

Compassion in Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 12:20 AM

In a recent book discussion on Frances Wright's *A Few Days in Athens*, [Scott](#) was quite right to bring up the question as to whether 'compassion' was truly evident in Epicurus' teachings in the classical texts. [Kalosyni](#) had likewise raised the question in a forum post in the thread for the discussion. My purpose here is twofold; first, to thank both of you for raising the question (thank you!); and second, to reopen the discussion here with a handful of preliminary citations.

It is quite easy to demonstrate that Epicurus was motivated at least *in part* by concern for his fellow man; and clear, too, that he extended his concern beyond the pale of the professional philosopher. His introduction to the letter to Pythocles states his intent:

Quote

Therefore, as I have finished all my other writings I now intend to accomplish your request, feeling that these arguments will be of value to many other persons as well, and especially to those who have but recently tasted the genuine inquiry into nature, and also to those who are involved too deeply in the business of some regular occupation.

The letter to Menoecus expands on this further;

Quote

LET no one when young delay to study philosophy, nor when he is old grow weary of his study. For no one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul. And the man who says that the age for philosophy has either not yet come or has gone by is like the man who says that the age for happiness is not yet come to him, or has passed away. Wherefore both when young and old a man must study philosophy, that as he grows old he may be young in blessings through the grateful recollection of what has been, and that in youth he may be old as well, since he will know no fear of what is to come.

So much for the letters. This is perhaps not the full-throated endorsement of compassion we would like to see, but the idea of the thing is beginning to take shape; Epicurus believed that in sharing his philosophy, he was helping to bring good health to the souls of all who would listen. He did not seek to convince only those in traditional philosophical circles, but to bring this 'true health' even to the commoners; scholars and working folk, young and old.

Proceeding in good order, we turn next to the Principle Doctrines:

Quote

27. Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.

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 even in our limited conditions of life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

There is friendship, then; the greatest pleasure, and surest path to happiness.

Quote

31. Natural justice is a symbol or expression of usefulness, to prevent one person from harming or being harmed by another.

And a sense of justice, too; predicated not on morality, or Natural Law, or divine intervention--all such suppositions being either false or arbitrary--but on harm. This is the kind of justice that is blind--that protects all people, not merely the pious or the powerful.

And in the Vatican Sayings;

Quote

29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

Here we begin to see a glimpse of a missionary attitude--the philosophy can bring help to *anyone*.

Quote

52. Friendship dances around the world bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.

66. We show our feeling for our friends' suffering, not with laments, but with thoughtful concern.

78. The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one.

79. He who is calm disturbs neither himself nor another.

And we may hope that the great blessings of friendship may be available to all.

Next, we take the testimony of others; it is fitting that we start with Menander, as he and Epicurus were 'classmates'.

Quote

Hail, you twin-born sons of Neocles, of whom the one saved his country from slavery, the other from folly.

And Diogenes Laertius;

Quote

[Epicurus] has abundance of witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men-- his native land, which honoured him with statues in bronze ; his friends, so many in number that they could hardly be counted by whole cities, and indeed all who knew him [...] the School itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues for ever without interruption through numberless reigns of one scholar after another; his gratitude to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the School, the most eminent of them being the aforesaid Mys ; and in general, his benevolence to all mankind.

Lucian;

Quote

But secondly I was still more concerned (a preference which you will be very far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him.

I'll expand on some of this tomorrow---my phone armed with more battery-life!

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2022 at 6:55 AM

Great post! My only fine tuning on what is posted so far is this:

[Quote from Joshua](#)

There is friendship, then; the greatest pleasure, and surest path to happiness

I think the second clause is almost exactly correct, but I would say that what Epicurus saying is that the whole the pleasure of having a friend is great, and such relationships are actually or at least virtually essential, I do not think that there is an absolute ranking of pleasures that would allow us to call friendship "the greatest pleasure."

A fine point I easily grant, but given our focus on explaining the nature of pleasure as accurately as possible. I think an important one.

Am I forgetting any passage that would justify exactly calling friendship "the greatest pleasure"?

We definitely need to expand the thread and be sure we touch on the explanation for the opening of Lucretius Book Two.

And I think we will also find more apt material on friendship in the Torquatus material in Book One of On Ends that we will tackle next week (section 65 et seq. If I recall correctly)

And yes there is much in Diogenes of Oinoanda to incorporate, in addition to "circumstantial evidence" and "logical implications" that may not be explicit

Post by “Scott” of February 7, 2022 at 10:09 AM

Thanks for staring this thread, [Joshua](#) ! You beat me to it and I'm glad, since you did a far better job than I could have 👍

I'm pleased that we have the quotes that show that Epicurus felt and expressed concern for people generally, as opposed to just a sort of tit-for-tat kind of "concern" for "friends" (which is an idea that can come out of certain passages). As you say, what we have is somewhat indirect, not the:

[Quote from Joshua](#)

full-throated endorsement of compassion we would like to see

Compassion is not identical with being "friendly", of course, or even being "kind" or "considerate". "Caring" comes closer but still doesn't nail it. All of these are also great attributes but I'm thinking in today's use of the term compassion we have something like a powerful "feeling with" another person, combined with a desire to alleviate suffering they have. Its often a fairly automatic response, like what one has when one sees a crying child or even a hurt animal. It's like empathy but with a motivation to reach out. It does not involve any desire of a reward for reaching out (even the reward that someone doing compassionate work under the aegis of a religious organization for example might get from knowing that are promoting their ideology). Of course, one can have an affiliation with a religious or philosophical organization and still have genuine compassion - I don't mean to suggest otherwise. But compassion is one of our natural, biological responses which can yet be cultivated (even into a strong, reliable personal pattern of feeling & behavior) - or conversely, repressed into oblivion. It is perhaps a bit "unusual" in not being directly self-advantageous to the organism feeling it and acting on it, though studies in evolutionary biology and other fields have identified it as producing social benefit. Certainly acting on compassion and eliminating another being's suffering can produce powerful feelings of pleasure, even though the initial impetus may not contain an consideration of that.

Is there even a word in ancient Greek or Latin that captures this idea?

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 11:27 AM

Empathy and Sympathy are Greek words originally. Don will be of more assistance on that point!

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 7, 2022 at 12:45 PM

So within Epicureanism, there is the great importance of friendship, and within friendship there is the great importance of acting with compassion toward one's friends, as compassion would bring the greatest pleasure within friendship interactions.

I think it would be good to more clearly define the word "compassion" as an active attitude rather than a passive attitude. So speaking and acting with cordiality, kindness, consideration,

respect, patience, acceptance, candor, and caring.

Post by “Scott” of February 7, 2022 at 12:59 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think it would be good to more clearly define the word "compassion" as an active attitude rather than a passive attitude.

Sounds right, [Kalosyni](#) - I totally agree with you compassion should be thought of that way! Compassion tends to make people try to help. Compassion includes an urge to reach out. If there isn't this active element, you only have sympathy or empathy.

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 8:13 PM

Quote

Am I forgetting any passage that would justify exactly calling friendship "the greatest pleasure"?

Your suggestion is quite right, Cassius; the formulation I used above is 'stuck in my head', as it were, and I would not be able to cite a source for it. Perhaps the answer lies in translation, or modern commentary, or my own internal phrasing. *Pleasure* is the good, full stop!

As we go through the above citations, it will become important to consider exactly what is meant by the term *friendship*. I have no opinion on that just now, but it is something to think about. On that note, we turn next to Diogenes of Oenoanda!

