

One of the Greatest Epicureans of All?

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2024 at 9:24 AM

I will have to check into Vardoulakis so thank you. In the meantime I skimmed through Wikipedia, and rather than saying that Spinoza was among the greatest Epicureans of all, I have to begin to question whether Spinoza should be considered an Epicurean at all. Before I go further, nothing I am about to write takes away from my praise of your writing or the benefit that discussing this brings to us here in the forum. Distinguishing others who did not claim forthrightly to be Epicurean from those who did helps us understand the differences in ideas much better. Right now I don't know what Spinoza said himself about Epicurus, but the best way to attack these questions is to lay out the ideas of Epicurus and see how many of them and to what extent Spinoza (or anyone else) agreed. Here's a start:

Epicurus	Spinoza	Rating
1. No Thing Can Be Created From Nothing	1. As a materialist, it appears that Spinoza may perhaps agree with this statement, but it appears Spinoza was a monist rather than an atomist, and there are profound implications to that difference.	
2. Nature Has No Gods Over Her	2. Spinoza apparently said that Nature IS God, much like the Stoics, which would be very different from Epicurus' clear denial of supernatural gods.	

Epicurus**Spinoza****Rating**

3. Spinoza seems to agree with Epicurus that there is no life after death, but there appears to be a question as to whether Spinoza and Epicurus advised us to think about death while we are alive. We'd have to clarify where both the Stoics and Epicurus stood on this as well. Is the "meditate mortem" phrase Stoic, or Epicurean, or both? [Don has posted on this. Article:](#) "By contrast, Spinoza's "free person"—the ideal individual all of whose thoughts and actions are under the guidance of reason, not passion—rarely, if ever, thinks about death. In one of the more striking propositions of his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*, Spinoza notes that "the free person thinks least of all of death." This is because the free person knows that there is nothing to think about. They understand that there is no afterlife, no post-mortem realm of reward and punishment, no world-to-come. When a person dies, there is, for that person, nothing. In this respect, Spinoza's view is closer to that of Epicurus."
3. **Death Is Nothing To Us**

Epicurus

Spinoza

Rating

4. He Who Says "Nothing Can Be Known" Knows Nothing.

4. My first reading indicates that Spinoza may have been a skeptic, and that he may be closer to Plato's idea forms than to Epicurus' sensation-based canonic. [Wikipedia](#): The *Ethics* has been associated with that of [Leibniz](#) and [René Descartes](#) as part of the [rationalist](#) school of thought,^[102] which includes the assumption that ideas correspond to reality perfectly, in the same way that mathematics is supposed to be an exact representation of the world. The writings of [René Descartes](#) have been described as "Spinoza's starting point".^[99] Spinoza's first publication was his 1663 geometric exposition of proofs using [Euclid](#)'s model with definitions and axioms of Descartes' [Principles of Philosophy](#). Following Descartes, Spinoza aimed to understand truth through logical deductions from 'clear and distinct ideas', a process which always begins from the 'self-evident truths' of [axioms](#).^[109]

[Overview of Spinoza's Ethics](#): "From a number of intuitive definitions, axioms, and postulates, Spinoza (1632-1677) seeks by means of the geometric method of proof to understand the essential nature of what is reality from what he believes to be clear and distinct ideas. He views the unity of Nature and God as the only existent uncaused substance and the necessary and efficient cause of all other things. Since God is the same thing as Nature, he concludes by means of Euclid's method of mathematical deduction that mind and the body are two aspects of the same thing: the connection among ideas map exactly to the connection among physical entities."

5. All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation

5. To be determined. This looks good: "Knowledge of good and evil is nothing other than the emotion of pleasure or pain insofar as we are conscious of it." — [Proposition 8, Ethics VI, Spinoza](#). However to be more confident we would need to pin down Spinoza on "virtue."

6. [Pleasure Is the Guide of Life](#)

6. To be determined.

Epicurus	Spinoza	Rating
7. There Is No Such Thing As Absolute Justice.	7. Spinoza On Justice : "Spinoza studies have paid little attention to the concept of justice for centuries. However, he refers to it quite often in different contexts, especially in his mature texts. More specifically, he defines it as synonymous with <i>sum cuique tribuere</i> , even though he fails to provide a reasonable account of how this traditional legal expression fits into his philosophical system. This article shows that there is a relevant philosophical dimension in Spinoza's treatment of the <i>sum cuique</i> that emerges out of his notion of equality. The main section identifies the connection between Spinoza's references on justice as <i>sum cuique</i> and the different conceptions of equality that are inherent in his system (an ontological, a metaphysical, a productive (ethical), a legal, and a political equality). The conclusion tries to answer the question of whether such an understanding of the <i>sum cuique</i> as equality constitutes a theory of justice or not." Definition: <i>Sum cuique tribuere</i> is a Latin phrase that means to give each person what they deserve. It was one of the three general precepts in Roman law, which required people to not harm others, live honestly, and give everyone what they are owed.	
8. There Is No Necessity To Live Under The Control Of Necessity.	8. On first glance it appears that Spinoza was a strong determinist. Cite: Baruch Spinoza, "Human Beings are Determined" Abstract: Baruch Spinoza argues against the doctrine of free will as a result of demonstrating that the activity of our minds is equivalent to the activity of our bodies. The mind is more or less active (or contemplative) in accordance with the body's activity or sensing.	

I will work on updating this when I have more time to go through some of the source materials, but if Spinoza's main resemblance to Epicurus was that he was a "materialist" (and a monist, not an atomist, at that) then I am inclined to think at the moment that a good case could be made that on most core issues of philosophy, Spinoza may not have been an Epicurean at all.

We'll see, but I want to repeat that going through philosophers like this and examining how they compare to Epicurus on points of doctrine is a very helpful exercise.

I am sure the first drafts of this chart will need massive revision as my background in Spinoza is close to zero other than being aware of his name. I will update the chart as I have time and as others may provide cites.