

Altruism

Post by “Dubitator314” of May 30, 2021 at 12:28 PM

I'm somewhat new to the forum, and I'm curious where altruism, non-friendship based altruism, but altruism to society in general, fits in with Epicureanism. There are so many discussions that relate to this, but it's hard to find one that succinctly, if possible, answers the question.

For example, if a person gets pleasure from giving to a battered woman's shelter, would that be an an Epicurean ethical action?

Post by “Don” of May 30, 2021 at 1:07 PM

[Quote from Dubitator314](#)

For example, if a person gets pleasure from giving to a battered woman's shelter, would that be an an Epicurean ethical action?

Yep (from my perspective)

For me, it goes back to Epicurus's assertion in his Principle Doctrine 5:

"It is not possible to live a pleasurable life without the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice; and it is impossible to live with wisdom, morality, and justice without living pleurably. When one of these is lacking, it is impossible to live a pleasurable life. It is not possible to live a pleasurable life without the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice; and it is impossible to live with wisdom, morality, and justice without living pleurably. When one of these is lacking, it is impossible to live a pleasurable life. "

It's also practical. If I'm "altruistic" (or just a nice person) that makes it more likely or at least probable that I will be seen favorably by others. If I need a favor or assistance in the future, I'll be more likely to receive it if people around me see me that way. That makes for the possibility of more pleasure for me in the future.

I'll stop there for now. I'm sure others will have thoughts too.

Post by “Don” of May 30, 2021 at 1:17 PM

[Quote from Dubitator314](#)

an Epicurean ethical action?

Another quick thought... I would be careful about that phrasing. If you're equating an "ethical action" with a "virtuous action", remember that virtue in Epicureanism is instrumental to pleasure and not an end in itself. Why do we practice virtuous acts? Because they bring us pleasure.

Okay, now I'll step back and let others chime in. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of May 30, 2021 at 1:48 PM

i agree with Don's posts. I think one of the main aspects is that Epicurus would reject the view that there is an ethical imperative of some kind, through religion or simple idealism or any other source, to be "altruistic" or "selfish" either way. He would say that feeling is always contextual and practical and the circumstances will control how you deal with any situation. Appeals to "altruism" or most any "ism" are usually some kind of appeal to universal ethical absolutes, of which Epicurus rejects the existence of any and all of them. Nature provides pleasure and pain as references for what to choose and avoid - Nature does not provide universal ethical absolutes.

Post by “Cadmus” of May 30, 2021 at 1:50 PM

Epicureanism takes the stance of psychological egoism. All actions are motivated by the desire to decrease pain and maximize pleasure. Because we are social and empathetic creatures, the well being of others often means a lot to us. When someone dear to you is happy, you are happy too. This is the origin of "altruism" according to Epicureans afaik. Although true selflessness doesn't exist, one should hold the well being of others highly because we are social animals.

"I love men too — not merely individuals, but every one. But I love them with the consciousness

of egoism; I love them because love makes me happy, I love because loving is natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no "commandment of love." I have a fellow-feeling with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too." - Max Stirner

Post by "Don" of May 30, 2021 at 1:53 PM

The closest Epicurus ever gets to an "absolute" is his basis for just actions in society: to neither harm nor be harmed. But this isn't an absolute decree from some higher supernatural authority. It's simply his proposed "natural" baseline agreement that a community needs to function.

Post by "Cassius" of May 30, 2021 at 2:04 PM

Cadmus I think your post is pretty accurate, but I also think that you're in an area that is also personal preference. As in my case, I love "cats" and I love "dogs" but that doesn't imply that I have the same feelings for each of them individually. I'd say the same about "humans" as well, at least in some contexts, but the closer someone gets to saying "I love humanity in general" the more (to me) the statement is so close to being totally in the abstract that I personally think it loses its meaning.

That's kind of the distinction I see in the Stirner quote. the first part I identify with, but "I have a fellow-feeling with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too" comes pretty close to total idealism in my book.

But abstractions are pleasurable too, and if an abstraction like that floats someones boat, and they find it pleasurable, then more power to them. I would just make clear that their personal viewpoint doesn't qualify them as some kind of superhuman love machine that deserves some unique amount of praise.

Post by "Cadmus" of May 30, 2021 at 3:52 PM

Hmm yes you are right

Post by “Joshua” of May 30, 2021 at 4:21 PM

Diogenes of Oenoanda is [excellent](#) on this point;

Quote

In addition to my fellow-citizens who are in this predicament, I desire to help future generations, for they too, though unborn, belong to us, as do any foreigners who may happen to come here.