Please bear in mind that the inscription (translated by Martin Ferguson Smith) is very fragmentary; Even when whole, the inscription was more "arranged" than written. Many of the passages were quotations in whole or in part from early Epicurean works. A few come from Epicurus' surviving letters; a few from Diogenes' own letters, for he was evidently active in a 'community' of Epicureans, or so it seems from the text. A great many more that *appear* to be quotations come from Epicurean books or maxims that have otherwise been lost to history.

Quote

In this way, [citizens], even though I am not engaging in public affairs, I say these things through the inscription just as if I were taking action, and in an endeavour to prove that what benefits our nature, namely freedom from disturbance, is identical for one and all.

And so, having described the second reason for the inscription, I now go on to mention my mission and to explain its character and nature.

Having already reached the sunset of my life (being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age), I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a [fine] anthem [to celebrate the] fullness [of pleasure] and so to help now those who are well-constituted.

Quote

So (to reiterate what I was saying) observing that these people are in this predicament, I bewailed their behaviour and wept over the wasting of their lives, and I considered it the responsibility of a good man to give [benevolent] assistance, to the utmost of one's ability, to those of them who are well-constituted. [This] is the first reason [for the inscription].

Quote

[There are many who] pursue philosophy for the sake of [wealth and fame], with the aim of procuring these either from private individuals or from kings, by whom philosophy is deemed to be some great and precious possession.

Well, it is not in order to gain any of the above-mentioned objectives that we have embarked upon the same undertaking, but so that we may enjoy happiness through attainment of the goal craved by nature.

The identity of this goal and how neither wealth can furnish it, nor political fame, nor royal office, nor a life of luxury and sumptuous banquets, nor pleasures of choice love-affairs, nor anything else, while philosophy [alone can secure it], we [shall now explain after setting the whole question before you. For we have had this writing inscribed in public] not [for ourselves,] but [for you, citizens, so that we might render it available to all of you in an easily accessible form without oral instruction.] And ... you ...

Quote

and we contrived this in order that, even while [sitting at] home, [we might be able to exhibit] the goods of philosophy, not to all people here [indeed], but to those of them who are civil-spoken; **and not least we did [this] for those who are called «foreigners,» though they are not really so. For, while the various segments of the earth give different people a different country, the whole compass of this world gives all people a single country, the entire earth, and a single home, the world**

Quote

I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end.

Quote

[So we shall not achieve wisdom universally], since not all are capable of it. But if we assume it to be possible, then truly the life of the gods will pass to men. For everything will be full of justice and mutual love, and there will come to be no need of fortifications or laws and all the things which we contrive on account of one another. As for the necessities derived from agriculture, since we shall have no slaves at that time (for indeed [we ourselves shall plough] and dig and tend [the plants] and [divert] rivers and watch over [the crops], we shall] ... such things as ... not ... time ..., and such activities, [in accordance with what is] needful, will interrupt the continuity of the [shared] study of philosophy; for [the] farming operations [will provide what our] nature wants.

Quote

... [all] men [are able to save] themselves, [with the help from us and to effect a complete dispersal of misfortunes affecting the soul (?) and to do away with disturbing emotions and fears].

Quote

It is not nature, which is the same for all, that makes people noble or ignoble, but their actions and dispositions.

Quote

[I am confident, as I address the inscription to you,] my friends, [that many will become healthy in soul. Why do I say this]? What in the world are [the remedies]? The [inscription], dearest friends, [will afford help both] to us [ourselves] and [to others; for I produced it for the benefit of my fellow-citizens; and] I produced [it] above all [from a desire to help our descendants], in case [they should walk up and down this stoa, as well as showing myself benevolent towards those strangers among us [who are well constituted]. And being perfectly aware that it is through knowledge of matters, concerning both physics and the emotions, which I explained in the places below, that [tranquillity of mind comes about, I know well that I have advertised the remedies that bring salvation].

I have underlined the salient passages; key words that it might be useful to know the Greek translations of I have put into red. It might be worth mentioning in passing that Epicurus' name in Greek means *helper* or ally.

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 8:21 PM

Quote

Compassion tends to make people try to help.

I hope, [Scott](#) and [Kalosyni](#), that Diogenes of Oenoanda will allay your concerns on that point!

I have not brought Lucretius into the discussion, and probably there are other omissions as well. But, Alas! I have just received in the mail two books; one by David Sedley, and the other by [Michael McOsker](#); so I'll be turning this evening's attention in that direction!

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2022 at 10:28 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

one by David Sedley, and the other by Michael McOsker;

The Philodemus one looks interesting. I have to ask: Which Sedley book did you get? Look forward to seeing some reviews if you get the chance. Happy reading!

Post by “Joshua” of February 7, 2022 at 10:53 PM

Quote

The Philodemus one looks interesting. I have to ask: Which Sedley book did you get? Look forward to seeing some reviews if you get the chance. Happy reading!

Ask, and you shall [receive](#)!

The Sedley book is *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, which you might have brought to my attention. At any rate I was very impressed with him when we were finishing up the last few episodes of Lucretius on the plague.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2022 at 11:26 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

On that note, we turn next to Diogenes of Oenoanda

The Greek of the inscription is available at <https://papyri.info/dclp/865216>

I'm going to attempt to find a few of the words that [Joshua](#) highlighted and see where we get...

The first quote is from Fragment 3:

ὄπερ ἐστὶν ἀταραξία, καὶ ἐνὶ καὶ πᾶσι τὸ αὐτό ἐστιν.

Our old friend ataraxia is here: translated here as "freedom from disturbance"

"for both one and all it is the same" (kai eni kai pasi...)

I think "his mission" is being conveyed by

τὸ κατεσπουδασμένον ἡμῶν "our earnestness" It's an interesting paraphrase there to the best of my ability right now.

It's also getting late. Maybe get a fresh start tomorrow night.

Thanks for the fun translation exercise! 😊

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2022 at 11:32 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The Sedley book is Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom

👍 👍 I find that book fascinating. Especially, now again that I'm working through *On Nature* in *Les Epicuriens*. The connections between Epicurus's work and Lucretius's is very interesting. I find this doubly so (and I have source amnesia on this) that I've read Cicero was possibly using Philodemus for his Torquatus and other Epicurean material; while Lucretius had been using older texts - maybe even exclusively Epicurus's *On Nature*. Philodemus (and the more contemporary Epicureans) may have updated some of Epicurus's older celestial observations with more "modern" observations including the size of the sun argument. That may very well be in Sedley, so be on the lookout. I get the sense that Philodemus didn't refute Epicurus so much as update his work with more current observations.

Look forward to hearing what you think of it.

Post by “Scott” of February 7, 2022 at 11:33 PM

Thanks, [Don](#), and [Joshua](#) thanks for all the citations! Great work digging all that up! There is plenty to indicate the kindness of Epicurus and that of EP as a philosophy in general, perhaps especially from Diogenes of Oenoanda. Kindness and benevolence, love and help, etc. All good stuff. But I was pondering this and it occurred to me there is still something a little "different" about compassion than what we find in these citations. Some flavor. I did some etymology work on it (e.g. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/compassion>).

Then I took the dog for a walk, and it struck me. Compassion deals with **suffering**. It **calls** for suffering. Pretty much **requires** it. That seems obvious to me in hindsight. That's what really differentiates it from benevolence and love and help and such.

So then I thought... Buddhism, which has been a long time influence in my life, has "suffering" as a seminal concept, as we all know. And would it be any surprise then that compassion is likewise a Buddhist primary motif, which it is, especially from the Dalai Lama and other Mahayana versions, but to greater or lesser extent it pops up in most of the strands of Buddhism. Suffering is also a big deal in Christianity. The passion of Christ, etc. Perhaps Epicureanism just didn't and doesn't have suffering as such a center piece. Although certainly

aware of it and concerned to address what we generally find translated as "pain" in EP materials, is it not simply the case that Epicurus put the positive in front, not the negative? His focus was more on pleasure, not on escaping pain, right?

