

What is Virtue and what aspects of Virtue does an Epicurean cultivate?

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 13, 2025 at 8:17 AM

I want to start a discussion on the topic of virtue (aspects of which may have already been discussed in the past) but mainly because it seems that this topic hasn't had enough time in the limelight as what it deserves.

Principal Doctrine 5 - An Epicurean sees virtue as important for a happy and pleasurable life because it is the means to a happy and pleasurable life - virtue is itself not the end goal but is the way that leads to a pleasurable life.

So up for discussion is anything from Epicurean philosophy (including from Philodemus) that touches on development of virtue for the sake of a happy and pleasurable life.

I will start off with thinking about how we understand the word "virtue" in our current times.

Here is the opening from Wikipedia:

Quote

A **virtue** (Latin: *virtus*) is a trait of excellence, including traits that may be [moral](#), social, or intellectual. The cultivation and refinement of virtue is held to be the "[good](#) of humanity" and thus is [valued](#) as an [end purpose](#) of life or a foundational [principle](#) of being. In human practical ethics, a virtue is a disposition to choose actions that succeed in showing high moral standards: doing what is said to be right and avoiding what is wrong in a given field of endeavour, even when doing so may be unnecessary from a [utilitarian](#) perspective. When someone takes pleasure in doing what is right, even when it is difficult or initially unpleasant, they can establish virtue as a habit. Such a person is said to be **virtuous** through having cultivated such a disposition. The opposite of virtue is [vice](#).

(Wikipedia has more on this [here](#)).

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 13, 2025 at 10:19 AM

All of these questions to consider: What is "virtue" according to this or that philosopher (ancient or modern)? What is "virtue" according to the current zeitgeist? What do I think "virtue" is, and what does Epicurus say about "virtue"?

Also found this essay as food for thought on ["Virtue and Ethics"](#).

Post by "Pacatus" of August 15, 2025 at 4:41 PM

Here is a Wiki article on **Virtue Ethics**: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_ethics

"Some modern versions of virtue ethics do not define virtues in terms of well being or flourishing, and some go so far as to define virtues as traits that tend to promote some other good that is defined independently of the virtues, thereby subsuming virtue ethics under (or somehow merging it with) *consequentialist* ethics."

