

Contrasting Traditional Greek vs Platonic vs Epicurean Views of Justice

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2022 at 11:29 AM

I only have time to start this topic, but this morning while driving I heard it asserted in a podcast that in Book One of Plato's Republic, Socrates had attacked the traditional Greek view (which was asserted to be doing good to your friends and doing harm to your enemies). Supposedly Socrates said that rather than doing harm to one's enemies one should try to "improve" them.

If true, I can easily imagine such a doctrine being considered to be a component of virtue, with a universalized conclusion that doing harm to ones enemies is always bad.

It seems to me that Epicurus' views on justice are much more realistic -- to neither do harm *nor be harmed* with the implication that there is no universal rule of benevolence to "improve" one's enemies. One should make friends of them if possible, not treat them as enemies if friendship is not possible, or when necessary have nothing to do with them.

[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.

I would expect that there are probably articles out there which discuss this in detail which would be worth looking into. We regularly discuss the Justice doctrines without making a lot of progress, and if we could link Epicurus' views to specific Platonic or Aristotelian ideas to which they are responses, things would probably be much more clear.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 22, 2022 at 5:11 PM

Trying to "improve" one's enemies has a long history and to a degree gets to the heart of what's so destructive about religion (aside from the issues of "faith" and the supernatural). The Crusades and the Inquisition come readily to mind.

For that matter, trying to improve one's friends isn't such a great idea. Try telling a loved one that they need to lose weight! 😏😏

Post by “Little Rocker” of December 23, 2022 at 3:38 PM

Plato is a slippery bastard who says different things in different places, so it's always difficult to pin him down. In Plato's Apology, for example, Socrates definitely recognizes an obligation not to harm others, at least one's fellow citizens, but he grounds that obligation in *self-interested* reasons. Namely, if you make someone worse, then you are yourself more likely to suffer injustice as a result. So, if I make my neighbor a worse person, then I have reason to fear that they will harm me. That, in some sense, is a quasi-Epicurean argument. Whether that gives you a prudential reason to *improve* people for self-protection is less clear, but I can at least imagine some cases that might motivate an Epicurean to make an attempt at 'frank speech' to strengthen or restore a relationship. For the most part, though, I think people who significantly violate trust get exiled from an Epicurean community. But those are just idle musings.

In case you're curious, I've attached the relevant passage from Republic 1, which is a mess of an argument for a number of reasons. The upshot is that a person cannot make someone a worse person and call it justice.

To me the biggest difference between Epicurus and Plato on justice is that for Epicurus, we create justice through an agreement. For Epicurus, justice simply doesn't exist until we make it. For Plato, justice is something we discover--it exists prior to (and independent of) any experience or agreement. That's not to say that Epicurus does not build objective criteria into his conception--he has empirical mechanisms for critiquing agreements in terms of their ability to achieve security for members. The objectivity for Plato, by contrast, comes from an abstract perfection that exists independent of human agents.

Post by “Don” of December 23, 2022 at 3:52 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

Plato is a slippery bastard

It always warms my heart when I read things like this. 😊 Makes me feel better for thinking Socrates was an annoying jerk. Not sure I would have voted to convict and condemn him, but his disregard for his wife and children are at the top of my list for holding the opinion that he was a jerk.

Post by “Cassius” of December 23, 2022 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

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And thus we have an excellent example of how a person can be a prince of a guy and still say some very "sharp" things about philosophical opponents! 😊

Post by “Don” of December 23, 2022 at 4:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

still say some very "sharp" things about philosophical opponents! 😊

LOL. Let's say "frank" things 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of December 23, 2022 at 11:40 PM

Slippery bastard, indeed! In reading through the above download, it seems that at least every other line could be easily refuted (which is similar to the rest of the tiny amount of Plato that I've read). Yet the argument blithely proceeds....

[Don](#) there are some examples of "good" in there in case you're interested.

Post by “Don” of December 24, 2022 at 12:14 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2796-contrasting-traditional-greek-vs-platonic-vs-epicurean-views-of-justice/>

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Yet the argument blithely proceeds....

Maybe it was just to try and shut Socrates up.

"By Zeus, yeah, sure, I agree with you. (Now please, just shut...)"

"Ah, but what about..."

"Yeah, okay! That, too. (Just please, shut the...)"

" And yet,..."

"Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom."

"Ah, when you return we shall talk about..."

"Oh, I'm not coming back.. (By Zeus, what a @\$&!)"