

# The "Non-Aggression Principle" And Its Relationship To Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2021 at 9:16 AM

Discussion of the "Non-Aggression Principle" (abbreviated NAP) can skate perilously close to violating our rule against discussing modern politics, so that is something that I want us all to keep in mind in this thread. However the topic is also closely related to the concept of "Justice," which is specifically discussed at length by Epicurus, so it is a subject we should tackle.

[Wikipedia](#) defines the Non-Aggression Principle as follows:

Quote

The **non-aggression principle (NAP)**, also called the **non-aggression axiom**, is a concept in which aggression, defined as initiating or threatening any forceful interference with either an individual or their property,<sup>[note 1]</sup> is inherently wrong.<sup>[1][2]</sup> It is considered by some to be a defining principle of [libertarianism in the United States](#)<sup>[3]</sup><sup>[better source needed]</sup> and is also a prominent idea in [anarcho-capitalism](#) and [minarchism](#).<sup>[4][5][6][7]</sup> In contrast to [pacifism](#), the NAP does not forbid forceful defense.<sup>[3]</sup><sup>[better source needed]</sup> There is no single or universal interpretation or definition of the NAP as it faces several definitional issues, including those revolving around intellectual property, force, abortion, and other topics.

This is a definition that deserves close examination in relation to the Epicurean view of "Justice" as stated by Epicurus in the last ten Principle Doctrines:

Quote

[PD31](#). 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.

[PD32](#). 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.

[PD33](#). 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.

[PD34](#). 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.

[PD35](#). 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.

[PD36](#). 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.

[PD37](#). 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.

[PD38](#). 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.

[PD39](#). 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.

[PD40](#). As many as possess the power to procure complete immunity from their neighbors, 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.

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Just to begin the discussion, however, I see an immediate red flag in the part of the definition which says "is inherently wrong." Can that stand up to Epicurean scrutiny?

This post just opens the topic. Let's discuss the whole issue in detail as it comes up over and over, especially in terms of *Voluntaryism* and *Autarchy*.

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### **Post by "Godfrey" of July 18, 2021 at 2:22 PM**

As I understand it, a key component of Epicurean justice is that it relies on a compact and on someone appointed to enforce the compact. So my question regarding any anarchist "system" or any "system" eschewing government is: who makes and enforces compacts? It seems to me that some form of government is required in order to prevent a "system" reliant on aggression. But maybe I've read too much post-apocalyptic fiction 🤔

(Note that I put "system" in quotes because that word seems incompatible with anarchy, but I don't know what word is preferred.)

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### **Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2021 at 3:01 PM**

[Insert Link](#)Yes Godfrey I agree that is a good question, though I suspect that advocates of NAP have an answer to that in private enforcement structures.

Even before that, however, I would say that there is a more fundamental component as stated in [PD33](#) and is often translated as "

33. There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm." (Epicurus.net)

Therefore my first Epicurean concern about any principle which is asserted to be absolute is that in fact there ARE no absolute moral principles possible in an Epicurean universe. The practical test is always one of pain and pleasure, which are the only faculties given us by nature to determine what is desirable and what is undesirable.

So we definitely need to ask about the enforcing mechanism, but we also have to ask whether it is legitimate to consider the NAP as an absolute moral imperative, and I would suggest that

Epicurus would say something like: "No, because there are no absolute moral imperatives."

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### **Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2021 at 3:05 PM**

To follow up on that last post, I think it is legitimate to set the table for this discussion in the way that the Epicurean Torquatus did in On Ends:

#### Quote

I will start then in the manner approved by the author of the system himself, by settling what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

In Epicurean theory the ultimate good is pleasure, and if the NAP is suggesting that it is a higher concern than pleasure, then such a claim would be immediately ruled out by the most fundamental of Epicurean viewpoints.

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### **Post by "Don" of July 18, 2021 at 5:50 PM**

I was unaware of this idea previously, so I'm curious to read what everyone thinks is the connection between this NAP concept has to Epicurus's basic "natural justice" contract of "neither harm nor be harmed."

However, [Cassius](#) is correct in that it can't take precedence over pleasure/living a pleasurable life. It can at most be instrumental like virtue.

