

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

Post by “Charles” of October 7, 2020 at 11:51 AM

Picking up from some ruminations on this [thread](#) months ago.

There's a single paragraph within On Ends where Torquatus is discussing Justice that I will quote below. I have underlined some important aspects in which I will raise some questions and discussions.

## [Quote from Toquatus On Ends](#)

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**.

Back in March I wrote a vaguely worded thread, ruminating on the concept of Consequentialism, specifically the variations of "Motive Consequentialism" and, to a lesser extent, "Negative Consequentialism".

The former judges strictly based on the current state after an act has been made, compared with other possible decisions and their potential outcomes, justifying different acts and holding that certain acts, despite a negative outcome cannot be reprimanded or called out due to the circumstances which led to the course of action from the agent making the decision, for their motivations regardless were in a good, or justifiable place.

The latter in that the best moral outcome is one that seeks to reduce as many negatives as possible, or the least damaging outcome. An easy comparison to explain this is to compare it to "Negative Utilitarianism" or "Negative Hedonism" in that the highest good is found through reducing the pain or suffering of the greatest number.

Not to get onto the absence of pain debacle, but nonetheless, removing pain is an important concept and a key aspect of Epicurean Philosophy. However, context and individual interpretations and approaches to this are a necessity, since there is no sole universal pleasure which unequivocally works for each person, despite common instances such as food, and

desires play the chief role in all this.

For desires are something we act upon for the sake of pleasure. Sometimes those desires require self-reflection and the philosophizing about whether or not they are worth it, but even in these instances the end goal is for our pleasure, even if that means enduring a small amount of pain in the present, something established by many Epicurean sources.

How this all comes back full circle, we must first establish a few points for clarity and context: (I promise to not use formal logic, this is just a very layered issue)

1. Epicurean Philosophy has no universal or absolute moral principles, neither duty or virtue are held to such standards, as they are subject to the all-encompassing axis of pleasure & pain.
2. The Canon, or the Epicurean Epistemology is directly tied to everything in which we interact with, and is responsible for much more, as for this point, our senses and feelings are the important part for confirming the first statement above.
3. Third, and perhaps above all, pleasure *is* the good, and pain *is* evil. It is to this end that we actively and passively (moving/static) pursue pleasure, and avoid pain. This truth is self-evident, and to be as bold as to claim that this is a universal truth, well, by that I would say it is our natural inclination as evidenced by our sensations and reactions to both.

Here's where things can get tricky, as actions done in the name of removing pain are viewed as a good thing.

Quote from Principal Doctrines 6 & 7

6. Whatever you can provide yourself with to secure protection from men is a natural good.

7. Some men wished to become famous and conspicuous, thinking that they would thus win for themselves safety from other men. Wherefore if the life of such men is safe, they have obtained the good which nature craves; but if it is not safe, they do not possess that for which they strove at first by the instinct of nature.

Likewise, must we assume that actions done in the name of pleasure are in themselves good? That certainly seems to be something we can get behind.

The question remains then: what is to be done about those, Epicurean, hedonist, Cyrenaic, whose actions can be related to Torquatus and what Epicurus termed and referred to as [pleasures of] "the profligates".

Quote from Principal Doctrine 10

10. If the **things that produce the pleasures of profligates** could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should **never** have **cause to blame them:** for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have **pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.**

These profligates, or, the ones who may require restraint as worded by Torquatus, or, to be put in another manner, those whose actions done in the name of pleasure, who cannot be reconciled, for their pleasure incidentally reflects (and effects) poorly and negatively among others. They are the target of both Epicurus and Torquatus.

Now, before we discuss Justice, I would like to pull a quote from Epicurus' On Nature, Book 18, translated from French to English (by Hiram.) *If only there were more available subject matter regarding these French books.*

Quote from On Nature, Book 18

One must rely on sharpness of perception to separate the notions of nature from those that are designed with difficulty or obscurity ... Pay full attention to the power of the empirical reasoning. – Epicurus

While the above quote is used within the context of "empty words", I believe that it provides a good and consistent foundation from which we can reasonably proceed, in that judging the words and actions of others, is done primarily through our senses (ie the canon). Therefore, taking an empirical, or rather canonical approach to the aftereffects of an action is the only feasible method in which to judge something as justifiable.

There are many, numerous quotations, fragments, sayings, and paragraphs detailing the extent of law and justice from an Epicurean perspective. I firmly disagree in that its sole foundation is the concept of ***mutual benefit***. Instead, its notions and anticipations of contractarianism and Social Contract theory, refer instead to a mutual accountability on the basis of allowing individuals to pursue their pleasure and avoid pain caused by others. Let's take a look at some of these sources, namely the last 9 PD's.

Quote from Principal Doctrines 31-40

31. The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage, **to restrain men from harming one another, and save them from being harmed.**

32. For all living things which have **not been able to make compacts not to harm one another, or be harmed, nothing ever is either just or unjust;** and likewise, too, for all tribes of men which have been unable, or unwilling, to make compacts not

to harm or be harmed.

33. Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another, in any place whatever, and at any time, **it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed.**

34. **Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear** which attaches to the apprehension **of being unable to escape those appointed to punish** such actions.

35. It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention of the terms of the compact not to harm or be harmed to be confident that he will escape detection, even if, at present, he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape.

