

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.

Post by "Cassius" of August 3, 2019 at 2:44 PM

I completely agree with E1's interpretations, and this can be cited in the future as an example of how I (and others here) do not worship DeWitt as infallible.

Jordan as you read DeWitt you will see repeated references to connections between Epicurean views and Christianity, and you may know that DeWitt wrote a second book called "St Paul and Epicurus." In my view DeWitt's points are generally good but sometimes go too far on this relationship. Whether that's a result of his own disposition to build more link than is there, I can't say. I do think that many of DeWitt's explanations of New Testament passages as relating to Epicurus do make sense, however.

But to the main point, DeWitt stresses throughout the book that Epicurus placed pleasure at the center of his philosophy, and that even in the issue of friends the instigating factor is still the pleasure of the person being considered. I don't believe DeWitt ever defines what he means by

"altruism" and if he had meant it as a rule that the interests of other people ****always**** be placed first, that definitely could not be reconciled, any more than any other kind of "virtue" could be explained.

As you read further into the book and see how DeWitt constructs the big picture, I bet your concern about this (which is valid) will recede in significance. Because once you get a grip on how uniform and connected the big picture is in focusing on the feeling of pleasure (very broadly understood as including all mental and bodily pleasures), it becomes very easy to see how any competing "ism" (such as altruism or egoism for that matter) will fall to the wayside.

The issue with "altruism" is much the same issue as with "egoism" -- the real issue is whether and how the "interests" of people are defined. And with Epicurus the issue always comes back to a calculus of pleasure and pain, with the interests of other people factored in for the result that it causes to us and to those of our friends who we value as much as we do ourselves. The "interests" of some people are going to be of vital importance to us, while the interests of some other people are going to be largely irrelevant. And that is why "the greatest good of the greatest number" is eliminated.

[PD28](#) rules "egoism" out of the picture just as much as [PD39](#) and similar very clear doctrines rule "altruism" out of the picture, and DeWitt knows that very well and presents it all very clearly.

28. The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that in the limited evils of this life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

39. The man who best knows how to meet external threats makes into one family all the creatures he can; and those he can not, he at any rate does not treat as aliens; and where he finds even this impossible, he avoids all dealings, and, so far as is advantageous, excludes them from his life.

Post by "Cassius" of August 3, 2019 at 3:05 PM

Also Jordan, when you read virtually any book on Epicurus written in the last 50 years you will see broad statements implying that Epicurus taught a semi-christian view of general universal brotherly love. If you stick to DeWitt through to the end you'll have no issue seeing how that goes significantly astray. Epicurus' own statements are almost always tied to "friends," and the above-referenced [PD39](#) makes clear he had no illusions about everyone in the world being his friend.

When the "universal brotherly love" utilitarians try to bring Epicurus into their camp, they most frequently turn to citing a couple of relatively ambiguous passages from Diogenes of Oinoanda, who noted on his wall that he hoped it would be good for anyone who happened to see it. Going too far into those couple of references would get us too far off track, but when you study that you'll see that Diogenes himself made drew some very clear lines. He labelled some peoples as "vile" in their corruption through religion, he never gives any indication that he intends to deviate from Epicurus, and that attitude shows that his statements are best viewed as aspirational rather than a call to "universal indiscriminating christian brotherly love."

And it's not even necessary to go to Oionanda for this illustration. Lucretius' poem is itself a good example and contains statements about how sad it is that so many people "wander in darkness" due to their errors. An Epicurean would certainly hope that everyone will come around to the Epicurean way of thinking, and so Epicurus wrote letters and books, Lucretius wrote his poem, Diogenes wrote his inscription, many others wrote their works, and we come to today with our open forums.

But as stated in Diogenes Laertius, " ...However, not every bodily constitution nor every nationality would permit a man to become wise."

