

Epicurean Golden Rule?

Post by “Pacatus” of July 5, 2023 at 5:55 PM

There are a number of versions of the so-called “golden rule” across cultures. In the Judeo-Christian tradition there are two:

The first is by Rabbi Hillel (died circa 10CE) “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour.”

The second is attributed to Jesus of Galilee in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The first (Hillel’s version) is negatively formed – and I have often preferred it, sometimes wishing to tell some well-meaning person: “Please stop trying to do unto to me!” But I really view them as complimentary – each from a different perspective, and each sometimes being, perhaps, a salutary check on the other.

It seems to me that PD 31 can be analogous to Hillel’s version (with further explication in the following PDs):

“Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, not to harm one another or be harmed.” (St. Andre translation)

Michel Onfray incorporated a somewhat more positively formed dictum in his *Hedonist Manifesto*: “Enjoy and have others enjoy, without doing harm to yourself or anyone else; that is all there is to morality” – especially if one takes that “have” in an active, rather than passive, sense.

I am wondering if the more scholarly on here can identify a similar positively-formed version in the Epicurean corpus? VS13 perhaps? VS15? VS44? Something in Philodemus or Lucretius?

Thank you. 😊

Post by “Joshua” of July 5, 2023 at 6:02 PM

From the Wikipedia [page](#);

Quote

Ancient Greece

The Golden Rule in its prohibitive (negative) form was a common principle in ancient Greek philosophy. Examples of the general concept include:

"Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing." - Thales[17] (c. 624 - c. 546 BCE)

"What you do not want to happen to you, do not do it yourself either." - Sextus the Pythagorean.[18] The oldest extant reference to Sextus is by Origen in the third century of the common era.[19]

"Ideally, no one should touch my property or tamper with it, unless I have given him some sort of permission, and, if I am sensible I shall treat the property of others with the same respect." - Plato[20] (c. 420 - c. 347 BCE)

"Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you." - Isocrates[21] (436-338 BCE)

"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living pleasantly." - Epicurus (341-270 BC) where "justly" refers to "an agreement made in reciprocal association ... against the infliction or suffering of harm." [22]

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Post by "Don" of July 5, 2023 at 6:12 PM

To neither harm nor be harmed*

*

[PD31](#) Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed.

PS: [Pacatus](#) ...I apologize. I missed your mention of [PD31](#) in your initial post. But that's exactly what came to mind when I started to read it. I should be more thorough!

Post by "Joshua" of July 5, 2023 at 6:18 PM

Thoreau on the subject:

Quote

Yet the New Testament treats of man and man's so-called spiritual affairs too exclusively, and is too constantly moral and personal, to alone content me, who am not interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even. I have not the most definite designs on the future. Absolutely speaking, Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you, is by no means a golden rule, but the best of current silver. An honest man would have but little occasion for it. It is golden not to have any rule at all in such a case. The book has never been written which is to be accepted without any allowance.

-A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

Post by "Pacatus" of July 6, 2023 at 11:53 AM

[Don](#): No problem! 😎

Post by "Eikadistes" of July 6, 2023 at 3:11 PM

I lean toward an excerpt from the last 10 KDs

ΜΗ ΒΛΑΠΤΕΙΝ ΜΗΔΕ ΒΛΑΠΤΕΣΘΑΙ

μη βλάπτειν μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι

neither harm nor be harmed.

Post by "Pacatus" of July 6, 2023 at 5:02 PM

We all agree on the prohibitive (negative) formulation – and its importance. (And that is, apparently, the most common type of formulation – not only in ancient Greece but other cultures as well.)

There remains a twofold question:

Are there (in the classical Epicurean corpus) any similar affirmative statements on: 1) where reasonably possible, to prevent or stop wrongful harm from being done to another (particularly someone outside our immediate friendship circle); and 2) to foster social conditions that are conducive to maximizing the possibility for enjoyment/pleasure by most people (including those that may be on the socioeconomic margins)?

Of course, one can strive to do both without drawing on any school’s (or religion’s) ethical philosophy – e.g., as a matter of personal conscience. But I am still curious.

