

Can killing another human be justified under Epicurean philosophy?

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 25, 2023 at 1:46 PM

Here is a tough question: Can the killing of a another human being ever be justified under Epicurean philosophy? Thoughts?

Post by “Don” of October 25, 2023 at 2:35 PM

It's all about context. Self-defense? To prevent them from killing others? Etc etc etc.

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2023 at 3:07 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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[Quote from Don](#)

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Don gives a very short answer - almost as if he is implying that the question isn't "tough" at all!



Actually I agree that the question as worded is not very difficult, and the answer is "yes," as illustrated by Cassius Longinus' decision to act in regard to Julius Caesar even as an avowed Epicurean.

But there is a lot of toughness that comes in as Don says when he says "it's all about context." And also that's another way of saying "*Justified to whom?*" Justified to the police or the courts?

Justified to the dead man's family? Justified to god? Justified as not being a breach of some contention of absolute justice? Justified to Epicurus as a person? You'd have to know more facts to be able to give a thorough opinion on whether the deed was "justified" in the sense that you will reward and honor and respect the killer in the future, or whether you will hold him in disrepute and disrespect and want nothing to do with the killer in the future.

And I think that's the real question Kalosyni is asking. If we reword it as "Is there a "flat" rule against killing another human being in all circumstances?" It seems to me that that pretty clearly is answerable under Epicurean philosophy as "No - there is no flat absolute rule against all killing of human beings in all circumstances." Then you have to get into all the details of the repercussions in terms of punishment and regret and remorse (if any) after that, where the issues are very tough.

Post by "Kalosyni" of October 25, 2023 at 3:09 PM

There isn't much in the extant texts about **this truth: Any time you harm or kill another human there will be consequences** - often unforeseeable and potentially unpleasant.

PD5 is somewhat related to this: "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."

Post by "Kalosyni" of October 25, 2023 at 3:10 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

often unforeseeable and potentially unpleasant.

Some kind of retribution or revenge.

Post by "Kalosyni" of October 25, 2023 at 3:18 PM

Here is an interesting article about wrongdoing and punishment, in ancient Athens...and excerpt:

Quote

The Athenians, then, punished in answer to someone's anger, but to what end did they do so? If a modern citizen were to hear that someone, a parent or teacher, or a state, had punished out of anger, he would expect the motives of the punisher to be essentially vindictive. Anger, we think, leads directly to a desire for payback of the eye-for-an-eye variety. In contrast, the Athenians developed a far more nuanced view of what it meant to take anger as the starting point of punishment. Anger might be the origin of punishment, but they also conceded that it was a disease.

(I haven't yet read the whole article, but looks to be interesting).

[Discussion Series: Athenian Law Lectures - The Center for Hellenic Studies](#)

Punishment in Ancient Athens Danielle S. Allen, University of Chicago Part I) Introduction Ask any modern citizen to name a punishment meted out by their state...
chs.harvard.edu

Post by "Pacatus" of October 25, 2023 at 6:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Justified to whom?"

Whilst I agree that context and circumstance are critical, I just want to say that I think we ought to be careful not to totally relativize the question: the most atrocious act against another human being you can think of can likely be justified by "someone" somehow (especially, perhaps, the perpetrator).

With that said: (a) it seems almost universal across cultures (historical and present) that justification is called for with regard to acts of harm (whether we might think whatever justification is valid or not), while acts of kindness and compassion generally do not require such justification. And (b) justification and justice (in terms of a just act), despite their etymological relation, are not the same thing. The question of justice would seem to be what circumstances might justify (in Epicurean thought) violation of the compact to neither harm nor be harmed.

Yes, it's a tough nut. I think [Don](#) gave two good examples.

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I want to add that there are different concepts of justice generally: e.g., restorative or redemptive/rehabilitating as opposed to merely retributive/punitive.