

Should Epicurus be viewed as a pure consequentialist, virtue ethicist, or both?

Post by “wbernys” of May 7, 2026 at 8:21 PM

If any of you have seen the PhilSurvey, it asks a question about whether your normative ethics is consequentialist or virtue ethics or deontology. I think it's fair to say he's surely not deontology. But i struggle between putting him as a consequentialist or virtue ethicist.

Obviously i know these are modern categories which may not fit Epicurus entirely but i personally think of him more as a Virtue ethicist rather than a strict consequentialist in large part because of the Letter to Menoceus.

He says "And he considers it better to be rationally unfortunate than irrationally fortunate, since it is better for a beautiful choice to have the wrong results than for an ugly choice to have the right results just by chance." (Peter Saint-Andre). This seem to pain the picture of personal intentions mattering more than actual consequences.

Along with Diogenes of Oenoanda saying "The sum of happiness consists in our disposition, of which we are master."

I'm obviously not trying to say he is part of the Stoic "virtue in of itself" but he seems to stress personal character so much, even to the point of disregarding external consequences as seen above, that it feels wrong to consider him just a consequentialist, and perhaps listed as both a virtue ethicist and consequentialist together. Curious for other people's thoughts.

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2026 at 7:03 AM

I think you can find quotes such as the Diogenes of Oionanda statement that talk about the importance of attitude, but why is attitude important? Why is virtue important? Because they bring pleasure, not as goals in themselves. So i'd push back strongly on this direction, and question why someone might think it "feels wrong" to think of him as a consequentialist if not for the psychological pressure of a culture built on virtue ethics.

The conclusion of the philosophy is that the consequence that Nature (not society) calls for is pleasure, not virtue or anything else. Diogenes of Oinoanda himself has one of the most eloquent statements of this in his passage about shouting that a life of happiness is a life of pleasure, and that virtue is but a tool to pleasure, not the other way around.

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 7:20 AM

[Quote from wbernys](#)

He says "And he considers it better to be rationally unfortunate than irrationally fortunate, since it is better for a beautiful choice to have the wrong results than for an ugly choice to have the right results just by chance." (Peter Saint-Andre). This seem to pain the picture of personal intentions mattering more than actual consequences.

To me, that section doesn't point to intention but rather taking an active role in ones choices and rejections versus not letting chance rule what happens to you.

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2026 at 8:37 AM

Further, even if you prefer the "beautiful" wording there (which I don't because of it's very Platonic ring) you can refer back to the adage that Epicurus spits upon the beautiful unless it brings pleasure.

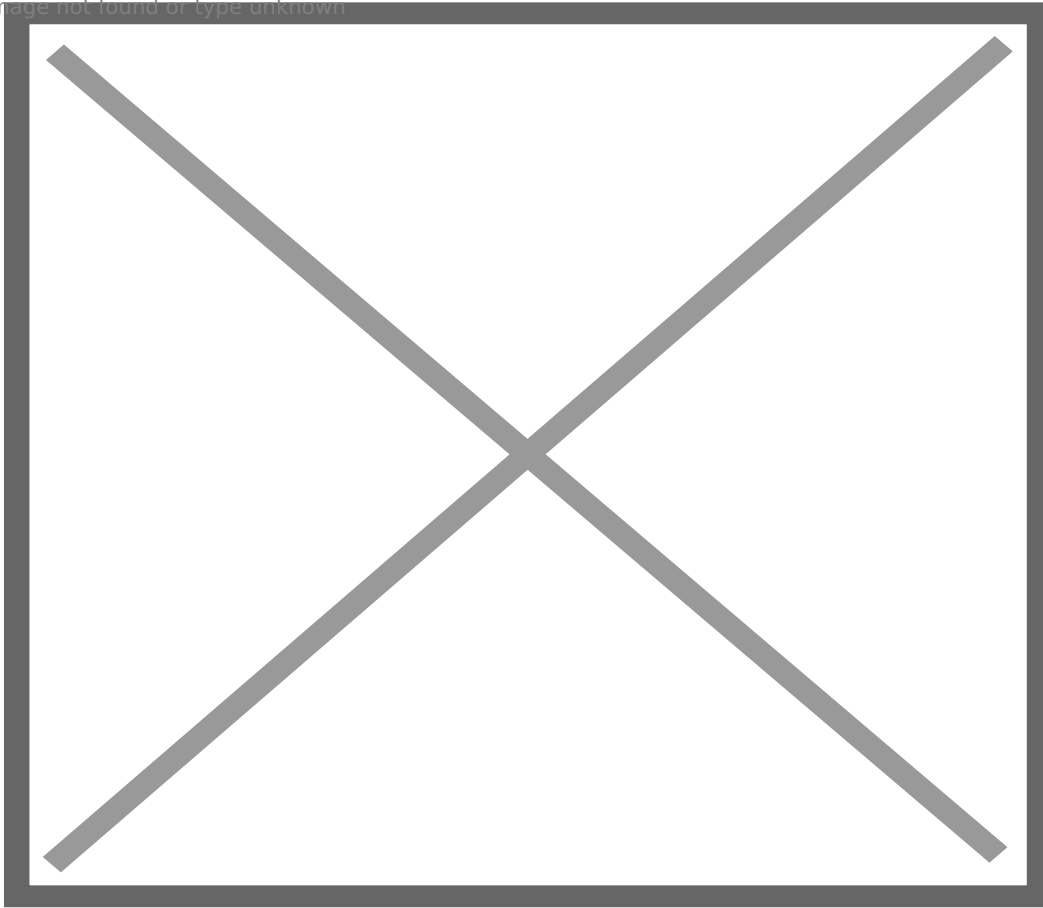
As I understand it the Hicks version is "[135] He believes that the misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool. It is better, in short, that what is well judged in action should not owe its successful issue to the aid of chance."