Post by "Mathitis Kipouros" of July 5, 2020 at 10:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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

This makes me feel uncomfortable on a very deep level. Perhaps it is because I have accepted for a long time as true the concept that universal well-being is achievable. I am of course suspicious of its idealism, since I don't know how it could happen, and I recognize that very quickly when trying to lay a concrete pathway towards it, things start to require a lot of wishful thinking and even perhaps a little fantasy. I *would like to believe* that a universal utopia is achievable. But I guess, a more realistic view of the world could show that this doesn't happen anywhere.

As a side note, and related to the question of how people new to Epicureanism take to it: I'm entertaining this deep feeling of discomfort right now trying to come to terms with what's more likely real, rather than what is desirable but less likely. Possibly this discomfort, and our willingness/capacity to be with it, is what helps people find a relief in religion, and what causes a lower adherence to Epicureanism.

Getting back on track, one of the reasons for this discomfort is, I think, the realization that there are people in the world that don't meet the basic needs to relieve pain or to achieve pleasure (shelter, nutrition, etc...), and the possibility (rather slim in some cases) that anyone of us could find ourselves in it at some point in our lives; I guess it is matter of just living in the moment versus having a longer term view. How could we not attend to social utilitarianism when we think of this? How can we not see that as long as we have people who can't relieve these basic pains, or achieve these basic pleasures, any equilibrium we think we have in our self sufficiency is rather unstable, because these people either some day will try to achieve them without the sophistication that comfort allows, or because they will fall prey of others for manipulation, perhaps even against us. So individual utilitarianism seems rather short-sighted for me.

Perhaps if we see that, in nature, survival and well-being happen in larger groups, and that these groups always have some sort of **justified** hierarchy, we could say that a structure of society is needed to guarantee my well-being, and that for it to be stable for the longest time, this structure should have social utilitarianism in mind to guarantee the well-being of others who for whom I'm not able to look after; the hierarchy is constantly revised in order for it to keep its justified character.

We could call this a larger group "friends", but that would be rather idealistic. The problem with calling it friends, is that it could get confusing when we remember the tightly related (to friendship) concept of loyalty, which could be defined as "I don't have to doubt you'll be there for me, and thus, you do't have to doubt it either", as, I guess more likely than not, happens with siblings (at least until a certain age where we haven't been corrupted). In such a big group, I won't always be there particularly for you, if you're not one of my true/close friends; that's just reality. It is not physically possible. My standing there shouldn't be on a basis of loyalty, but rather on a basis of how active you are in producing this society as a provider of pleasure and an eliminator of pains for the most. And what if I decide to change to another society because I think here I'm not providing, or am not being provided for, in terms of pleasure/pain. I couldn't be called disloyal, I'm just attending to my individual utilitarianism, as well as the social utilitarianism of the society I'm leaving and perhaps the one I will be joining.

Also, to further delve into friendship; as stated before, it is a concept that can also very easily slip into the realm of idealism. To keep it real, we will quickly realize that true friends are those that we feel the need and pleasure to keep in our lives as we would our siblings, hence I don't believe of *universal* brotherly love, but I do think that with our friends, our love should be brotherly. And these people can't be many, just by the fact that we're not able to correspond or reciprocate in a convenient fashion to more than just a few. If we then try to say our friends are people who "are like us" in "this or that way", we slip into idealism. And how could our self-sufficiency be stable if we can only depend for it on such a small group of people? It's a bit of wishful thinking again.

Post by "Cassius" of July 5, 2020 at 11:44 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

This makes me feel uncomfortable on a very deep level. Perhaps it is because I have accepted for a long time as true the concept that universal well-being is achievable.