Post by "Don" of February 7, 2022 at 11:50 PM

[Quote from Scott](#)

His focus was more on pleasure, not on escaping pain, right?

That's certainly my take.

You bring up a good point, [Scott](#) . We technically dealing with 3 different things that sometimes get conflated:

- compassion
- sympathy
- empathy

Common language sometimes sees those as synonyms, but you're right to focus on the distinctions.

I found it interesting that the LSJ specifically reference the philosophy of Epicurus in its definition of *sympatheia*:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, συμπάθεια](#)

"in the Philosophy of Epicurus, corresponding 'affection' or quality, affinity, Ep.1p.11U. (pl.), al."

I'm not sure what that citation to Epicurus means 😞

I seem to remember reading somewhere (a while ago!) that the predominant ethos in ancient Greece was to do everything you could for your friends and associates and do everything you could to crush your enemies. The world was divided into friends/enemies.

That being said, Diogenes of Oenoanda's inscription was specifically designed to spread the "good news" of Epicurus to all who came in contact with it:

καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ πᾶσιν Ἑλλήσι καὶ βαρβάροις "both now and always for all Greeks and barbarians (non-Greeks)"

Post by “Joshua” of February 8, 2022 at 12:07 AM

Quote

Ep.1p.11U. (pl.), al.

This looks to me like a citation to Usener's *Epicurea*, no?

Post by “SimonC” of February 8, 2022 at 3:12 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

Compassion deals with **suffering**. It **calls** for suffering. Pretty much **requires** it. That seems obvious to me in hindsight. That's what really differentiates it from benevolence and love and help and such.

You put your finger exactly on something that felt fishy about this subject. Compassion seems to be self-defeating as a virtue since it requires that others are in and remain in pain, which is not a state of affairs I prefer.

Perhaps love or benevolence is a better word to capture the proselytising spirit in the above quoted?

It seems more Epicurean in spirit to state the goal positively: there are many reasons to prefer people even outside my circle of friends to live according to nature and be free of unnecessary suffering. Therefore adopting an attitude that helps bring this about is appropriate. This attitude is love (or benevolence).

Post by “Godfrey” of February 8, 2022 at 3:24 AM

Quote from Scott

Buddhism, which has been a long time influence in my life, has "suffering" as a seminal concept, as we all know. And would it be any surprise then that compassion is likewise

a Buddhist primary motif, which it is, especially from the Dalai Lama and other Mahayana versions, but to greater or lesser extent it pops up in most of the strands of Buddhism. Suffering is also a big deal in Christianity.

That's an astute observation [Scott](#) . In both of these religions suffering seems to be something integral to life: "original sin" and "life is suffering", to put it a little glibly. On the other hand Epicurus treats suffering as a consequence of superstition and false beliefs. If you can rid yourself of those, then pain is something that you can handle, even to the degree that you make daily choices as to whether accepting a given pain will bring you a balance of pleasure.

This becomes pretty clear by studying the PDs. The first four are foundational, but the others continue to develop these ideas. It really is a positive philosophy.

Post by “Don” of February 8, 2022 at 7:35 AM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Quote

Ep.1p.11U. (pl.), al.

This looks to me like a citation to Usener's *Epicurea*, no?

That's what I thought but "Usener 11" doesn't seem to line up with anything.

The only thing I've found do far is this Vatican Saying :

LXVI. Let us show our feeling for our lost friends not by lamentation but by meditation.

*LXVI. Συμπαθωμεν τοις φίλοις ου θρηνουντες αλλά φροντιζοντες.

[Sympathōmen tois philois ou thrēnountes alla phrontizontes]

Bailey commentary:

"LXVI. Usener is probably right in holding that this fragment cannot refer to sympathy with living friends (θρηνουντες is against that), but to

feeling for friends who are dead The true Epicurean will not idly lament their death, but meditate on their lives. Compare [PD11](#)."

Συμπαθωμεν is a verb. "Let us 'sympathize'"

θρηνουντες refers to wailing, singing a dirge, lamenting.

φροντιζουντες connotes reflection on, giving thought to...

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, Φ φ, , φρι κ-ώδης , φροντ-ίζω](#)

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2022 at 9:21 AM

[Quote from Scott](#)

So then I thought... Buddhism, which has been a long time influence in my life, has "suffering" as a seminal concept, as we all know. And would it be any surprise then that compassion is likewise a Buddhist primary motif, which it is, especially from the Dalai Lama and other Mahayana versions, but to greater or lesser extent it pops up in most of the strands of Buddhism. Suffering is also a big deal in Christianity. The passion of Christ, etc. Perhaps Epicureanism just didn't and doesn't have suffering as such a center piece. Although certainly aware of it and concerned to address what we generally find translated as "pain" in EP materials, is it not simply the case that Epicurus put the positive in front, not the negative? His focus was more on pleasure, not on escaping pain, right?

I agree with Don's "yes." I will also say that it is important to keep in mind that given the logical foundation of Epicurus, which characterizes the ONLY two guides given by Nature as pain and pleasure, the two terms at that "logical" level are largely interchangeable: Pursuing Pleasure IS Avoiding Pain, and vice versa. Those are the only two guides given by Nature, so if you are motivated by feeling, you are doing one or the other.

But having made that observation, I agree that it is critical to analyze which motivation is to be followed (1) at any particular moment, or for the long term, or for any span of time or (2) in terms of significance to the individual who is feeling the pleasure or pain.

Each person has the free will to decide which he is going to pursue, or whether to end his life and pursue neither.

I think it is clear from the shortness of life and many sayings that focus on pleasure and point away from suicide except in extreme circumstances that Epicurus held that Nature gave us Pleasure as the thing to pursue, and so while we are alive (and if we want to look at Nature as a mother) while we can follow Nature's guide and stay alive) our prime directive is to pursue

pleasure, even at the cost of some amount of pain which we find to be worthwhile. If ANY amount of pain was deemed to be intolerable, the only way to implement that kind of philosophy would be suicide.

So whenever you're confronted with some basic unchallengeable observation like "some amount of pain is required to stay alive" then I think we have to assume that Epicurus understood that too and embraced it and worked with it, or else he would have explained why not. Instead, Epicurus was very clear that we sometimes in fact choose pain, so in my view that eliminates the possibility that Epicurus was saying to avoid all pain at all cost.

I don't see that I clipped another quote to comment on, but I also agree with the implication of some of the above posts that worldviews that focus on suffering and the elimination of suffering are in fact depending on the continuation of suffering for their existence, and they have extremely severe foundational problems. Yes Epicurus focuses a lot on alleviation of suffering, but he does so in the context that the purpose of life is pleasure, and the two go hand in hand toward the goal of living a completely pleasurable life, which is in fact largely achievable by most people in most circumstances, and by all people to at least some degree.,.

[Quote from Don](#)

I seem to remember reading somewhere (a while ago!) that the predominant ethos in ancient Greece was to do everything you could for your friends and associates and do everything you could to crush your enemies. The world was divided into friends/enemies.

"No better friend, no worse enemy" is the phrase that comes to my mind in this. I actually believe that Epicurus would and did endorse that, BUT with the caveat stated in [PD39](#) and implied in other places (the reason for this thread) that we do all we can to treat people as friends, or at least not as aliens, before we regretfully conclude that they are in the category of those who we exclude from our lives, or who are "enemies of Hellas," or who we decide are only fit for restraint rather than reformation, or we decide pursuant to [PD06](#) that there is essentially no limit to what we can and should do to protect ourselves from such people, or who according to Diogenes Laertius are "vile."

