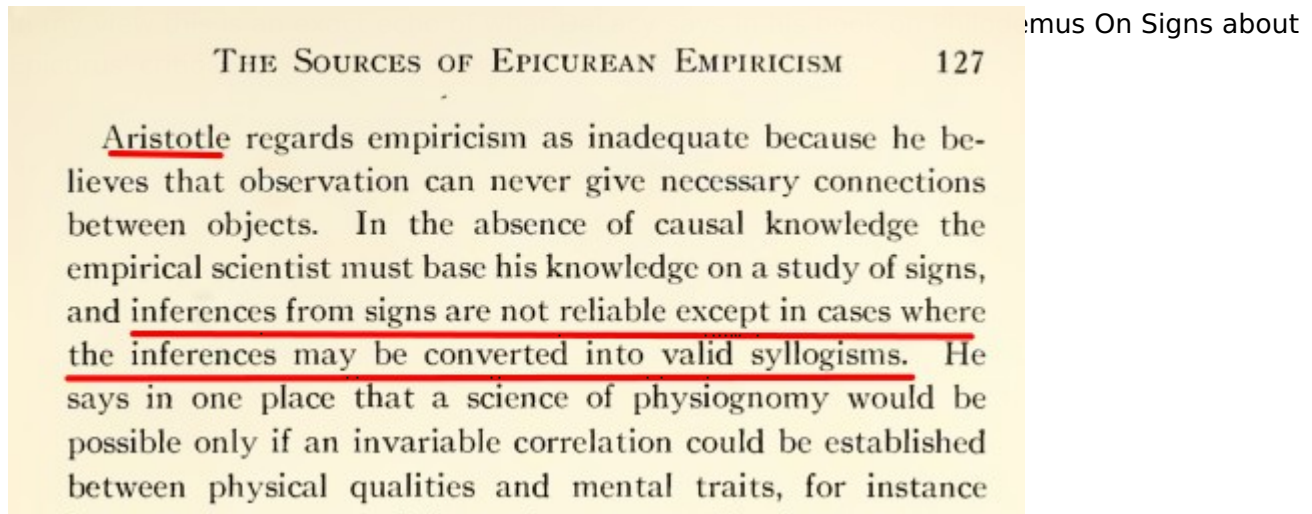
The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, moral principles. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.

When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world

could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

Possibly that's one of my favorite quotes of all time, because it not only hits against Aristotle's blank slate, but it also in my view hits on the heart Epicurus' argument against improper logical reasoning:

"we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions:"



I am thinking that this issue can be summarized as:

"We are not convinced of truth by forming it into logical propositions."

And that applies with special force in issues of ethics and morality.

Post by "Matt" of February 2, 2022 at 2:18 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I agree with that, but with the critical caveat that the issue would not turn so much on "civilization" but on those who are our family and "friends" (which would be an interesting issue to tackle as to who fits that). In other words there are people whose

existence are critical to us, and people who we have essentially no relationship to, so it would be important to make that distinction. But in the sense of "the world of living human beings" for example if the entire earth were being destroyed by a meteor there wouldn't be much to argue about

This is such an interesting idea. For me, my family's preservation would be my only concern in the event of some catastrophe. My only real need to survive would be so that I am present to be able to defend and provide for them.

A friend of mine said recently that when he was a Marine overseas, he would've been willing to die for his fellows without question, but now with his kids, he has so much more of a reason to live. So a biological imperative could theoretically change a person's perspective. Willing to die for friends one day, unwilling to risk death if it means your absence is a net negative for your family the next day.

I too follow his principle in that I'm linked to my kids preservation, therefore if I die I won't be present for them to continue my fatherly duties, but I would die for them if no options presented themselves. But I won't be performing any uncalculated heroic acts of bravery for strangers, for my children's sake.

Nature and biology have entirely rewired my brain. If you asked me about virtuous acts of bravery for random people years ago, I might've given my Marine friend's earlier answer, but things have changed.

Post by "Matt" of February 2, 2022 at 2:21 PM

This whole topic has pushed my brain into an area of reflection about my individual perspectives of what my needs and wants are as a human being and what the agenda nature ultimately is.

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2022 at 4:02 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

I too follow his principle in that I'm linked to my kids preservation, therefore if I die I won't be present for them to continue my fatherly duties, but I would die for them if no options presented themselves. But I won't be performing any uncalculated heroic acts of bravery for strangers, for my children's sake.

I can't remember which conversation we were in but I recall someone (Joshua or Don) addressing the hypothetical of whether a young person would die to save the life of their 99 year old grandfather. Every situation is different and even there I would not suggest a uniform rule, but even with people we know it is plain (at least to me) that we would not always give up our lives even for people who are close to us, depending on the circumstances.

