Would Epicurus Say That It Is Better to Suffer Harm Than to Harm?

Post by “Cassius” of September 21, 2022 at 9:32 AM

This question (or the evaluation of the "is it better to suffer harm than to harm?" question) came up in our 20th discussion last night.

Before going further I need to say that I intuitively think that Epicurus would NOT agree with the question/statement. With the usual caveats as to circumstances controlling, it is overbroad and therefore incorrect to think that *as a general principle or rule of thumb* it is better to suffer harm than to harm. However like many questions in justice (again apart from contextual issues) it's an interesting question to think about. Surely Epicurus would first say that it is better to do neither, but what happens when we find ourselves in a harm situation that we believe to be beyond our control, or "justified"? When we are harmed by someone, is it a safe general rule to say that it is better that we not reply or respond with force or harm of any kind?

We were talking about this in context of whether Epicurus would differ from Buddhism in this regard, and as usual we ran into the issue that Buddhism is hard to pin down on much of anything.

However I should have remembered to bring to the discussion this better-known statement of the issue:

> Quote
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> 1 Corinthians 6:7 Context
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> 4If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. 5I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? 6But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. 7**Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather *suffer yourselves to* be defrauded?** 8Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that *your* brethren. 9Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

With this commentary by Wesley:

Wesley's Notes for 1 Corinthians 6:7

6:7 Indeed there is a fault, that ye quarrel with each other at all, whether ye go to law or no. Why do ye not rather suffer wrong - All men cannot or will not receive this saying. Many aim only at this, I will neither do wrong, nor suffer it. These are honest heathens, but no Christians.

Putting this issue in context of "turning the other cheek" and similar statements in the "New Testament" (this doesn't necessarily track at all with the "Old Testament") I would say it is pretty clear that a CHRISTIAN would answer the question "Is it better to suffer harm than to harm" with a "YES" -- and thus we have passivism etc of the pre-war "Sergeant York" model. Maybe in fact that is really the dominant / orthodox Christian position.

But I don't think it is the Epicurean position, and I would site such things as:

PD06. Whatever you can provide yourself with to secure protection from men is a natural good.

PD14. The most unalloyed source of protection from men, which is secured to some extent by a certain force of expulsion, is in fact the immunity which results from a quiet life, and retirement from the world.

PD39. The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus.

PD40. As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbors, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the most certain pledge of security, and, after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied.

Torquatus XVI, Cicero's On Ends Book One: "Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, lust, gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more; inasmuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint rather than for reformation."

Of course the big issue that arises in taking action that would end in harm to someone else is "justification." But that is where I would see "It is better to suffer harm than to harm" is overbroad -- I think Epicurus would look to the circumstances and evaluate whether "harming" the other person is (burglar, murderer, etc) is "justified" and consider that as part of evaluating whether to take pre-emptive or retributory action or not.

So I think Wesley is actually correct -- there is a significant distinction between a Christian and an Epicurean in this regard.

Thoughts?

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 21, 2022 at 10:02 AM

From Letter to Menoeceus:

"And because this is the primary and inborn good, we do not choose every pleasure. Instead, we pass up many pleasures when we will gain more of what we need from doing so. And we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, if we experience a greater pleasure for a long time from having endured those pains. So every pleasure is a good thing because its nature is favorable to us, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen — just as every pain is a bad thing, yet not every pain is always to be shunned. It is proper to make all these decisions through measuring things side by side and looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, for sometimes we treat a good thing as bad and a bad thing as good."

I think to answer "is it better to suffer harm than to harm?" would be taken on a case by case basis, so there would not be an absolute rule on this. Sometime you might choose to suffer some small harm in the short term if it led to a better long-term outcome.

Post by “Cassius” of September 21, 2022 at 11:01 AM

> Quote from Kalosyni
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> Sometime you might choose to suffer some small harm in the short term if it led to a better long-term outcome.

Yes that's another good cite. Sometimes we might choose to suffer a harm, sometimes we might choose to inflict harm, based on circumstances and our prediction of the total eventual outcome of the action.

The real issue here is whether there is an "absolute rule" of conduct that says "never cause harm" and I think just about every absolute rule suggestion gets answered with "it depends."