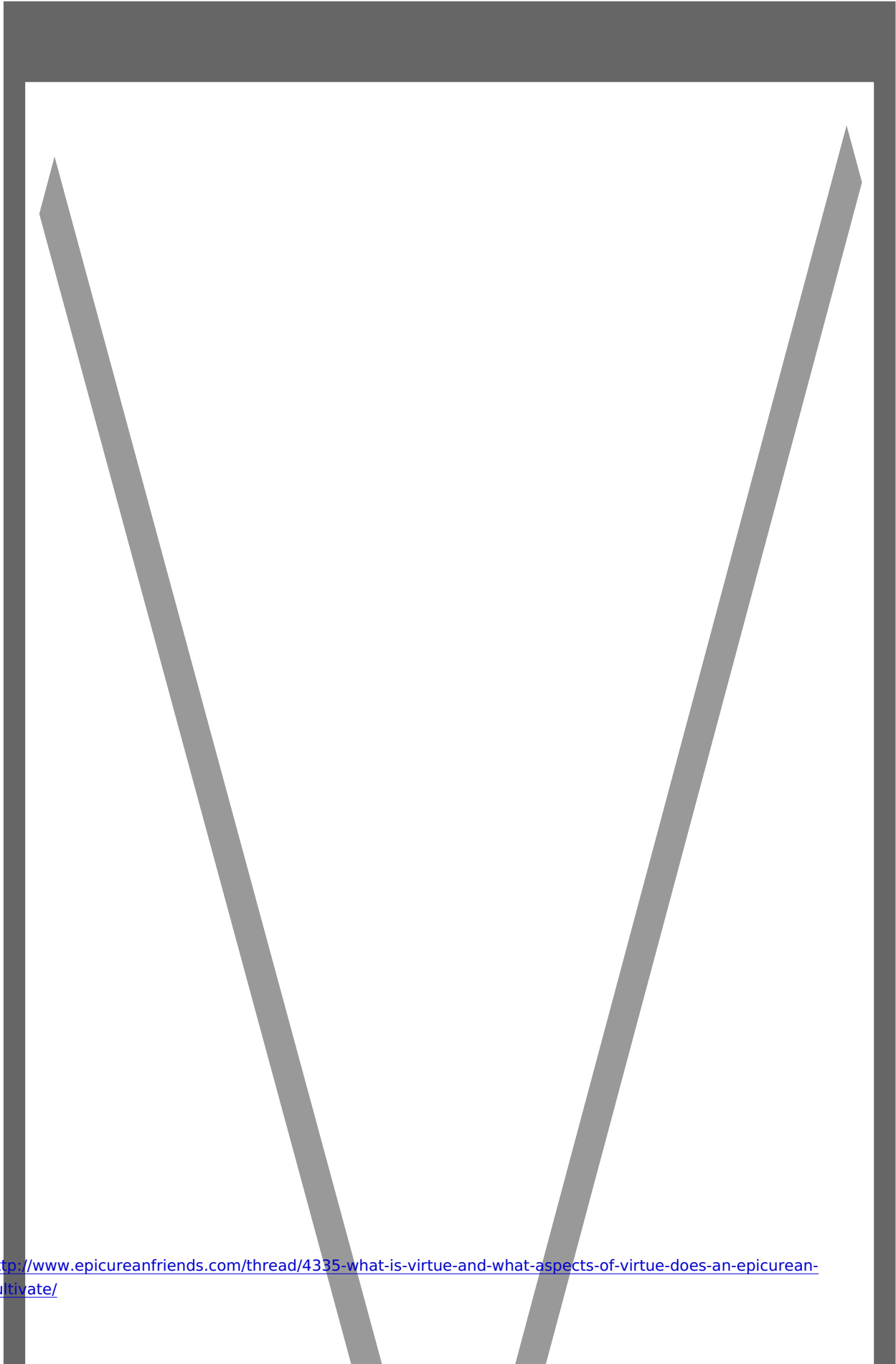
This seems to be the move made by Lawrence Becker (sort of the "founding father" in academic circles of modern Stoicism) in his *A New Stoicism*. He essentially defines virtue as something necessary to enhance and sustain "effective agency" toward some (any) endeavor. Effective agency is necessary (though not sufficient) to the successful outcome of any endeavor. He makes some other (to me very questionable, to say the least) moves to try and salvage a Stoic virtue ethics from being a thoroughgoing consequentialism. I think he fails - and once again reminds of Emily Austin's essay suggesting that modern Stoics are really disguised Epicureans. (Becker also dismisses any notion of an intelligent, providential universe. And he seems to hedge on eudaimonia as telos.)

Arete

This does at least remove "virtue" from any particular "moralism". And I think that moves it closer to the original Greek term **areté** (ἀρετή) - as "excellence" of any kind - especially a person or thing's "full realization of potential or inherent function." (Which may include, but does not strictly refer to, "moral virtue").

And: "The ancient Greeks applied the term arete (ἀρετή) to anything: for example, the excellence of a chimney, the excellence of a bull for breeding, and the excellence of a man." Since this view seems focussed on functional values, it seems closer to consequentialism to me.

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[Arete - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

I'm sure that [Don](#) can contribute more on this ...

Post by "Pacatus" of August 15, 2025 at 4:57 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Principal Doctrine 5 - An Epicurean sees virtue as important for a happy and pleasurable life because it is the means to a happy and pleasurable life - virtue is itself not the end goal but is the way that leads to a pleasurable life.

In addition to PD5, there is also this --

Letter to Menoiceus 132: "Of all this the beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy: for from prudence are sprung all the other **virtues**, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly, (nor, again, to live a life of prudence, honor, and justice) without living pleasantly. *For the **virtues** are by nature bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.*"

Post by "Matteng" of August 19, 2025 at 8:50 AM

Thanks, I often worry

that the topic sometimes fades into the background because rivals to Epicurean philosophy often define virtue as the highest good instead of Pleasure.