But to repeat for emphasis, I do think Epicurus held that there are essentially no "good" or "evil" people who are intrinsically evil, and that we can and should work to make everyone whom we can into a friend. All the while keeping a clear head that we are not always going to be successful, and that the safety and happiness of ourselves and our friends is sometimes going to require treating some people as enemies.

[Quote from SimonC](#)

You put your finger exactly on something that felt fishy about this subject. Compassion seems to be self-defeating as a virtue since it requires that others are in and remain in pain, which is not a state of affairs I prefer.

Perhaps love or benevolence is a better word to capture the proselytising spirit in the above quoted?

It seems more Epicurean in spirit to state the goal positively: there are many reasons to prefer people even outside my circle of friends to live according to nature and be free of unnecessary suffering. Therefore adopting an attitude that helps bring this about is appropriate. This attitude is love (or benevolence).

Yes absolutely. The way this is worded reminds me of a topic I have always found interesting but not fully understood nearly as much as I would like. In my reading of Nietzsche I see that he took a strong position that "pity" (another word that we possibly ought to include in this analysis) is a very negative thing (it in fact "killed God" in his view). Further, Nietzsche or others (I can't recall) took the position that Aristotle held much the same view. If Aristotle held it, this attitude toward pity may well have deep roots in the Greek viewpoint. I don't think we should dismiss this out of hand as inconsistent with compassion, I frankly don't have a good grip on exactly what the reasoning is, and I think we ought to understand it explicitly before we dismiss it.

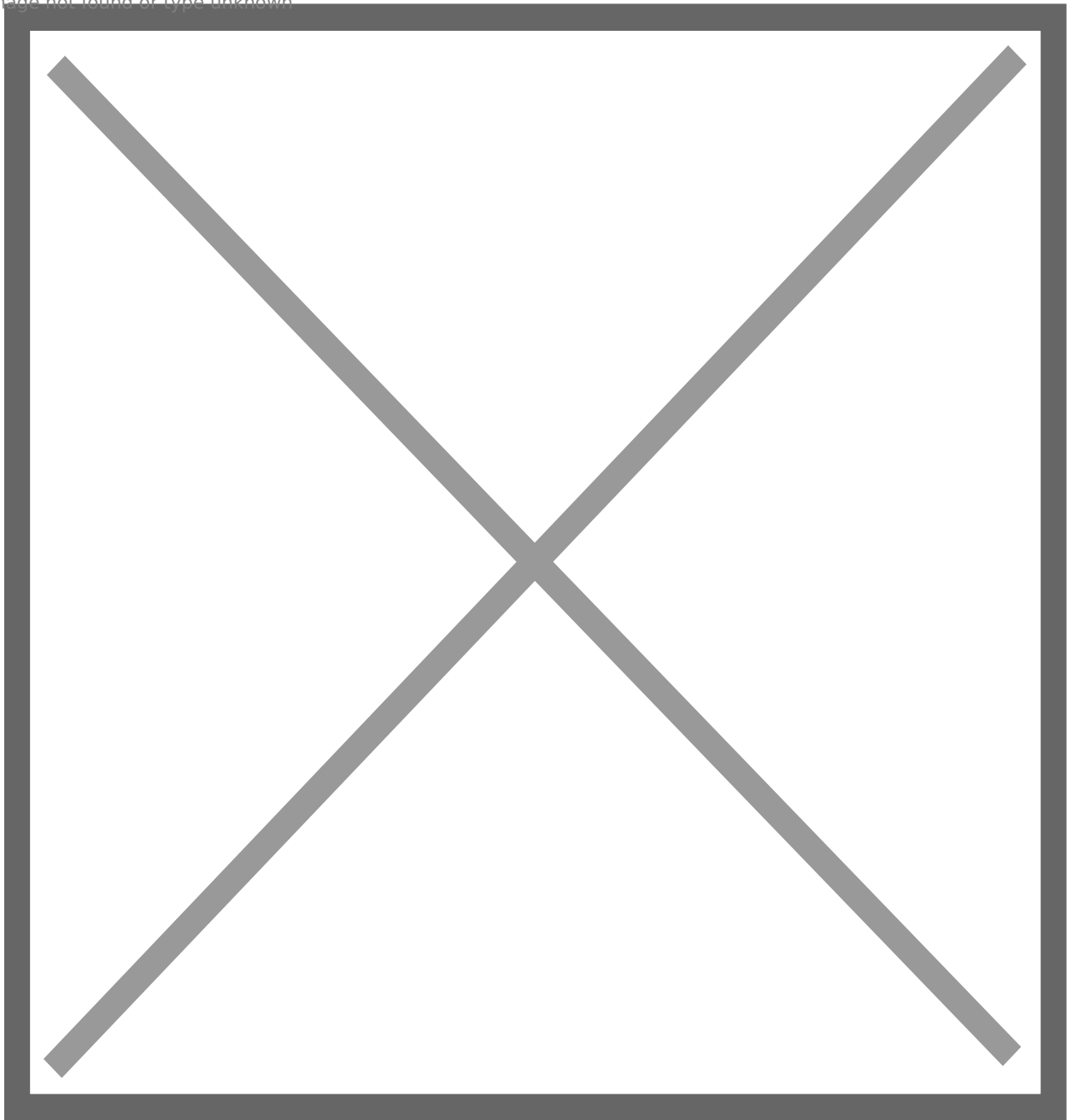
And to add to the complexity, I have a feeling this view of pity is related to the Greek view of "hope," which we know was among the "evils" (or sins or whatever) that had been confined into Pandora's box before she opened it and let the rest of the sins escape. Why was "hope" classified as a bad thing and in the box? Presumably that was due to a close parsing of the issues involved in "hope" and we probably ought to perform the same exercise as to "pity."

I think we already have discussed and probably established to the satisfaction of most that even compassion has a limit, in that if we allow ourselves to be immobilized by sorrow over the condition of those who are suffering, we would never take any steps toward the alleviation of those problems. So probably there is something related to that in the analysis of pity and hope.

Post by “Don” of February 8, 2022 at 11:18 AM

For background on Pandora, I can't recommend more highly Natalie Haynes entertaining episode:

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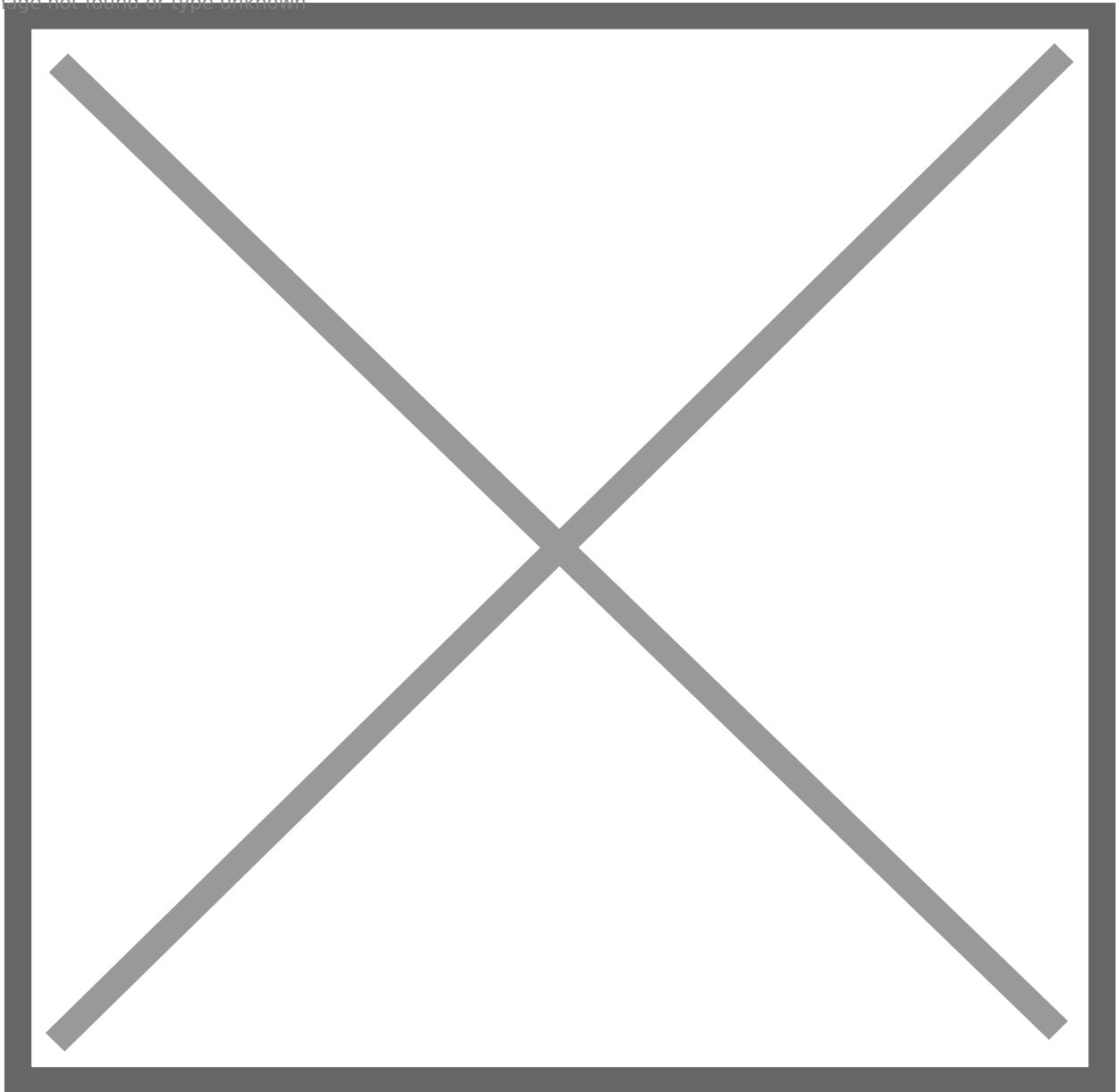


[BBC Radio 4 - Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics, Series 7, Pandora](#)

A mythological equivalent to Eve with a bit of Sleeping Beauty thrown in. With Edith Hall
www.bbc.co.uk

She also literally wrote the book on Pandora:

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[Pandora's Jar by Natalie Haynes review - ancient misogyny](#)

The writer and broadcaster rescues the reputation of the women demonised in classical literature in this erudite and funny study
www.theguardian.com

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2022 at 11:22 AM

Can you summarize the situation on "hope" and/or "pity" Don, as you understand it?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2387-compassion-in-epicurean-philosophy/>

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2022 at 11:46 AM

I see that Elli commented earlier on Pandora and Hope here: [RE: Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy](#) but it was only a passing comment:

Quote

When you would be able to live among gods, then we will talk about this again. Maybe there is a definite conclusion for **living like gods among gods is an utopia**. Utopia means that there is not any place in this planet Earth that **you can live like gods among gods**. Not still now. Hope so, but the Hope, as that myth says, it was the LAST THING in the Pandoras box.

Other references to hope:

Why Did Zeus Put Hope In Pandora's Box?

[Why did Zeus put hope in Pandora's Box?](#)

According to Hesiod, Zeus willed that Hope should stay inside because he wanted mortals to suffer in order to understand that they should not disobey their...

wikilivre.org

Hope and Pandora's Box:

[Hope and Pandora's Box](#)

Lawrence Alma-Tadema's water-color of an ambivalent Pandora, 1881 In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first human woman created by the gods. Zeus ordered her...

reasonandmeaning.com

Nietzsche - [Human, All Too Human](#):

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HOPE.—[Pandora](#) brought [the box of ills](#) and opened it. It was the gift of the gods to men, outwardly a beautiful and seductive gift, and called the Casket of Happiness. Out of it flew all the evils, living winged creatures, thence they now circulate and do men injury day and night. One single evil had not yet escaped from the box, and by the will of Zeus Pandora closed the lid and it remained within. Now for ever man has the casket of happiness in his house and thinks he holds a great treasure ; it is at his disposal, he stretches out his hand for it whenever he

desires ; for he does not know the box which Pandora brought was the casket of evil, and he believes the ill which remains within to be the greatest blessing, —it is hope. Zeus did not wish man, however much he might be tormented by the other evils, to fling away his life, but to go on letting himself be tormented again and again. Therefore he gives man hope,—in reality it is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs the torments of man.

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2022 at 11:57 AM

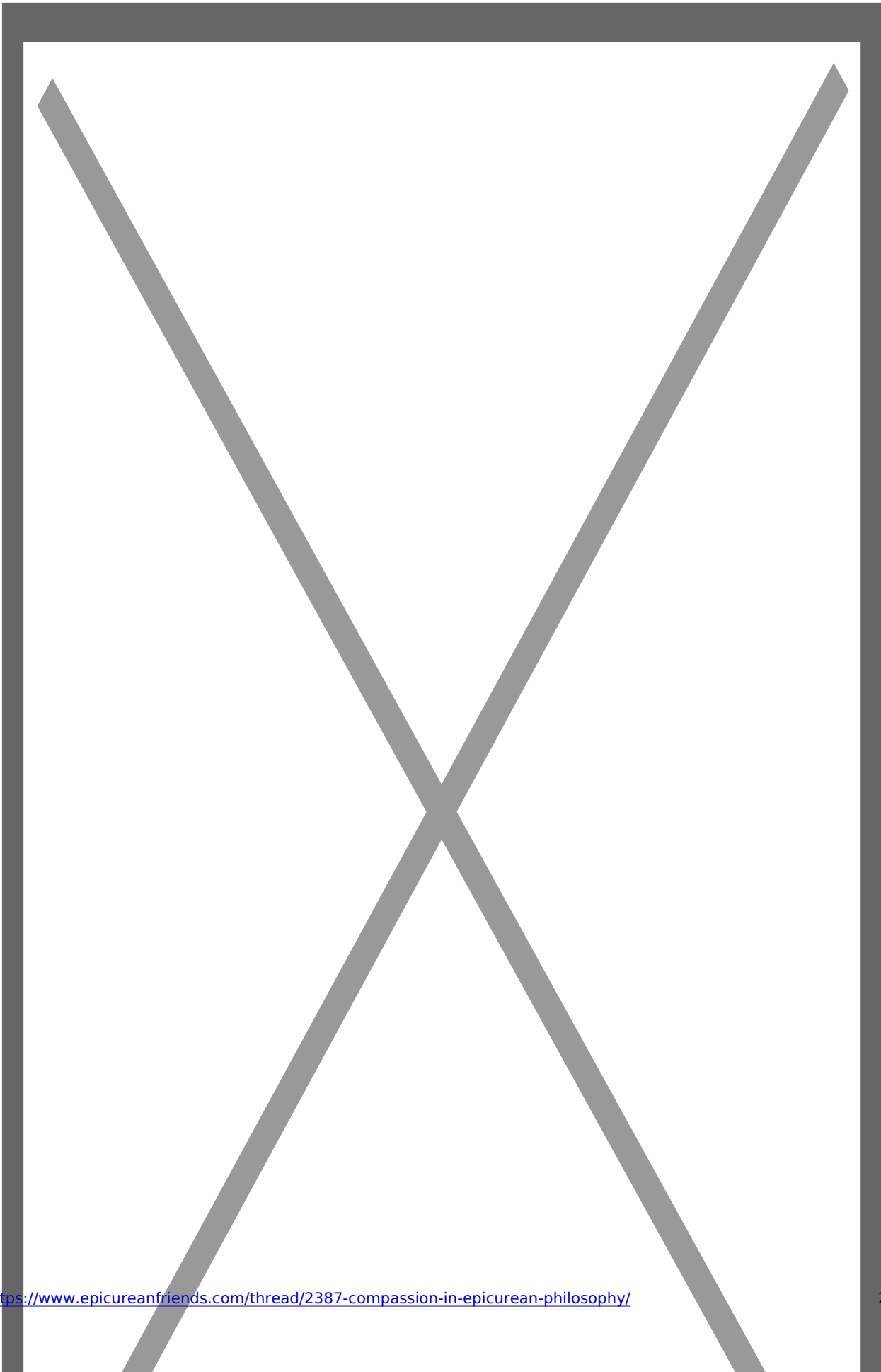
As to Pity. I suspect that what is going on here is that there are significant differences between "pity" and "compassion" even though we tend to use them interchangeably - or at least I do myself. After googling I see there are a lot of articles that allege a difference between the two, for example: <https://www.chopra.com/articles/the-d...assion-and-pity>