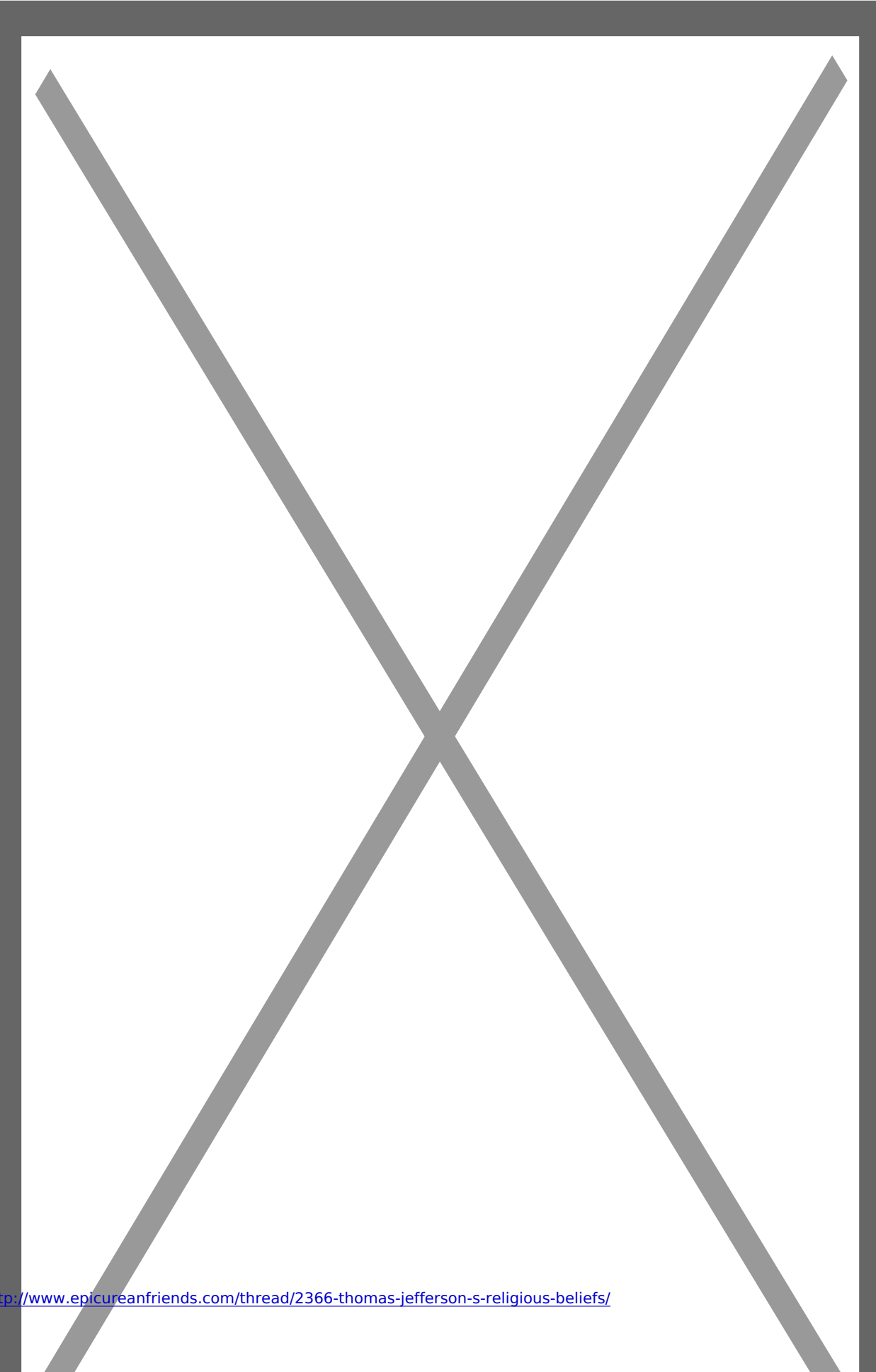
When you extend that reasoning the idea of dying for "humanity at large" when you might have a chance to save or alleviate the suffering of your child or spouse or someone close to you is pretty breathtakingly abstract and (at least for me) a non-starter on the gut-level scale of the way I think I would personally act. And I suspect that Epicurus would well understand that argument.

My gosh there are reasonable arguments that he said something about living alone, and away from the crowd, and not paying attention to their lack of understand. I seriously doubt he would entertain the idea that he ought to be willing to give up his life for any number of strangers when he could preserve those of his family and friends.

Post by "Don" of February 2, 2022 at 11:23 PM

It may be instructive to look at what's covered under dying for a φίλος (philos). The people covered under philia φιλία, according to the unimpeachable source of Wikipedia 😊 are:

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[Philia - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

"young lovers (1156b2), lifelong friends (1156b12), cities with one another (1157a26), political or business contacts (1158a28), parents and children (1158b20), fellow-voyagers and fellow-soldiers (1159b28), members of the same religious society (1160a19), or of the same tribe (1161b14), a cobbler and the person who buys from him. (1163b35)"

This is from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* but gives an idea of the range of who a philos may be. It goes beyond what we would necessarily call a "friend" in modern English.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 3, 2022 at 9:11 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

If civilization ended and cannibalism became the only way to survive, I can imagine that an Epicurean would sacrifice themselves or give themselves up for another's food because at that point "the party is over" meaning that a joyful life wouldn't be possible anymore, and it would also be chosen since "[death is nothing to us](#)".