One must be careful not to create a false dichotomy like virtue vs. pleasure. In Epicureanism, virtue and pleasure grow together, but virtue gets its value from pleasure, not the other way around. Virtue is the greatest but instrumental good. Therefore, many people (as I used to) unconsciously believe that Stoics, for example, are generally more virtuous than Epicureans, which is nonsense. The path to pleasure/eudaimonia always leads via virtue. I see the biggest difference (virtue or pleasure as the core of eudaimonia/life goal) in that eudaimonia, the good self or inner spirit, is defined by the Stoics as "doing good" while Epicureans define it as

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"experiencing good."

Post by "Eikadistes" of August 19, 2025 at 9:50 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

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No doubt!



VIRTUE



PLEASURE

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 19, 2025 at 10:04 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

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Very well said [Matteng](#)

This section of the Letter to Menoecus points toward choosing actions which are non-harming:

"He therefore thinks it better to be unfortunate in reasonable action than to prosper in unreason. For it is better in a man's actions that what is well chosen (should fail, rather than that what is ill chosen) should be successful owing to chance."

Choosing actions which do not harm others will often (but not every single time) create the best outcome.

Post by “Matteng” of August 25, 2025 at 4:55 PM

The Epicurean way of life is the way of Virtue and Pleasure.

Here is an quote from Philodemus which extends the one from PD and letter from Menoecus:

„It is impossible for one to live pleasurably without living prudently and honourably and justly, and also without living courageously and temperately and magnanimously, and without making friends and without being philanthropic, and in general without having all the other virtues. For the greatest errors in things we choose or avoid occur when some people accomplish individual actions while they hold the opposite view and, because of that, are in the grip of vices. (De elect. XIV. 1-14)“

Book: The Ethics of Philodemus, from Voula Tsouna

Post by “Matteng” of August 26, 2025 at 5:13 AM

To get a better understanding of Virtues it could help to have a look at the "sub-virtues" to see more aspects of them. In my opinion the core of them all is prudence (phronesis) and friendship (philia) so the rational and social aspect for a good or better life which sometimes makes it necessary to endure pain for greater pleasure (hedonic calculus for example, enduring pain for others...).

I would also like to point out that the following overview is a purely human classification and is not set in stone; there are/were other classifications/aspects in antiquity. Another caveat is that these classifications were often made by philosophers for whom virtue represented the highest good (so be careful when it is about Pleasure or Piety for Gods) .

Wisdom - Φρόνησις (Phronēsis)

Good sense - εὐβουλία (euboulia)
Good calculation - εὐλογιστία (eulogistia)
Quick-wittedness - ἀγχίνοια (anchinoia)
Discretion - σύνεσις (synesis)
Resourcefulness - εὐμηχανία (eumēchania)

Justice - Δικαιοσύνη (Dikaiosynē)

Piety - ὁσιότης (hosiotēs)
Honesty / Truthfulness - ἀλήθεια (alētheia)
Equity / Fairness - ἰσότης (isotēs)
Fair dealing / Non-greed - ἀνεξικακία (anexikakia, sometimes glossed as forbearance)

Courage - Ἄνδρεία (Andreia)

Endurance - καρτερία (karteria)

Confidence - θαρραλεότης (tharraleotēs)

High-mindedness / Magnanimity - μεγαλοψυχία (megalopsychia)

Cheerfulness - εὐθυμία (euthymia)

Industriousness / Hard work - φιλοπονία (philoponia)

Temperance - Σωφροσύνη (Sōphrosynē)

Good discipline - εὐταξία (eutaxia)