Again, this is all Nietzsche, but I seem to recall (or else this is my memory failing again) there are at least reflections of this in Aristotle:

“Pity preserves things that are ripe for decline, it defends things that have been disowned and condemned by life, and it gives a depressive and questionable character to life itself by keeping alive an abundance of failures of every type. People have dared to call pity a virtue... people have gone even further, making it into the virtue, the foundation and source of all virtues, - but of course you always have to keep in mind that this was the perspective of a nihilistic philosophy that inscribed the negation of life on its shield. Schopenhauer was right here: pity negates life, it makes life worthy of negation, - pity is the practice of nihilism. Once more: this depressive and contagious instinct runs counter to the instincts that preserve and enhance the value of life: by multiplying misery just as much as by conserving everything miserable, pity is one of the main tools used to increase decadence - pity wins people over to nothingness! ... You do not say ‘nothingness’ : instead you say ‘the beyond’; or ‘God’; or ‘the true life’; or nirvana, salvation, blessedness ... This innocent rhetoric from the realm of religious-moral idiosyncrasy suddenly appears much less innocent when you see precisely which tendencies are wrapped up inside these sublime words: tendencies hostile to life.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, [The Anti-Christ](#)

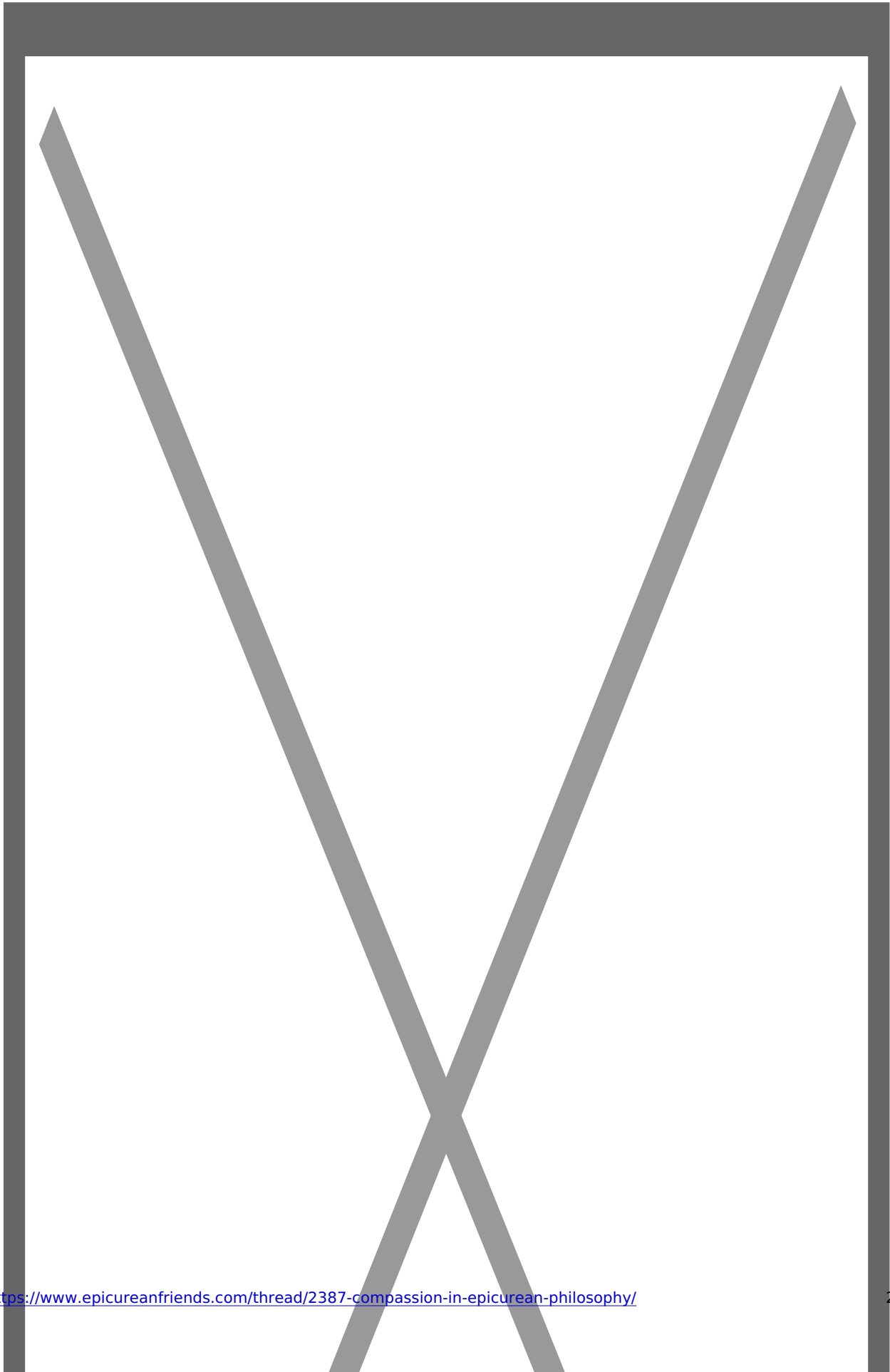
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[Nietzsche on Pity](#)

Pity...is a depressant. A man loses power when he pities [and when he's pitied]. Through pity that drain upon strength which suffering works...
medium.com

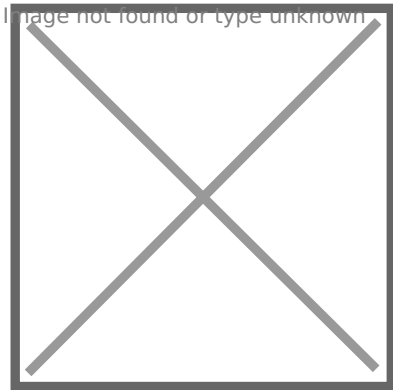
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[Nietzsche on Pity](#)

Where are your greatest dangers? In pity.

medium.com



[Nietzsche on pity and the death of God](#)

Christopher asked: Nietzsche is famous for stating that 'God is dead.' After reading Zarathustra I felt that what he meant by this statement is that because of...

askaphilosopher.org

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 8, 2022 at 12:03 PM

It is only when hope leads to inaction that it is an "evil".

With the right hopeful attitude we can carry on in life...otherwise difficult times become unbearable if there is no hope for taking action to create change or improve the situation.

