

Consequentialism & Moral Relativism within the context of Pleasure-filled Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of March 11, 2020 at 7:13 PM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

That's a very categorical rejection of several of the [Principal Doctrines](#) on your part.

No, I don't see it that way at all. You are quoting the [principal doctrines](#) on justice, and justice is one of the "virtues," all of which are subservient to the most fundamental principle that [pleasure is the guide of life](#).

The subservience of justice to pleasure is explained thoroughly in Torquatus / On Ends:

Quote

XVI. It remains to speak of Justice, to complete the list of the virtues; but this admits of practically the same treatment as the others. Wisdom, Temperance, and Courage I have shown to be so closely linked with Pleasure that they cannot possibly be severed or sundered from it. The same must be deemed to be the case with Justice. Not only does Justice never cause anyone harm, but on the contrary it always adds some benefit, partly owing to its essentially tranquilizing influence upon the mind, partly because of the hope that it warrants of a never-failing supply of the things that uncorrupted nature really needs. And just as Rashness, License, and Cowardice ever torment the mind, ever awakening trouble and discord, so Unrighteousness, when firmly rooted in the heart, causes restlessness by the mere fact of its presence; and if once it has found expression in some deed of wickedness, however secret the act, yet it can never feel assured that it will always remain undetected.

The usual consequences of crime are, first suspicion, next gossip and rumor, then comes the accuser, then the judge; many wrongdoers have even turned evidence against themselves, as happened in your consulship. And even if any think themselves well fenced and fortified against detection by their fellow men, they still dread the eye of heaven, and fancy that the pangs of anxiety night and day gnawing at their hearts are sent by Providence to punish them. But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one's fellows?

Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, lust, gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more; inasmuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint rather than for reformation. Men of sound natures, therefore, are summoned by the voice of true reason to justice, equity, and honesty. For one without eloquence or resources dishonesty is not good policy, since it is difficult for such a man to succeed in his designs, or to make good his success when once achieved.

On the other hand, for the rich and clever generous conduct seems more in keeping, and liberality wins them affection and good will, the surest means to a life of peace; especially as there really is no motive for transgressing since the desires that spring from nature are easily gratified without doing any man wrong, while those that are imaginary ought to be resisted, for they set their affections upon nothing that is really wanted; while there is more loss inherent in Injustice itself than there is profit in the gains it brings.

Hence Justice also cannot correctly be said to be desirable in and for itself; it is so because it is so highly productive of gratification. For esteem and affection are gratifying, because they render life safer and fuller of pleasure. Hence we hold that Unrighteousness is to be avoided not simply on account of the disadvantages that result from being unrighteous, but even far more because when it dwells in a man's heart it never suffers him to breathe freely or know a moment's rest.

If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure.

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The point of our disagreement is in your statement "**Mutual advantage is the key concept in Epicurean social ethics.**" I don't think that statement is saved by the "*social*" modifier to ethics. Epicurean ethics of any kind is always based on pleasure, and pleasure is something that is felt individually. There is no "group" pleasure, or else we would all be Benthamites looking for the greatest pleasure of the greatest number. By elevating "mutual advantage" to the role of "the key concept" you're doing the same thing the Stoics and Platonists do every day - you're saying that mutual advantage is an end in itself regardless of what it produces from the individual perspective.

As to Elli's example you are making the same presumption in talking about "dangerous for a society" and "benefits the members of that society." You are lumping all sorts of things into that analysis as if it is possible to do so, which it is not -- from a philosophical perspective there are no bright lines that establish such things as "dangerous for a society" or "benefits the members of the society." You or any other individual can certainly make that calculation for

yourself, but to say that Epicurean philosophy and/or "Nature" supports it as a general rule is to turn the contextual nature of pleasure and Epicurean philosophy upside down.

Which is exactly what that essay by Thrasher does. He admits in the preamble, for good reason, that "**The pursuit of pleasure and the requirements of justice, however, have seemed to be incompatible to many commentators, both ancient and modern.**" However I would go further and say that he is understating the point when he says "many" -- the truth is that it is very clear that "the requirements of justice" are of no relevance to an Epicurean stated in the way that implies that there are absolute principles of justice. The PDs that you are quoting makes plain that justice changes with circumstance, and there is no Epicurean principle of "the best society" that can be read into the doctrines to infer that any particular society should always be defended, or always be deposed. Plenty of societies can deserve to be defended, and plenty of societies can deserve to be destroyed, but there is no standard above the individual level that answers the question as to which is which.

I don't have the time to read the full essay in detail again right now; I know I have argued against it in the past, perhaps even here in this forum. But one of the basic issues is his search for a "rule hedonism" -- in other words he is looking for a "rule" that appears to be divorced from pleasure itself, which, like the gods, has no ruler over it. He's attempting to systematize a theory of contract in which individuals secure their greatest happiness by agreeing to a mutual contract -- that is all well and good, and in practice that's pretty much what it seems like we ought to struggle toward- -- but each in our own individual circumstances, and not by looking for universal rules which we then see, in the classic error of "virtue" - as an end in itself, rather than always looking to pleasure itself.

That's the great error of humanism and all virtue ethics, as stated in [PD25](#):

25. If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other, nearer, standard, when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.

Thrasher's "Epicurean Social Contract" theory is doomed for the reason all other efforts to derive an absolute best political theory is doomed. Once we go further than did Epicurus, who simply noted that any legitimate concept of "justice" turns on the pleasure of the people involved, then we slide down the slope directly to Platonism and Stoicism.

Epicurus didn't do that for reasons that ought to be clear when you start with his fundamental principles and build from the ground up.