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2026 at 8:44 AM

It always irritates me when I can't find a quick reference

I have the "spit upon the beautiful" as Bailey's fragment 79, but I am not quickly finding the Usener number

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[Fragment Collection - Epicureanfriends.com](#)

www.epicureanfriends.com

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 8:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am not quickly finding the Usener number

U181

[Epicurus: Fragments - translation](#)

And U512

[Epicurus: Fragments - translation \(3\)](#)

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5073-should-epicurus-be-viewed-as-a-pure-consequentialist-virtue-ethicist-or-both/>

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2026 at 9:14 AM

Thanks Don! U512 seems to be the key - with the problem of finding it being that Usener uses "honorable" and "excellence" and "noble." That makes it harder to find when I key on "beautiful," but for purposes of this particular conversation these wordings are even more directly on point.

U512

Aetius, *Doxography*, XII p. 547A: And in his work *On the End-Goal*, he says again: “{=[U70](#)}” And in other passages, he says “I spit upon the honorable and those who vainly admire it, whenever it produces no pleasure.”

Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 30, p. 1124E: ... and when men take for sages those who “spit on excellence, unless pleasure attends it.” [c.f. 1124E @ [U368](#)]

Plutarch, *Is “Live Unknown” a Wise Precept?*, 4, p. 1129B: ... to live together with Leontium and “spit on noble action,” and place the good in the “flesh” and in “titillations.”

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 9:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

with the problem of finding it being that Usener uses "honorable" and "excellence" and "noble."

I just searched for spit

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 8, 2026 at 10:19 AM

So long as we understand we're trying to map ancient thinkers using contemporary terminology, I'm comfortable saying that Epíkouros firmly fits within the category of **consequentialism**. Most philosophers we view as virtue ethicists and deontologists are anti-

Epicurean.

Hedonism is represented as a form of consequentialism, and, according to Epíkouros, "Pleasure is The Goal" and virtues are merely instrumental goods to achieve The Goal of Pleasure.

Post by "Eikadistes" of May 8, 2026 at 10:23 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[Quote from wbernys](#)

I think it's fair to say he's surely not deontology.

No doubt. Kant is typically represented as the prototype of a deontologist. Kant famously argued that stealing bread is categorically unethical, even if it's to feed a starving child.

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2026 at 1:25 PM

I personally think this needs to be hammered home:

To me this conversation is sort of like discussing Epicurus as a "hedonist." Yes I understand that that term has a technical meaning in which pleasure is the key. However in common discussion the term is LOADED with implications, most of which imply that people should choose "pleasures of the moment" over consideration of "all the consequences so as to gain the greatest net pleasure, even if it means temporarily accepting pain." With a proper explanation, the term "hedonism" is fine, but that doesn't cut away the general context that it is loaded with negative vibrations.

So too with "virtue ethics," with "deontology" (clearly the worst) and also "consequentialism" (which strips away the question of "Which consequences?" which is really the important question).

These terms get used to place people in boxes, and the motivation behind the boxing is rarely just a pure intellectual pursuit of truth. Usually the game has much more malicious purposes - to accept a negative label. So we have to be very very careful in how we play those games. Give the wrong people an inch and they will take a mile, and they will use any admission you

make against you as if you are being convicted of murder in court.

(I gather this is pretty much what Eikadistes is saying too.....)

Post by “DaveT” of May 8, 2026 at 2:21 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Usually the game has much more malicious purposes, so we have to be very very careful in how we play those games. Give the wrong people an inch and they will take a mile, and they will use any admission you make against you as if you are being convicted of murder in court.

Who are those maliciously purposed people referred to here? And what goal do you think they have in such a game?

What does Epicurus say about those individuals, as well as how one is to live a happy life among them?

Post by “wbernys” of May 8, 2026 at 3:07 PM

Yeah you all have convinced me, I was already a little unsure about posting this.

But yeah I'm probably letting the societal praise of virtue ethics cloud my view of these texts. To be honest the main reason I liked Epicurus was that I felt he was the only one who could ground virtue in anything real, unlike Stoics and Aristotle who I liked but couldn't accept their view of virtue in of itself, and probably letting that overemphasize how important virtue is for Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of May 8, 2026 at 3:46 PM

[Quote from wbernys](#)

I was already a little unsure about posting this.

No - I'm glad you posted. if you were thinking it it's likely others are too, so always feel free to speak up.

This goes along with Dave's question. Aside from those of us who are really into the topic there's always a general level of background discussion among people who are mildly interested, and it's there that the subtle connotations of the words end up being influential.

If people just accepted the superficial labels then no one would take any serious interest in Epicurus because the superficial labels are coded by society to keep people in line and within society's quad rails.

This forum is here for those who take ideas seriously and want to make up their own minds about things.

This is where I was just thinking and citing earlier this week some of the opening words of DeWitt's book - the second sentence of chapter one in fact

Quote

At the very outset the reader should be prepared to think of him at one and the same time as the most revered and the most reviled of all founders of thought in the Graeco-Roman world.

There's no middle ground on Epicurus. If you don't realize that when you read opinions about Epicurus that you're reading opinions about explosive stuff, then either you or the person you're reading doesn't realize what being talked about at all.

Post by “Don” of May 8, 2026 at 7:32 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This forum is here for those who take ideas seriously and want to make up their own minds about things.



Well said, and, as always, thanks for creating this corner of the Internet in the first place, [Cassius](#)

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