

The Absence of Sin

Post by “Rolf” of April 21, 2025 at 4:45 PM

As a result of Cassius' friendly encouragement, I've decided to post this publicly, along with a tongue-in-cheek title. 😊

Something I really appreciate about Epicurean philosophy is that there is no concept of sin. I don't necessarily mean the concept of religious sin - I was not raised religious - but the idea of falling short of some ideal. With other philosophies of life I've tried on, I always feel this shame or guilt whenever I miss the mark. Maybe I indulged too much in worldly desire and clinging (Buddhism) or allowed my emotions rather than virtue guide me (Stoicism). But with Epicureanism, I haven't "sinned" if I do something that results in more pain than pleasure. It's a learning process. Sometimes I drink too heavily on a night out and feel hungover the next day, and realise that I would've been better off drinking more moderately. But it's not some kind of stain on my soul. Life can be messy and Epicurus, from what I understand, gets this. There's nothing inherently despicable about living a life filled with pain, it's just misguided and unnecessary.

Post by “Cassius” of April 21, 2025 at 5:21 PM

[Don](#) can help with the Greek wording but there's definitely use of words that are translated as "evil," but I agree that "sin" is different, and that you're making a very important point. There's no God or absolute force in relation to which you're "sinning against." You can very definitely commit acts that lead others to be mad at you and therefore have negative impacts later, but there's a world of difference between practical problems, which can be dealt with, and "mortal sins" which supposedly can lead to eternity in hell.

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 21, 2025 at 8:40 PM

In the Sayings of the Wise (10.120), Epíkouros employs the word ἀμάρτημα (*amártēma*) meaning "mistakes", "failures", "faults" "guilts", "flaws" "errors", or "sins". This corresponds with several employments of αμαρτία (*amartía*) and ἀμαρτάνω (*amartánō*, meaning "to miss", "

to fail to correctly aim", "to lose", "to fail", "to sin") throughout Paul's Epistles in the New Testament.

I bet we'll find more examples.

Post by "Don" of April 21, 2025 at 9:32 PM

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers*, X.120: "The school holds that *sins* are not all equal ; ..."

Δοκεῖ δ' αὐτοῖς ἀμαρτήματα ἄνισα εἶναι. ...

(The school) Holds the doctrine that failures are unequal, ... (my translation)

LSJ: ἀμάρτημα , ατος, τό,

A. failure, fault, S.Ant.1261 (Iyr.); freq. in Att. Prose, Antipho 3.3.8, Th.2.65, etc.; midway between ἀδίκημα and ἀτύχημα, Arist.EN1135b18, Rh.1374b7; sinful action, opp. κατόρθωμα, Zeno Stoic.1.54, cf. PTeb.5.3, etc.; "τὸ περὶ τὴν τέχνην λεγόμενον ἄ." Pl.Plt.296b, cf.Ap.22d; "εἶς τινα" Id.Lg.729e; "περὶ τὸ σῶμα" Id.Grg.479a.

"midway between ἀδίκημα and ἀτύχημα" occurs in Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics. ie, between something intentional wrong or error of judgement and misfortune or fault of ignorance, a mistake.

Middle Liddell: 1. a failure, fault, sin, Soph., Plat. 2. a bodily defect, malady, id=Plat.

Post by "Bryan" of April 21, 2025 at 11:51 PM

Yes "mistake" or "failure" is the idea for ἡ ἀμαρτία. Using that same word, Epikouros in On Nature Book 14, says (of Plato):

"but some people **make a mistake** (ἀμαρτάνουσι) regarding these component elements."

Full quote is:

"...Such is the case for those who define one particular shape for fire, or earth, or water, or air: since they are more ridiculous than those who do not define any type of shape for each element -- given that, in their comparative juxtapositions, those who define a specific shape for each element should have agreed, either willingly or unwillingly, that certain multiple particular forms of shapes are produced which can affirmatively be said to be substantial, in accordance with each compound. But some people **make a mistake (ἀμαρτάνουσιν)** regarding these component elements, and there is something more consistent to be said that pertains to these elements -- speaking in this way, those who define one particular shape for each element could also entirely refer to the variety in the mixtures..."

P.Herc. 1148 col. 1/34

ΟΡΙΖΟΝΤΑΣ ΧΗΜΑΓ... ΟΣΙ
ΔΙΟΝ Η ΓΗΣ ΜΥΔΑΤΟΣ... ΡΟΣ.
ΟΤΙ ΓΕΛΟΙΟΤΕΡΟΙ ΕΙΣ ΤΩΝ ΟΥΧΟ
ΡΙΖΟΝΤΩΝ ΜΕΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΔΕ ΤΑΣ
ΠΑΡΑΘΕΣΕΙΣ ΟΜΟΛΟΓΗΣΑΝ
ΩΝ ΑΝ Η ΚΟΥΣΙΩΣ Η ΑΚΟΥ
ΩΣ ΓΙΝΕΣΘΑΙ ΤΙΝΑΣ ΧΗΜΑ
ΩΝ ΙΔΙΑ ΔΕΙΔΗ ΚΑΘΕ ΚΑΣΤΗΝ
ΣΙΩ ΔΗ ΤΡΗΘΙΣ ΑΝΑΝΣΥΓ
ΙΣΙΝ. ΟΙ ΜΕΓΓΑΡΤΟΙΣ ΜΕΝ
ΟΙ ΧΕΙΡΟΙΣ Α ΜΑΡΤΑΝΟΥΣΙΝ
ΚΟΛΟΥΣΟΝ ΔΕ ΤΙ ΤΟΥΤΟΙΣ
ΑΛΛΟΝ ΟΥΤΩ ΛΕΓΟΝΤΕΣ
ΤΟΙΕΝΑΝ ΚΑΙ ΣΩΣ ΔΕ ΤΗΝ
ΣΜΕΙΖΕΣΙ ΠΑΡΑΛΛΑΓΗ
ΔΕ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΗΝ

Post by "Don" of April 22, 2025 at 12:01 AM

The word akin to that also occurs in DL X.137:

137] He further disagrees with the Cyrenaics in that they hold that pains of body are worse than mental pains ; at all events evil-doers (ἁμαρτάνοντας hamartanontas) are made to suffer bodily punishment ; whereas Epicurus holds the pains of the mind to be the worse ; at any rate the flesh endures the storms of the present alone, the mind those of the past and future as well as the present. In this way also he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body.

ἁμαρτάνοντας

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἁμαρτάνω](#)

Post by “Don” of April 22, 2025 at 12:40 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

But with Epicureanism, I haven't "sinned" if I do something that results in more pain than pleasure. It's a learning process. Sometimes I drink too heavily on a night out and feel hungover the next day, and realise that I would've been better off drinking more moderately. But it's not some kind of stain on my soul. Life can be messy and Epicurus, from what I understand, gets this. There's nothing inherently despicable about living a life filled with pain, it's just misguided and unnecessary.

We got off on a Greek tangent, but I wanted to say that that's well put. Teachers and students in the Garden definitely corrected each other, pointed out mistakes, and gave frank feedback. One had to acknowledge one's mistakes, too; and you've given good examples of "could have made better choices." And there's nothing "sinful" about overindulging in wine, for example. But if you're going to, you've made a choice and you'll have to deal with the consequences. No more, no less.

Post by “Cassius” of April 22, 2025 at 2:55 AM

This has been a good thread and maybe not gotten to exactly the destination Rolf may have thought but it points out how important it is to be precise.

Quote from Rolf

There's nothing inherently despicable about living a life filled with pain, it's just misguided and unnecessary.

Even here, we have to balance the wording that Torquatus and Epicurus used about "blame":

Quote from Torquatus

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

Quote from Epicurus to Menoeceus

[133] For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.

Post by "Rolf" of April 22, 2025 at 5:42 AM

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power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.

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Hmm, this is certainly an interesting counterpoint. You're right about the importance of precision in language - I appreciate your frankness!

These two quotes do sound rather uncharacteristically *harsh* to my ear. Although perhaps the former is a case of Cicero's embellishment. Epicurus using the word "blame" in the second quote makes sense to me, as I read it as him saying that we can only hold ourselves accountable for what is in our control. Feel free to correct me if I'm off-base here.

Post by "Rolf" of April 22, 2025 at 5:43 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

And there's nothing "sinful" about overindulging in wine, for example. But if you're going to, you've made a choice and you'll have to deal with the consequences. No more, no less.

Well said Don, that's exactly how I see it.

Post by "Don" of April 22, 2025 at 8:03 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Epicurus using the word "blame" in the second quote makes sense to me, as I read it as him saying that we can only hold ourselves accountable for what is in our control

I'd say you're firmly on base.

Here's that section from my Menoikeus translation, and I just realized I need to correct the text. Here is the correct version:

133j. ὧ καὶ τὸ μεμπτὸν καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον παρακολουθεῖν πέφυκεν.

καὶ τὸ μεμπτὸν καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον

μεμπτὸν "to be blamed; blameworthy"

ἐναντίον "opposite, contrary"

This phrase is normally translated as some permutation of "both blame and praise." However, the word "praise/praiseworthy" is not in the Greek but implied by the juxtaposition of καὶ τὸ μεμπτὸν καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον which literally means "that which is blameworthy and that which is its opposite."

παρακολουθεῖν "following beside, following closely, c. dat., Dem.: of a physician, π. νοσήματι Plat.; so, π. τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς Dem.: of an audience, to follow with the mind, Aeschin."

πέφυκεν "brought forth, produced"

Which brings us to the end of verse 133 and our consolidated literal translation:

Seeing that, whom do you consider is better or more powerful than one who holds pious beliefs concerning the gods; one who has absolutely no fears concerning death; one who has rationally determined the τέλος of one's natural state; and the one who grasps that, on the one hand, good things (namely pleasures) are both easily attained and easily secured, and, on the other hand, evil things (or pains) are either short in time or brief in suffering; someone who laughs at Fate which is introduced onto the stage of life by many as the mistress of all things? For that person, even though some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power, for although necessity is beyond our control, they see that chance is unstable and there is no other master beyond themselves, so that blame and its opposite are inseparably connected to themselves.