Post by "Kalosyni" of February 8, 2022 at 12:13 PM

Pity is looking down at someone and creates an "object" divorced from feeling, whereby we need not do anything to help.

Compassion is caring and consideration for another in a way that sees the fullness of their humanity. If for some reason, we turn away from the feeling of compassion, then we turn also away from our own self, so that we then lose our ability to be self-compassionate.

On the Contrast between Pity and Compassion in Nietzsche

SUZANNE OBRZALEK

Some have dared to call pity a virtue (in every *noble* ethic it is considered a weakness); and as if it were not enough, it has been made *the* virtue, the basis and source of all virtues. To be sure—and one should always keep this in mind—this was done by a philosophy that was nihilistic and had inscribed the *negation of life* upon its shield. (*Antichrist*¹ 573)

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SUZANNE OBRZALEK

not the only way to confront the suffering of one's fellowman. I will suggest that in the strong, pity can be reoriented in a life-affirming manner, which I will call "compassion." The response to suffering through compassion is not only suggested in Nietzsche's writing, but it also follows from his ideal of the noble individual and from his doctrines of the will to power and *amor fati*. However, in ultimately arguing for

https://aporia.byu.edu/pdfs/obdrzalek-on_the_contrast_between_pity_and_compassion.pdf

Post by “Don” of February 8, 2022 at 10:36 PM

Pity per JRR Tolkien not Nietzsche:

really afraid. What am I to do? What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!

‘Pity? **It was Pity** that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.’

‘I am sorry,’ said Frodo. ‘But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum.’

‘You have not seen him,’ Gandalf broke in.

‘No, and I don’t want to,’ said Frodo. ‘I can’t understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.’

‘Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that

Pity + Mercy = Compassion? or something else?

I have to say I like the "Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends." I don't know whether it's Epicurean or not, but that's some good wordsmithing imho on the part of JRRT.

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 8, 2022 at 10:57 PM

It seems to me that the word "pity" in the past had a different shade of meaning than what it has now, as we can see from [Don](#), in the Tolkien excerpt above.

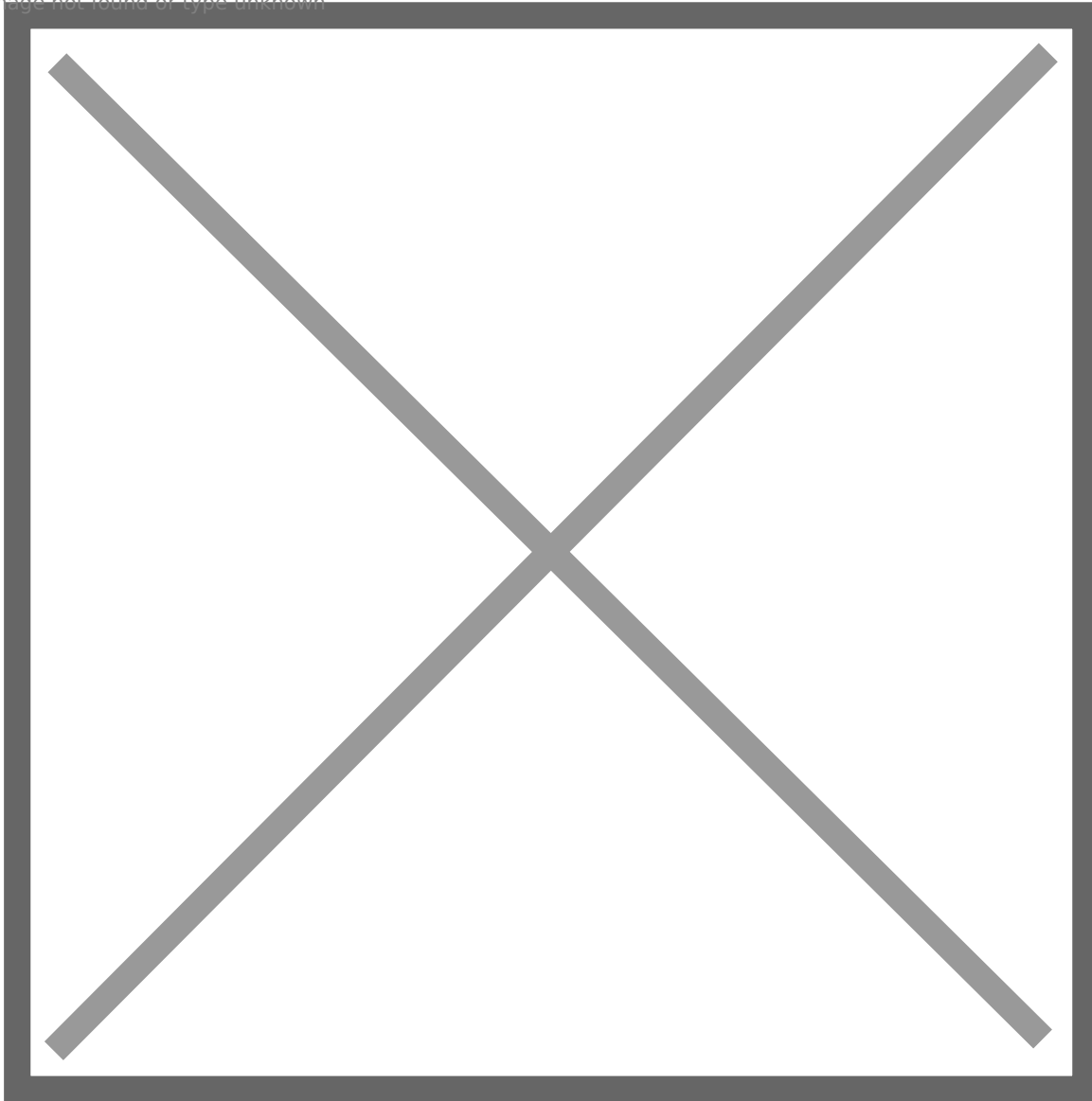
Here is an excerpt the end of chapter 2 of "A Few Days in Athens" ...the word pity in the very last sentence.

Quote

[Time] "as he leads us gently onwards in the path of life, demonstrates to us many truths that we never heard in the schools, and some that, hearing there, we found hard to receive. Our knowledge of human life must be acquired by our passage through it; the lessons of the sage are not sufficient to impart it. Our knowledge of men must be acquired by our own study of them; the report of others will never convince us. When you, my son, have seen more of life, and studied more men, you will find, or, at least, I think you will find, that the judgment is not false which makes us lenient to the failings — yea! even to the crimes of our fellows. In youth, we act on the impulse of feeling, and we feel without pausing to judge. An action, vicious in itself, or that is so merely in our estimation, fills us with horror, and we turn from its agent without waiting to listen to the plea which his ignorance could make to our mercy. In our ripened years, supposing our judgment to have ripened also, when all the insidious temptations that misguided him, and all the disadvantages that he has labored under, perhaps-from his birth, are apparent to us — it is then, and not till then, that our indignation at the crime is lost in our pity of the man."

Post by "Don" of February 8, 2022 at 11:29 PM

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[pity | Etymology, origin and meaning of pity by etymonline](#)

PITY Meaning: "compassion, kindness, generosity of spirit;" c. 1300 "disposition to mercy, quality of being merciful,"... See definitions of pity.

www.etymonline.com

Post by "Scott" of February 9, 2022 at 12:51 AM

I should share that I don't want to suggest compassion is all "bad" by any means. Cultivating compassion can produce very positive results. I have spent some time doing this and can attest

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2387-compassion-in-epicurean-philosophy/>

to the value of it. I've worked with Amnesty International and Tzu Chi for instance, both of which help end the suffering of people from human rights abuses and natural disasters, etc. It is a wonderful feeling to do compassionate work, a powerful connection with one's fellow human beings. When you help someone that is hurting, it is a deep, heartfelt pleasure! There was a time earlier in my life when I didn't have much compassion at all. For anyone, really. That to me now seems cold and "Stoic".