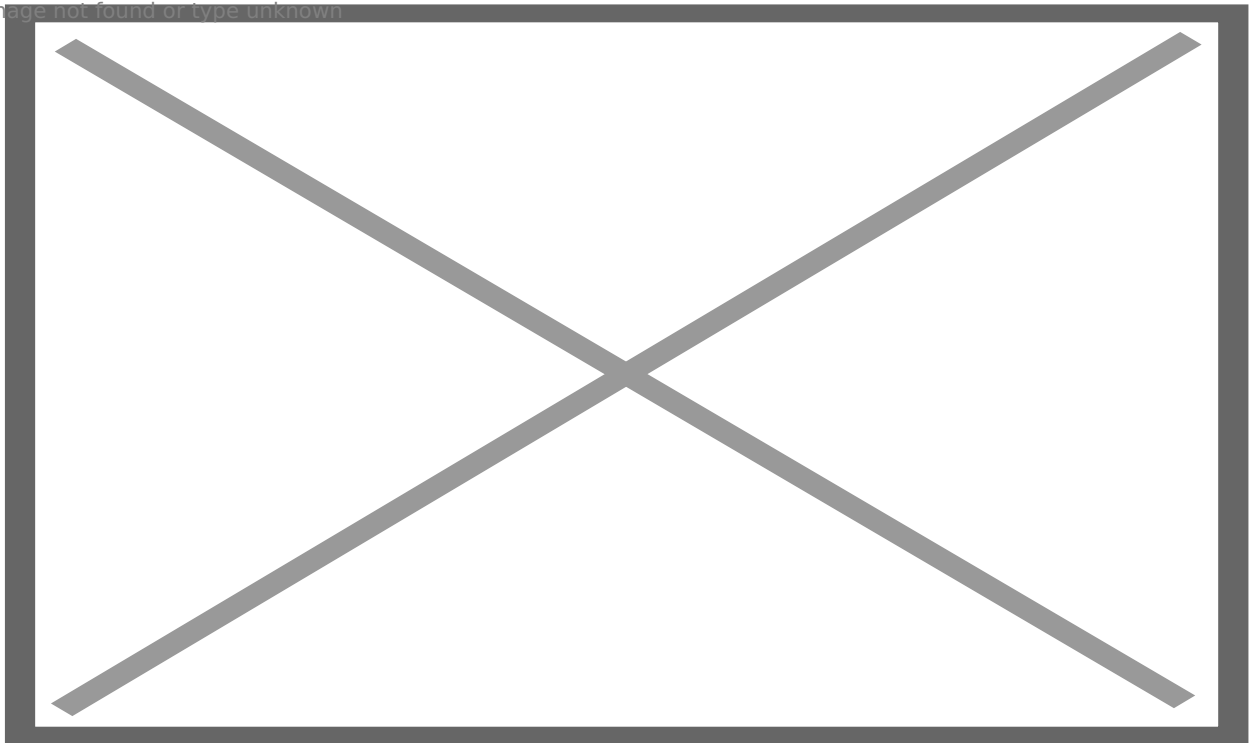
Seemliness / Decorum - κόσμιος (kosmios)

Modesty - αἰδώς (aidōs)

Self-control - ἐγκράτεια (enkrateia)

Here is a similiar classification/explanation:

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[Forty-Four Stoic Virtues: Pseudo-Andronicus' On Passions, and Stoic Life by Matthew Sharpe](#)

Introduction It is well-known that the Stoics hold there to be four cardinal virtues: courage (andreia), justice (dikaiosunē), moderation (sōphrosunē), and...

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2025 at 6:05 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Another caveat is that these classifications were often made by philosophers for whom virtue represented the highest good (so be careful when it is about Pleasure or Piety for Gods) .

I would say that's the most important point, and if forgotten it turns the whole classification process into a problem rather than a help. I like to outline and classify things too - so long as I don't forget they the purpose of the outline is to help in application, and not to uncover some hidden power from the classification itself. It's easy to get lost in classifying and the Stoics are a great example of not seeing the forest because they spend too much time classifying the trees.

Post by “DaveT” of August 26, 2025 at 11:52 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

The path to pleasure/eudaimonia always leads via virtue. I see the biggest difference (virtue or pleasure as the core of eudaimonia/life goal) in that eudaimonia, the good self or inner spirit, is defined by the Stoics as "doing good" while Epicureans define it as "experiencing good."

I am enjoying this discussion. I recently read that a distinction between the Stoics and the Epicureans was that the Stoics focused on a public, civic-minded orientation, and thus a belief in virtue as a goal to that end. And that the Epicureans' belief in more private life promoted pleasure etc. and friendship for personal happiness. I know this may sound simplistic, but that comparison helps me understand why the two philosophies were so different in the view and uses of virtue.