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## **Post by “Cassius” of July 18, 2021 at 5:57 PM**

I do think there is a very logical relationship to what is being discussed in the PDs on justice, but I think that the controversial point is the same as to both. I think that what he is saying is that "justice" like all the virtues is strictly tied to result in a particular situation, and that it shouldn't be viewed as an absolute. That's why it seems that he is saying that it is so easy to find the limitations in discussing justice - that the word does not even apply to those who refuse to agree to the agreement, and that even where people initially agree, if conditions change then the justice changes.

I think that's exactly applicable to the "non-aggression principle." Like "justice," the NAP is a good working tool that is going to produce the best results in many - but not all - circumstances, and it is necessary to see that both "justice" and the "non-aggression principle" are contextual and do not apply to all people at all times in all circumstances.

Any other view of justice or the NAP as "absolute" I think is therefore going to be putting the cart before the horse and turning the "tool" into an end in itself, which is exactly what Epicurus is warning against and with Diogenes of Oinoanda "shouts" about to all greeks and non-greeks on his wall.

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## **Post by “ResponsiblyFree” of July 19, 2021 at 10:53 AM**

Just happen to see this out of the corner of my I. So I will take my NAP and see what I can awake as a Cat among the Pigeons.

First, a basic definition of my Non-Aggression Principle that can and should be Universalized:

The FIRST use of PHYSICAL force by one human being against another including his voluntarily acquired property, is the ONLY Human Action that must be prohibited, considered immoral, wrong, evil in all circumstances except to save that person's physical life in the moment (e.g., physically stopping a child, a blind or mentally disabled person from wandering out into traffic).

I wait for your responses.

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## **Post by “Don” of July 19, 2021 at 11:06 AM**

### [Quote from ResponsiblyFree](#)

The FIRST use of PHYSICAL force by one human being against another including his voluntarily acquired property, is the ONLY Human Action that must be prohibited, ~~considered immoral, wrong, evil in all circumstances~~ except to save that person's physical life in the moment (e.g., physically stopping a child, a blind or mentally disabled person from wandering out into traffic).

From my perspective and understanding, taking out the morality clause gets it \*closer\* to an Epicurean social contract of "neither to harm nor be harmed." But I'll be interested to see others' ideas.

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### **Post by “ResponsiblyFree” of July 19, 2021 at 11:14 AM**

In addition, from a blog I wrote many years ago:

A Libertarian AS IF Thought Experiment: The 4F, Free-From-Force-Field.

The First and Last Freedom Where All Else Is Permitted.

Explaining the Most Fundamental Freedom Necessary to Free Humanity.

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Curtains part on the IMAX screen of your imagination.

1.

The year is 2100. Your 4F switch is on and your Free-From-Force-Field activated. It had been coming increasingly over the last few miniarches of the momentum leaps, yet when it arrived it still stunned most and left a wound of wonder in the center of the Great Question. Our Psience, as so often before, stumbled over the truth, but this time knew enough to stop and be examined by it. It was all so simply complex and complexly simple. We knew each of the 50 trillion or so individual cells of the human body possessed a biomechanical energy equal to the four forces at all levels of the Universal Demonstration. The trick was to release each cell's energy transform at the turn of wave into particle and direct that process progressively throughout all the cells and then gather and store that tremendous power for human use.

2.

Never mind how it happened. Call it God or Evolution, Plan or Chance. No one can physically harm you. Knives, bullets, bombs, missiles, lasers...absolutely nothing can penetrate the force field that surrounds your body. And you cannot physically harm another. Everyone on earth at birth is protected by a Free-From-Force-Field known simply as the 4F with a grin for the now defunct military meaning. Further, whatever you touch – so long as it was not already the property of another human being – automatically becomes yours and is protected by your 4F. Everything else remains the same and yet is completely changed.

3.

Ponder this pure IF lifted out of life: IF no one can resort to the threat, or use, of physical force but everything else is permitted, how would we live our lives? My answer is easy: we would live our lives as we do now in 2010, by trading personal values for personal values. But we would do so freely, voluntarily, knowing that in the first and last instance, no one can force us to do anything we don't chose to do. Released from the murderous matrix of human violence, we are now free for whatever it is that humans can do with each other when unable to reenact Cain and Able.

What would society be like if this happened? For a joyous start, there would be no need for The State or any other coercive collectives. No self-elected, or democratically elected, Tyrants or Saviors on any level could exist. Freedom from physical force is the final solution into which all human problems will be dissolved, and thus, never again arise to be solved.