And a little further down;

Quote

This includes those who are called “foreigners,” though they are not really so, for the compass of the world gives all people a single country and home. But it does not include all people whatsoever, and I am not pressuring any of you to testify thoughtlessly and unreflectively. I do not wish you to say, “this is true,” if you do not agree with us. For I do not speak with certainty on any matter, not even on matters concerning the gods, without providing you evidence, and the proper reasoning to support what I say.

What humans (and some other mammals!) have in lieu of a moral imperative is an empathetic faculty. Even more than that, our evolutionary history has endowed us with a neurological reward circuit to reinforce this faculty. Altruism is then in itself another avenue for the pursuit of pleasure! Nor does this pleasure-reward by any means cheapen the experience of the fulfillment of empathy; indeed, quite the opposite. It means that the act of helping is beneficial both for the one who helps, and for the one who receives help--it brings good to everyone involved.

After all, Vatican Sayings no. 52 doesn't say that friendship dances around the block, or down to the social club and back; “Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.”

Post by “Don” of May 30, 2021 at 6:31 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

After all, Vatican Sayings no. 52 doesn't say that friendship dances around the block, or down to the social club and back; "Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness."

Hey, how do I give two thumbs up? 👍 👍

PS There we go!

Post by “Dubitator314” of May 31, 2021 at 12:32 AM

Thanks for the insight! Everyone's input was quite helpful!

Post by “Julia” of October 3, 2024 at 5:01 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

That's kind of the distinction I see in the Stirner quote. the first part I identify with, but "I have a fellow-feeling with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too" comes pretty close to total idealism in my book.

Much has been lost in translation, partly due to Stirners quite idiosyncratic use of German even for the time (early 1840s), partly due to shifts in both German and English, which changed connotations since then. As such, my translation to modern English would be:

Max Stirner in *The Unique and Their Selfownership*: I love humans, too; not just specific ones, but everyone. But I love them with the conscious awareness of an Egoist; I love them, because love itself makes me happy; I love, because loving comes natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no "commandment of love." I have empathy with every feeling being, and their agony torments, their recreation refreshes me.

Stirner knew about the Epicureans, but had various misconceptions, some of which are common to this day.[1]. In my mind, Stirner - by chance - partially reinvented the wheel, albeit from a different framing and with new vocabulary, and in doing so did something loosely akin to[2] expanding upon Classical Epicureanism by applying it to modern economy, the state and law. Engels (Marx's companion) was his adversary, mischaracterised him at every chance and

slandered him in a poem (rhymes lost in translation):

Look at Stirner, see him, the thoughtful hater of barriers
For now he drinks beer, soon he'll drink blood like water
Like others wildly yell: "Get rid of the king!"
He swiftly adds: "And get rid of laws, as well!"

To me, Stirner and Epicurus parallel each other even in the lengths their adversaries went to in suppressing their ideas 😞 Anyhow. I digress! All I meant to say was: [Cassius](#) , I disagree, because Stirner was very outspokenly against ideology, and what he really wanted to say with that passage is, if I may paraphrase: "Just because I embrace my own *egoism*, just because I am *unapologetic and transparent about doing what gives me pleasure*, doesn't mean I'm any less empathic or compassionate than you are; the opposite might well be true!" I dare say, that could just as well be proclaimed by an Epicurean like yourself 😊

[1] Stirner once referred to an article by Feuerbach, which in turn contains the figurative(!) passage "[the ideas] move around in the empty space of his own self like Epicurean atoms [...]". From this, I assume that Epicureans were well-known amongst The Free Ones, the informal group Stirner was part of. As far as I remember this was before Stirner's *The Unique* was published. Also five years prior to Stirner's *The Unique* is published, Feuerbach passes a fleeting remark about Epicureans in section 29 of his treatise *On Criticism Of Hegel's Philosophy*; I would expect Stirner to have read that. Later, Kropotkin explicitly notes the similarity between Epicurean thought and Stirner in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1910. Stirner himself mentioned Epicureans, including some nomenclature like "Ataraxia" a few times in *The Unique*. Therein, he both bundles Epicureans with Stoics and delineates them from each other, but does not appear to fully grasp Epicureans: He relates the descriptive state of Ataraxia to the prescriptive action of Stoic bravery/imperturbability, and seems to think Epicureans consider the world and it's people as much their mortal enemy as Stoics do, except that Epicureans also want to have a good time by tricking the very thing they reject into giving them pleasure. That is a rather wild mischaracterisation of wanting to, for example, stay out of politics, live a calm life, prepare for eventualities, and so forth. I think he fell prey to the "Epicureans are just hedonistic Stoics" narrative. Stirner died 20 years prior to DeWitt being born.

[2] "loosely akin to", because he didn't do this on purpose, and – as said in [1] – seems to have somewhat misunderstood Epicureans, but partially reinvented the wheel with a different focus, thus often coming up with parallel results.