Post by “Cassius” of August 26, 2025 at 1:55 PM

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[Quote from DaveT](#)

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I think that's definitely true - that they had a different orientation toward public life. That seems like an innocuous enough distinction, but then you get to the question of "why" they had a such a different attitude. And I'd say that stems directly from the physics as to the nature of the universe. If you think there's a "Providence" that has designed the universe and everything in it intelligently, then you're going to want to work to bring not only yourself but also your society into conformity with those views.

If you think that there is no central intelligent designer, and that nature works through practical experience in many different ways according to circumstances, then you're going to be much more willing to "live and let live" and let each person pursue their own personal view of what makes them happy.

Post by "Patrikios" of August 27, 2025 at 5:05 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

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[Matteng](#)

Thanks for sharing that insight on "doing good" vs "experiencing good". I see the Stoic focus on virtue more for the external effect; how this virtuous act appears to others. While I see the Epicurean focus more on experiencing pleasure while engaged in a virtuous activity, and prudently considering whether this 'virtuous' activity brings pain or pleasure to others.

Does this view follow from your analysis?

Post by “Matteng” of August 29, 2025 at 3:46 PM

[Patrikios](#)

The Stoics would see Virtue as internal and Pleasure mostly as external when it is caused from objects. But how Virtue is seen by others reminds me in Cicero wurh his „ heros of the past“ who define Virtue.

Yes I see both, pleasure in the Virtuous disposition (like gratefulness or feeling philia/friendship, or love instead of hate, envy ...) and in getting things desires better.

Post by “Matteng” of August 29, 2025 at 4:09 PM

Hirams Essays on Epicurean Virtue are so good, I come many time back to him when this subject confuses me or Stoics try to convinced about their view:

[On Epicurean Virtue | Society of Friends of Epicurus](#)

[Dialogue On Virtue | Society of Friends of Epicurus](#)

[Philodemus’ Method of Studying and Cultivating the Virtues | Society of Friends of Epicurus](#)

But how to grow Virtue and the Pleasant Life in a good way ?

What I read from the Epicurean texts:

-> Improve Prudence:

- Sober Reasoning

- Hedonic Calculus

- Reflection of Desires / Values

- Eleminating unnecessary fears/ pain (with a realistic world view)

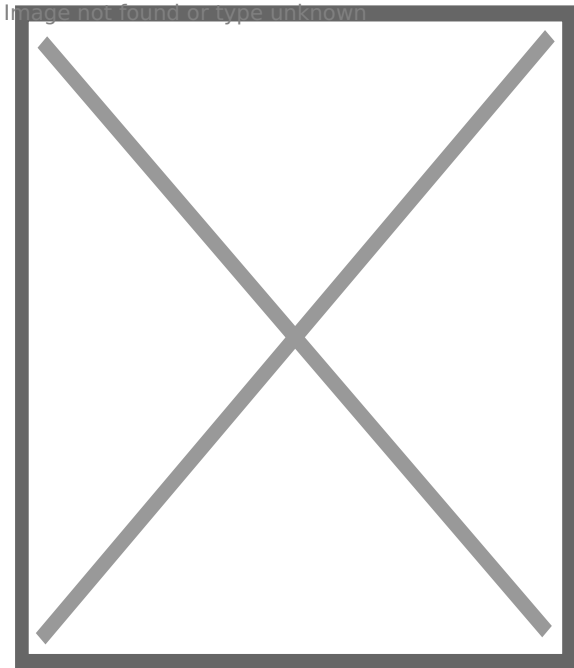
- Train to Endure Pains/ Fears for greater Pleasure / reducing greater Pain/Fears

- Try active to be more other regarding / altruistic (philia/friendship) but in a prudent way.

- In best case everyone is your friend but that is not possible in this world, here live psychopaths and humans with harmful dispositions, there is no natural law, cosmopolitism or

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human rights who protect you. So justice is prudent and sometimes to avoid people or protect from them:



[John Allen Chau - Wikipedia](#)

en.m.wikipedia.org

Reminds me on the Epictetus quote for Epicurus: "Be not deceived; be not seduced and mistaken. There is no natural tie between reasonable beings. Believe me. Those who say otherwise mislead and impose upon you"