

# Threads of Epicureanism in Art and Literature

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2021 at 11:37 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

This strikes me as hugely important—is there something about the Epicurean conception of justice (as not morally absolute) that appeals to the slaveholder, but repulses the abolitionist?

I think that comment deserves a reply, just not the one I gave it before I moderated myself 😊

I think that regardless of the specifics of the context in which Caldwell was involved, the American Civil War, it is widely true is that the Epicurean concept of justice is always going to appeal to the minority, to the dissenter, to the rebel --- to basically everyone who finds himself or herself in a minority position.

If we happen to find ourselves part of the majority and the establishment, then we like to think that such is the natural order of things, and we tend toward Platonism or Stoicism.

People who find themselves "on the outs" from society are always going to be searching for answers to questions about whether the views of the majority are "right" and "just" for some cosmic reason, or simply because the majority is numerically stronger.

Every time we get tempted to let our emotions pull us in the direction of thinking that one moral position or another is so compelling that it "ought" to be universally received, we've got to remember - I think - that the nature of the cosmos in the Epicurean worldview is that such absolute standards of authority don't exist. We can and we should act as vigorously as possible to see that we surround ourselves with things and relationships that please us, and we separate ourselves from things and relationships that cause us pain, so we get involved where it is reasonable to do so and we fight to defend what we think is just. But we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that there is any absolute universal law or absolute justice that is behind our decision. Presumably across the species pain and pleasure does spring from a common background and we can expect that we aren't the only ones who measure pain and pleasure as we do, but I think it's fair to say that human experience is very wide on that score, and we have to expect that there are lots of people who disagree with us in most facets of life.

I think the bottom line is that no matter how much we may want there to be some cosmic force that writes our conception of justice and enforces it, Epicurus would say that such a cosmic force doesn't exist. That's true in the case of your question for both the slaveholders who thought god was on their side and the abolitionists who thought god was on their side. But we could also pick any other age and context and dispute, no matter how hotly contested, and

analyze it in the same way.

I think something like that is the ultimate philosophic lesson. Whether we are part of the "in crowd" or the "out crowd" is not the determining factor - there's no fate and no human necessity. But that circumstance likely influences who it is who finds themselves motivated to study Epicurus and other views that justify "outsiders" and non-conformists, and who it is who stays closer to home and to "establishment" views like for example the Stoics.