And the reason for that is the Epicurean worldview that there is no supernatural god, no absolute good and bad, no ideal forms of conduct, etc.... that apply to all situations at all times. It is definitely possible to generalize and it's good to do so ("Don't walk up to people who resemble Muhammed Ali and hit in the face") but if you forget that it's just a general rule then you're committing the 'virtue' error of thinking that there are absolute rules of conduct that never change.

Post by “Kalosyni” of September 21, 2022 at 5:54 PM

This brings up the ethics of war -- discovered "just war theory":

> Quote
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> For millennia, philosophers and Christian theologians have worked on a framework for guiding the ethical prosecution of wars. Just war theory—the most influential source of objective guidance for the ethical prosecution of wars—is traditionally attributed to Ambrose (ca. 339-397 CE) and Augustine (354-430 CE). Nine hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas established the theological, systematic conscience-based foundations under which a war could be justified. Aquinas’s views became the model for later scholars, who universalized just war theory beyond its Christian foundations, recasting it in terms of what is allowed or forbidden in wars between modern nation-states.
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> The absence of an ethics of conflict termination hinders the civic polity’s ability to judge whether a conflict should be over. This omission vitiates a founding tenet of democracy: civilian control of the military.
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> Contemporary just war theory has branched into two schools—traditionalist and revisionist. The traditionalist camp is best represented by Michael Walzer’s seminal 1977 book *Just and Unjust Wars,* which defended a non-religious justification of national self-defense, combatant equality, and civilian immunity. In the last decade or so, a revisionist camp, spearheaded by Jeff McMahan’s work, questioned these tenets of traditional just war theory. McMahan’s book, *Killing in War* (2009), revolutionized the philosophical discussion on the ethics of war by questioning the moral standing of states and the justification of national self-defense as a just cause for war, problematizing the notion of civilian immunity, and systematically attacking Walzer’s argument regarding the moral equality of combatants—instead, McMahan contended that combatants fighting for an unjust cause have no right to kill.
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> Historically, just war theorists distinguished between just two stages of conflict: *jus ad bellum*, the limitations on the resort to war, and *jus in bello*, the restrictions on the

conduct in war. In the past twenty years philosophers in both camps—traditionalists and revisionists—have argued for adding *jus post bellum* as a third branch of just war theory as a way to provide guidance on what is owed *after* a conflict has ended. The construction of peace treaties and the reconstruction of states, for example, raise difficult questions about retribution and vengeance and what can be demanded of the defeated.

Now, only more recently have philosophers started to address the gap between *jus in bello* and *jus post bellum*. As Cecile Fabre notes, "there is hardly any work on the transition from war to peace, and more specifically on the ethics of war termination." As such, philosophers have begun arguing that the moral principles governing the end of armed conflicts require a new regime in just war theory, called either *jus ex bello* (Darrel Moellendorf's terminology), or *jus terminatio* (David Rodin's terminology). (The U.S. Military Academy at West Point is holding a conference on these subjects, called "How to End a War: Peace, Justice, and Repair," just next week.) As Rodin puts it, such a framework should be a "fourth and independent component of the morality of war standing alongside *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*."

Defining a framework for guiding the termination of wars, however, is not a straightforward task. You might start, for example, by just continually checking the conditions required to start a war. (*Jus ad bellum* requires meeting six distinct criteria.) Once the reasons that justified resorting to force do not apply any more, that framework would say, the war needs to be terminated. Yet this view simplifies the task at hand too much. First, the very fact that the war *has* begun has changed the moral situation. For example, there are those who already died in the war, new atrocities planned by the enemy could be discovered, or new, unpredictable costs, as well as termination costs, might emerge. Mechanical applications of the *ad bellum* principles could lead to morally perverse situations, since circumstances alter cases.

Second, and crucially, *ad bellum* conditions are not themselves the groundwork of the morality of war. They are the *application* of moral principles to specific situations, in which the two competing aims—to allow the victim to use defensive force while minimizing the harm of war—are balanced. To paraphrase Amartya Sen in his *The Idea of Justice* (2011), the task of a moral theory of ending wars is in "the prevention of manifest injustice in the world, rather than seeking the perfectly just." To achieve progress in developing such a theory, we must recognize that there are differences in the moral evaluation between resorting to force and ending the use of force.

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