Camotero:

In making today's recording of the Lucretius today podcast we came across something that I think is similar to this. Here is a passage from [where we currently are in Book 2](#):

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Besides, consider well mankind, the scaly fry of silent fish that swim the flood, the verdant trees, wild beasts, the various kinds of birds, such as flock about the banks of pleasant streams, the fountains and the lakes and those who frequent the thick covers of the woods; consider all these in their several kinds, and you will find them all consist of forms different among themselves. 'Tis by nothing else the tender young knows its own Dam, and thus the Dam distinguishes her young, thus we see each creature knows its own kind, no less than men, and so unite together. ***For often before the gilded temples of the gods a young heifer falls a slain victim beside the altar flaming with incense, and breathes from her heart a reeking stream of blood. The Dam, robbed of her young, beats over the fields and leaves the marks of her divided hoofs upon the pressed grass, and searches every place with careful eyes to find her the young she lost; then stops and fills the branched woods with her complaints, and often returns back to her stall, distracted with the love of her dear young - no more the tender willows, or the herbs freshened with dew, nor can the running streams within the full banks divert her mind, or turn away her care, nor can a thousand other heifers, as they play wantonly over the grass, take off her eye, or ease the pain she feels - so plain it is that she searches for her own, for what she knows full well.*** And thus the tender kids find by their bleat their horned Dams, and so the sporting lambs know their own flocks, and, as by Nature taught, each hastest to the full dug of its own Dam.

In our discussion of this heart-string-tugging passage, I brought up the issue of ethical treatment of animals / animal welfare or whatever you'd like to call it that motivates some people toward vegetarianism.

In my own mind, I find it hard to separate the thought of animals confined in factory farming, or animals confined in "shelters" waiting to be euthanized, from the plight of humans or society in general, as you're talking about. If I allowed myself to think constantly about factory farming of animals, or animals "shelters" with their euthanasia chambers, or elderly people "warehoused"

in nursing homes in various forms of stupor, I simply would not be able to function at all.

Now some people might object that these are different categories of problems, but I don't see them at all differently from the same kind of socially desirable results that you're talking about. And the examples I have mentioned are just the living - what about the uncounted millions of people who have died under terrible circumstances in the past? Do they deserve less thought because they died yesterday or an hour ago, versus those who died a year or a decade or a century ago?

And some are going to say something like "Well, we only do WHAT WE CAN..." as if that provides a bright-line philosophical answer to where to stop worrying or being concerned. I don't agree that "what we can" answers anything whatsoever.

So somewhere we have to come to terms with where to draw the lines with our concerns, or else give up the idea that we ourselves "should" live our own lives in any way whatsoever.

I think that's what Epicurus is forcing us to confront, and I think it's right that we confront the issue, or else we dealing as you say with a dream-like situation that has no connection with reality. So we have to get to the bottom of the question of where and when we draw the line as to where to be concerned, and where to stop being concerned, with other living things.

I think you've correctly focused on the problem as "idealism" but we've all got a lot of work to do about how to understand where the lines should be drawn, and why.

Maybe this section from Lucretius, which we also touched on today, gives a hint, and the hint has something to do with the limits of those things that "touch" us:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

For Touch, the Touch (blessed be the Gods above!) is a Sense of the Body, either when something from without enters through the pores, or something from within hurts us, as it forces its way out, or pleases, as the effect of venery tickles as it passes through, or when the seeds, by striking against each other, raise a tumult in the body, and in that agitation confound the Sense; and this you may soon experience, if you strike yourself in any part with a blow of your hand. It is necessary, therefore, that the Principles of Things should consist of figures very different in themselves, since they affect the Senses in so different a manner.

Of course that's a super-broad comment and as we also discussed, "touch" probably here does not really mean "touch" as in the sense "I touch this with my fingers" but something much more broad, as Munro thinks in his notes on this section:

testanda vota.] 434 this point is put with emphasis to shew the vast importance of touch; for as nothing can *tangere et tangi sine corpore*, so nothing can *sine tactu sentire*: all the senses are but different forms of touch: he then enumerates the different ways in which the body can feel; either something enters from without, and gives pleasure or pain; or something takes place in the body, and gives pleasure or pain; or thirdly the atoms in the body itself, before quiescent, are troubled by some collision and so disturb the body's feeling, as for instance when you strike any part of the body. 438 *Aut* from the attraction probably