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2022 at 3:21 AM

I think Don is coming from the perspective I assumed to be true, that pity and compassion mean pretty much exactly the same thing.

I need to read the etymology of pity

But after reading some of the Nietzsche material and hearing Scott and Kalosyni say that they consider them to be different as informed by their Buddhist reading, there seems to be more going on than I understood.

We're probably going to have a situation where our goal of articulating the proper view of compassion, or the role of compassion in Epicurus, requires some careful explanation.

Lest it sound like a word game, the reason for the discussion is making sure that suffering is understood as something to work to eliminate, not something to nurse along as a pet doe improper motives, such as excusing us from taking action to seek pleasure or eliminate the pain that can be eliminated.

I get the sense that in that direction is where the criticism of pity lies, and it is justified, but that there is an entirely different and proper role for compassion.

And on this score, as in several others we will definitely run into, we may need to be careful against reading too much into Frances Wright's interpretation.

Last comment would be that it seems to me that in modern usage pretty much everyone sees "compassion" as a virtue. However that does not seem to be the case with "pity" which seems to carry other and varying meaning.

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2022 at 3:22 AM

so ok pity is related to PIETY - and that probably helps explain its mixed implications.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2022 at 3:24 AM

Is it fair to say that compassion derives from something more closely akin to "with feeling"? That would be easier for me to understand as a word that is more uniformly to be endorsed than "piety"

Post by “SimonC” of February 9, 2022 at 6:56 AM

Thinking about the drawback of pity, I remember reading about some of the failures in [Mother Theresa's hospice](#).

Quote

Fox conceded that the regimen he observed included "cleanliness, the tending of wounds and sores, and loving kindness", but critiqued the sisters' "spiritual approach" to managing pain: "I was disturbed to learn that the formulary includes no strong analgesics. Along with the neglect of diagnosis, the lack of good analgesia marks Mother Theresa's approach as clearly separate from the hospice movement. I know which I prefer."

I think there are some times when pity can even encourage passivity.

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 9, 2022 at 9:21 AM

I tend to avoid the word "compassion" altogether. It's etymology is sticky. The word is rooted in ecclesiastical Latin, and specifically alludes to the "co-suffering" of the Christ with the rest of humanity. Additionally, since "compassion" (or "co-suffering") necessarily includes the idea of "suffering", I think the word is antithetical to the Epicurean goal. A wise person would not contribute to their own suffering by accepting the same punishment as someone else; rather, a

wise person would direct their efforts toward trying to remedy the situation, or risk their life to rescue a friend in need. I think our interests would be better served by employing "sympathy" or "empathy" instead of "compassion".

Post by “Eikadistes” of February 9, 2022 at 9:51 AM

I'm also partially splitting hairs, in that *sym-* (Gk.) and *com-* (Lat.) mean nearly the same thing, and *-pathos* (Gk.) and *passion* (Lat.) are directly related. However, the *-pathos* (in "sympathy") links directed to a word that Epicurus, himself employed to refer to one of the three criteria of knowledge. Whereas, hundreds of years later in Italy, the idea of "passion", linguistically, was developing parallel to the Christian myth, which lead to a different historical connotation.

Noting the slight different between ***feeling*** as *judgments of pleasure versus pain* as opposed to ***passion*** as *an undesirable emotional disturbance* helps highlight what I propose to be the Epicurean rejection of the idea of *unconditional pity*. It also helps illuminate the idea of an "untroubled being" (KD1) and its incompatibility with *kharisi* (or "care"). A being that is not weak will not weaken itself; it will empower those around it to achieve a similar state of robust security.

Post by “Scott” of February 9, 2022 at 10:20 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I suspect that what is going on here is that there are significant differences between "pity" and "compassion" even though we tend to use them interchangeably

You're right, Cassius. Don has given a link to the etymology of pity directly above. For compassion, see [this](#)

Post by “Scott” of February 9, 2022 at 10:45 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

I tend to avoid the word "compassion" altogether. It's etymology is sticky. The word is rooted in ecclesiastical Latin, and specifically alludes to the "co-suffering" of the Christ with the rest of humanity.

Agree, that's part of the history/origination of the word. But that's very old history. It doesn't mean that in today's usage. Words change in meaning over time and there is no other word that can replace it today and have the same meaning. Pity and empathy and sympathy just don't fill the bill (and most folks don't know the history of all this anyway).

[Quote from Nate](#)

since "compassion" (or "co-suffering") necessarily includes the idea of "suffering", I think the word is antithetical to the Epicurean goal. A wise person would not contribute to their own suffering by accepting the same punishment as someone else; rather, a wise person would direct their efforts toward trying to remedy the situation

I can totally understand your perspective Nate, as this seems counter-intuitive. But I have lived through this and can honestly attest to the fact that cultivating compassion can be a very positive thing. This is an example of accepting some pain (the extent to which we can take on the pain of someone else, limited) to gain at least 2 greater pleasures 1) a very powerful pleasure of helping someone, and 2) more broadly the pleasure of deep connection with people. This is very meaningful work. Enjoying the good fortune of a friend for instance, is a great thing, but if you help a friend out when they are truly suffering, the connection is much deeper and more powerful. Same with non-friends (in fact sometimes friends are made this way!)

That said, compassion CAN be problematic - it depends on the details. One can become overwhelmed by compassion (we've all heard of this among health care workers during this pandemic, as just one example). Also some persons are so sensitive (or even have outright medical/psychological issues) that most any effort at compassion could be debilitating or even dangerous!

Post by "Scott" of February 9, 2022 at 12:11 PM

Another thing I've found resulting from developing compassion is a more fair assessment of others' intentions. You know how we might go too late through a traffic light and say to

ourselves "Damn! That was a red light I just went through!" Whereas when we are sitting at a red light and someone flies through the other way we say "Damn that guy is a f***g jerk!" There is a bit of tendency to assume bad intentions for others, and to think our intentions are good. Well, at least for me. Compassion has helped me more often give people the benefit of the doubt or at least be more open to them. I sort of gained a perspective like "we're all in this together". During childhood I (short story) had some amount of trauma. Only *many* years later I became capable of telling my mother that I loved her. It wasn't because she or history or anything else was changed. It was me who changed. I was only able to do this because of developing compassion. My heart just got a little "bigger" or whatever. Sorry, that's kind of the Grinch story there I totally bumped into that corny reference apologies lol

Post by "Scott" of February 9, 2022 at 12:22 PM

I should add to that last post, to clarify one thing - when I could say that to my mother, I felt GOOD. I didn't just feel like "virtuous" or something. I had a release of a lot of internal turmoil and was at peace and have been since then about it. That was a true pleasure there, for me.

Post by "Don" of February 9, 2022 at 9:30 PM

Is empathy what we're talking about, too?

<https://youtu.be/Lv79mYHu2C4>

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2022 at 9:47 PM

For me the subject of empathy always comes down to: The "empath" episode of Star Trek the original series is virtually unwatchable and the very worst of the episodes as far as I am concerned. It is also the only episode that, as soon as the episode selection becomes clear, requires changing the channel to something else.

I've never liked that weird French style of white face painting either. Pantomime - is that related to this topic?

Sorry for the tangents there.....

It is interesting how this subject is a lot trickier than first meets the eye.

Post by “Don” of February 9, 2022 at 9:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

For me the subject of empathy always comes down to: The "empath" episode of Star Trek the original series

For those not up on their Star Trek original episodes:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Empath?wprov=sfla1