Yep, and thats a very important point, in my view. I'm young enough in order to experience the consequences of climate change, and I'm probably going to become old enough to see our ecosystem crumbling. Still, I always have the way out by killing myself in order to avoid creating harm. And with this thought, it's far easier to enjoy the now and here- to be honest, I by myself will never be able to stop climate change or even influence it in the slightest. My job is to be happy, and enjoy life- and see what will come. Earth will collapse? Great; if I won't be able to gather food without inflicting pain, I'll happily end my own life. The climate will survive in some form, which is far more probable than that civilization will collapse? Fantastic- a few years more of pleasure!

Basically, this fearlessness of death is the maximum of autarchy; its the pinnacle of independence from the exterior. Evidently I want to live- but I shouldn't worry about what will happen in 30 years, because I simply can't influence it. Its always interesting how I understand things better while writing them, but now I get why "[death is nothing to us](#)" is such a major part of the tetrapharmakos!

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2022 at 9:31 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Great; if I won't be able to gather food without inflicting pain, I'll happily end my own life

I agree with the thrust of your post but I pick this part out just to extend the conversation:

It's pretty tricky to carry that statement out to a logical extreme, and in my view therefore important not to treat it as an absolute. If we consider animal pain in the equation (and I think we probably should), then most of us live off the spoils of some pretty horrible treatment of animals in factory farming and otherwise.

So it's important to keep before the eyes (right [Don?](#)) a clear view of the limits of what we can realistically experience in life. We inflict a certain degree of pain (in the form of effort) on ourselves every day just to continue living. And we do that for the pleasures obtained.

So yes ending our own lives is in fact a realistic option if the circumstances truly deserve it, but we have to be very careful in deciding when that is the case. If we choose unwisely in when to exit we don't get a "do-over!"

And that too is one of the invigorating things about Epicurus - we're playing for keeps, and there's no recompense for a mistake for us - no strumming harps in heaven as consolation prize.

Post by “Matt” of February 3, 2022 at 10:41 AM

And to be clear about my earlier post about dying for my children if no other options are available. It stands to reason because my need to stay alive is a necessity for their survival, that the particular act of self-sacrifice means that I will sacrifice myself unto an “active” external threat.

Whether that means me getting hit by a bus or killed by another human or animal etc. I personally won't be “opting out” by my own hand, because I can't currently imagine a situation where if I did that it would be a benefit or a net positive for my offspring. So that means whatever the external threat is, it will need to be the thing to terminate me.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 3, 2022 at 10:41 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Evidently I want to live- but I shouldn't worry about what will happen in 30 years, because I simply can't influence it.

I have read some studies on climate change which suggest by 2040 some major changes will begin to challenge civilization. Some hedonic choices will need to be made regarding where to live as climate change kicks in...as some places might become too uncomfortable (heat/humidity) or too dangerous due to floods/wild fires. Civilization will continue as long as modern agriculture and infrastructure can keep up with the changing climate. But I think it will be important to keep on top of the science. Avoid living in low lying areas which could flood, as we have already seen this happening in places, and science says this will continue.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2022 at 12:53 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

. But I think it will be important to keep on top of the science.

That's the bottom line for me, just like a person might want to think about earthquakes before living in parts of California or tornadoes before living in Kansas. Lots of places have their own unique issues which overlay global issues, so the best you can do is to do your best to be intelligent and on top of all of them.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 3, 2022 at 5:39 PM

Yep, I agree with all of you. Taking your life is a last resort- but it's so liberating of allowing this resort to oneself. If, by whatever means, I see that I'll never again obtain pleasure in my life which would overweight the pain (let's say, I'm deadly ill), then I would gladly take my life with some sort of drug and go out peacefully. By having this thought in the back of my mind, I can allow myself to enjoy my limited time more thoroughly. That doesn't mean that suicide is a solution, and if you consider suicide you should always seek out professional help- but in some situations, that's the best solution, albeit not ideal.

Post by “Matt” of February 3, 2022 at 5:42 PM

Yup anyone who is feeling “off”, depressed, or having ideations of hurting themselves should always seek professional medical help.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2022 at 6:29 PM

I agree with you completely Smoothkiwi. As for myself, I may not have had any control over the way I came into the world, but unless I die unexpectedly I have complete control over when and how I exit it, and I expect to exercise that authority without interference from any government, preacher, or anyone else.

We want to be very careful and not be too casual about this topic, but the very idea that anyone would seek to restrict my right to exit on my own terms at the time I decide is one of the most offensive suggestions that I can think of the religious and other establishment authorities making.

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 19, 2025 at 7:15 PM

This thread seems like a good place for placing this (even though the later posts may have drifted from the original early posts).

I found this which others may also be interested in checking out...in which Jefferson edited out everything "supernatural" and there is also an interesting letter, at the start of the book.

[The Jefferson Bible](#)

Edit note: I see that Don already brought up the Jefferson Bible, back in post 3.