36. In its general aspect, **justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another;** but **with reference to the individual peculiarities** of a country, or any other circumstances, **the same thing does not turn out to be just for all.**

37. **Among actions which are sanctioned as just by law, that which is proved, on examination, to be of advantage, in the requirements of men's dealings with one another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law, and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice. And even if the advantage in the matter of justice shifts from one side to the other, but for a while accords with the general concept, it is nonetheless just for that period, in the eyes of those who do not confound themselves with empty sounds, but look to the actual facts.**

38. **Where, provided the circumstances have not been altered, actions which were considered just have been shown not to accord with the general concept, in actual practice, then they are not just. But where, when circumstances have changed, the same actions which were sanctioned as just no longer lead to advantage, they were just at the time, when they were of advantage for the dealings of fellow-citizens with one another, but subsequently they are no longer just, when no longer of advantage.**

39. The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself, and the rest at least not alien; but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus.

40. As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbours, these also live most pleasantly with one another, since they have the most

certain pledge of security, and, after they have enjoyed the fullest intimacy, they do not lament the previous departure of a dead friend, as though he were to be pitied.

Display More

In regards to the application of Epicurean Justice, I will refrain from inviting discussion onto the implications of an Epicurean state, society, or civilization, I will instead broadly refer to culture and law as if these were commonly accepted. But first, I will refer to three paragraphs from Torquatus about Choice & Avoidance and how they pertain to consequence, which includes the law and thus fear of punishment.

Quote from Torquatus On Ends

If then we observe that ignorance and error reduce the whole of life to confusion, while Wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of appetite and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, **and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and to peace, why should we hesitate to avow that Wisdom is to be desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and Folly to be avoided because of its injurious consequences?**

The same principle will lead us to pronounce that Temperance also is not desirable for its own sake, but because it bestows peace of mind, and soothes the heart with a tranquilizing sense of harmony. For it is **temperance that warns us to be guided by reason in what we desire and avoid. Nor is it enough to judge what it is right to do or to leave undone; we also need to abide by our judgment.** Most men however lack tenacity of purpose; their resolution weakens and succumbs as soon as the fair form of pleasure meets their gaze, and they surrender themselves prisoners to their passions, failing to foresee the inevitable result. Thus for the sake of a pleasure at once small in amount and unnecessary, and one which they might have procured by other means or even denied themselves altogether without pain, they incur serious disease, or loss of fortune, or disgrace, **and not infrequently become liable to the penalties of the law and of the courts of justice.**

**Those on the other hand who are resolved so to enjoy their pleasures as to avoid all painful consequences therefrom, and who retain their faculty of judgment and avoid being seduced by pleasure into courses that they perceive to be wrong, reap the very highest pleasure by forgoing pleasure.**

Similarly also they often voluntarily endure pain, to avoid incurring greater pain by not doing so. This clearly proves that Intemperance is not undesirable for its own sake, while Temperance is desirable not because it renounces pleasures, but because it procures greater pleasures.

Now, if we are to suppose that these laws were commonly accepted or put into practice, we would see instances in which those who harm others intentionally or unintentionally, would be subject to some form of punishment, for they have committed an unjust act via harming another

person. Though depending on the severity, since this must all be on a case by case basis (see circumstance in PD 38), and per Torquatus, the hand of the law could either include restraint (punitive) or reformation (restorative) means. To say nothing of having the law dictate and subsequently act upon what is \*considered\* good and evil or unjust and establishing a precedence, but instead by acting upon empirical, observable effects of an individual or even a collective's efforts that are deemed as unjust for violating the mutual agreement.

*Side note: I've read in a few instances in Usener's Epicurea, a story or account in which Epicurus & Metrodorus (or perhaps Hermarchus) attempted to free a friend of theirs who had been imprisoned, which required visiting local authorities. Despite this I recall the account ending in their friend remaining imprisoned. Another instance similar to this via interacting within the constraints of the law, is when Zeno of Sidon eventually had Diotimus the Stoic sentenced to death for the latter's crude and excessive defamation against Epicurus. Additionally, Epicurus being forced to sail during the winter seasons during his exile from Lesbos (or Mytilene) because he had angered the local authorities on various charges also comes to mind.*

So what does this all mean?

Well, given the various sources and taking into account the many nuances that go into formulating a specific position such as this in regards to Epicurean Philosophy. I propose here that it's safe and reasonable to assume that Epicurean moral theory is the following:

**A consequentialist, relative, and hedonist theory that does not outright declare any action or intent as inherently morally good or evil, rather that all morality stems from pleasure and pain, since pleasure is the good and pain being the evil in life. Where unseemly actions may be justified and perhaps even lauded (as good).**

Morality as a whole stems from this as well, so just as Epicurus put it in PD 10, we cannot blame and punish other hedonists but rather express condemnation at shortsighted behavior, likewise we cannot fault others who act only on their behalf for the purpose of securing a safe future for themselves, whether financially or physically. However, we can use our standing with the law and a willingness to preserve the integrity that is the mutual advantage and compact of Justice to be allowed the means to sanction or punish those who cause pain unto others, even if it's done in the name of pleasure.

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I know this was sort of a rambling mess, but a structured one at that, as I wrote this over a span of time in which I had to constantly revisit my desk after being taken out of focus due to errands and other obligations. Generally this topic has been of major interest to me, and it's nice to actually have an idea of what to post on the forums.

Let me know what you think!