All human problems – physical survival, limited resources, control, power, ownership – these and thousands of others, we attempt to solve by resorting, finally or at first, to physical force. The solutions we destructively create and impose – wars, the State, crime – all go on to create even more problems that call for more solutions that breed more problems...Humanity's Hall of Horrors.

To Recap: Explaining the Libertarian Non-Aggression Axiom

My "Make Believe Story" is intended to explain the Libertarian Non-Aggression Axiom and what it could mean to humanity if everyone lived it. The first and last freedom – the one freedom from which all other freedoms issue – is this: to be free from one, single specific human action – which is, physical force or threat of it (the initiation of force – this does not include self-defense). Then, everything is permitted – everyone is free to do what they want to do. Once every human being lived this First and most Fundamental Freedom, then humanity could truly begin to creatively answer the Great Question: What are humans for?

I want to convince you that once you agree with my basic starting point for human action, then all the other difficult, contentious and confusing problems of humanity are dissolved within this most primary solution. Then you are free to do and be whatever you choose and allow others that same, infinite freedom.

Selah and Scire Licit.

[TheMes of Jack](#)

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 19, 2021 at 11:26 AM

Glad you saw this Jack as I was going to bring it to your attention to be sure you did, as no doubt this is an area where you have much more expertise than most of us do. Here are my comments:

### Quote

First, a basic definition of my Non-Aggression Principle that can and should be Universalized:

Already I would have a concern about the "can and should be universalized." I do not see what basis that can be provided within Epicurean theory that any "principle" "can and should be universalized." We know from observing the young of all species that:

*"Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature."*

It therefore appears to me that there is nothing "universal" established by nature other than pleasure and pain, and that any attempt to "universalize" an ethical decision is going to run afoul of the fact that Nature herself does not so ordain.

So on what basis do you argue the "should"?

### Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2097-the-non-aggression-principle-and-its-relationship-to-epicurean-philosophy/>

The FIRST use of PHYSICAL force by one human being against another including his voluntarily acquired property, is the ONLY Human Action that must be prohibited, considered immoral, wrong, evil in all circumstances except to save that person's physical life in the moment (e.g., physically stopping a child, a blind or mentally disabled person from wandering out into traffic).

This is going to be subject to the same analysis as stated above, but provides us another way to ask the question: By what authority do you segment out "to save that person's physical life in the moment" as something that is an exception to your otherwise universal rule?

Now of course please understand that I do agree that as a practical matter in most circumstances it is desirable to come to agreements not to harm each other, but since we are talking philosophy and trying to get to the most articulate and precise description of the issue and the conclusions to be drawn from it that we can, it appears to me that Epicurus has drilled down to the essence of the issue, while the "NAP" is simply one ethical choice or tool that may be helpful in many circumstances, but which is certainly not prescribed by Nature (and therefore not by any other higher or equivalent authority) as a universal rule.

I don't think we should first argue about the "can be universalized" part yet, even though there would be many practicalities involved - we probably first need to deal with the "should it be universalized?" aspect because I don't see that it is going to be anyone to argue that there is any valid authority for the universalizing of any ethical or moral value at all. To my reading Epicurus did not attempt to do so, and in every case in his doctrines and writings it appears to me that he was very clear that all choices and avoidances - including / especially in ethics and morality - are subservient to the greater question of whether they lead to pain or pleasure in practice.

From the letter to Menoeceus:

Quote

And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we

must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 21, 2021 at 9:52 AM

[Here is a paper](#) which appears very relevant to this topic, because it apparently focuses on how Epicurus' philosophy does not lead to universalization as does that of Kant. I have not had a chance yet to read beyond the first page, and I expect to disagree at least in part with the writer's summary in which he says that Epicurus' system propounds happiness **for all.**" (I agree that the goal of all is the happiness or themselves and their friends, but if the author asserts that each individual has the happiness of everyone living in the world as his/her goal, then I will say he is mistaken. Yes the practical and actual happiness of "others" is relevant to ours, but I would strongly dispute that "others" means "everyone" for a variety of practical and theoretical reasons. I would assert there is a scale of relevance in which the happiness of those closest and dearest to us is most important, and the further away from us and our acquaintance, the less generally relevant that person's happiness will be of concern to us.)

But let's read the article and see if it sheds any light on our issue. 😊

