

Question From Chapter 1 on "Altruism"

Post by "Cassius" of August 3, 2019 at 2:43 PM

Poster:

Hello. I have bought Norman DeWitt's 'Epicurus and His Philosophy' and am reading the first chapter. One sentence has caught my attention: "both (Epicurus and Comte) stressed altruism as opposed to self-love..." My question is, to what degree? As an ex-Christian, the problem I had with Christian ethics was that it demanded so much of what Iris Murdoch called 'unselfing' as to undermine both my individuality and my own pleasure. Could a more senior Epicurean spell out what DeWitt means by this sentence? What is Epicurean altruism? Thank you in advance.

Also, does that mean he was opposed to self-love? I thought that's what hedonism, even Epicurus's prudent hedonism, was all about.

Answers:

E1:

Hi Jordan! I am sure some of the long time Epicureans can pitch in here. IMO DeWitt doesn't get this right.

Pleasure is always the way to untangle these questions!

When sharing leads to net pleasure, it is wise.

Because the pleasure of friendship is so great, most of us feel strong pleasure when witnessing the pleasure of our friends-- so it isn't two conflicting goals, our pleasure vs theirs. Our kindness to our friends is inseparable from our own pleasure-- no need to try and pick that apart!

Poster2 : I think Dewitt is trying to say it is different from utilitarian philosophy

Poster1: Oh really? I thought there would've been some overlap between Epicurean and utilitarian philosophy

E1: It is an individual utilitarian philosophy though. Not social utilitarianism.

Poster 3:

Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism had based his philosophy on the pain/ pleasure criterion but extended it to a panhuman level. J.S. Mill said that utilitarianism and Epicureanism were in essence the same. (I can hear some eyes rolling after reading this 😊)

Poster 1:

In the sense that the pleasure of others is linked with my own pleasure? For instance, I wouldn't flirt with the girl at the bar because the displeasure this would cause my girlfriend would cause me displeasure too (because I love her). Is that about right?

E1:

There's a huge difference between social utilitarianism and individual utilitarianism ?. We are definitely not social utilitarians in this philosophy.

But insofar as we judge an action desirable or not according to its effects on us, we are proceeding according to the utility of the action rather than making up some fake absolute categories of actions.

If a person never shares with friends, this won't tend to lead to strong social ties and could be detrimental to long term pleasure.

If we share with our enemies, in some cases we might save ourselves and in others we might have wasted our resources and strengthened those who would harm us-- so the specifics of each situation are critical.

A difference between wise sharing and idealistic sharing is that for us, we don't make altruism itself the goal. Sharing would be like eating, sleeping, reading, working-- any action we put to the test of its effect on us.