Note: in case 1) above, the perpetrator of harm would be someone who has not embraced the Epicurean social compact.

~ ~ ~

Note: I have some other things to attend to, but I’ll try to check in tomorrow. Thanks again, all.

Post by “Joshua” of July 6, 2023 at 5:45 PM

Quote

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Now these are somewhat more interesting questions at least to me. Per usual with Epicurus we are left with observations rather than commandments, as here;

Quote

[PD39](#): He who best knew how to meet fear of external foes made into one family all the creatures he could; and those he could not, he at any rate did not treat as aliens; and where he found even this impossible, he avoided all association, and, so far as was useful, kept them at a distance.

And here;

Quote

Diogenes of Oenoanda: 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.

Diogenes of Oenoanda is generally the most explicit when it comes to answering your questions, [Pacatus](#).

Quote

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. Now, if only one person or two or three or four or five or six or any larger number you choose, sir, provided that it is not very large, were in a bad predicament, I should address them individually and do all in my power to give them the best advice. But, as I have said before, the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing (for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep) moreover, it is right to help also generations to come (for they too belong to us, though they are still unborn) and, besides, love of humanity prompts us to aid also the foreigners who come here.

Post by “Cassius” of July 6, 2023 at 5:56 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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another (particularly someone outside our immediate friendship circle); and 2) to foster social conditions that are conducive to maximizing the possibility for enjoyment/pleasure by most people (including those that may be on the socioeconomic margins)?

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Note: in case 1) above, the perpetrator of harm would be someone who has not embraced the Epicurean social compact.

I think Joshua's answer hits the high point of quoting the statement from Diogenes of Oinoanda.

I also think that Pacatus you are correct here:

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Of course, one can strive to do both without drawing on any school's (or religion's) ethical philosophy - e.g., as a matter of personal conscience.

...because rather than "personal conscience" I think you can substitute "pleasure." It gives a lot of people "pleasure" to want to make life better for "others in general" - even where you don't have direct relationships with those others.

But as to the general drift of your question as to whether there is anything in Epicurus that would provide some kind of general instruction analogous to a "great commission" to do so, I don't think such a thing would exist because that would come too close to a sort of "idealism" that would be inconsistent with much of the rest of the philosophy. But I think here is plenty of reason for thinking that it enhances your own happiness by making life better for others.

And like everything else there is probably a warning needed about making such a goal an end in itself. The general rule remains that nothing is "good in itself" other than pleasure, and pleasure isn't just out there floating in the air, so it seems to me that everything ultimately has to be tied to the question of whether the action will result in specific improvements in pleasure for specific people who are in some kind of relationship of degree of friendship (or at least not an enemy).

Post by “Joshua” of July 6, 2023 at 6:03 PM

And of course Lucretius, who starts his poem by asking Venus for the blessings of peace:

Quote

Pour from those lips soft syllables to win

Peace for the Romans, glorious Lady, peace!

For in a season troublous to the state

Neither may I attend this task of mine

With thought untroubled, nor mid such events

The illustrious scion of the Memmian house

Neglect the civic cause.

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If Lucretius did die in 50 B.C. or just before that, then he narrowly escaped the seismic and bloody Roman Civil Wars of the 1st and 2nd triumvirates, 49-44 B.C.

In retrospect his plaintive call for peace on the eve of bitter war begins to assume dramatic and even tragic proportions.

Post by “Pacatus” of July 7, 2023 at 1:40 PM

Thanks all.

@Nate: Yes, I like the simplicity of that.

[Joshua](#): That's the kind of stuff I was looking for.

[Cassius](#): I agree with your take. I think all "command moralities" are idealist, Kant no less than the Stoics or other "divine command" types.

Again, thanks all. 😊

Post by “Julia” of September 29, 2024 at 11:24 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

The first (Hillel's version) is negatively formed - and I have often preferred it

I also consider the negatively phrased version to be much preferable, because positively-phrased ones allow for imposing one's ideology onto others, which never ends well. Also, I would note the Christianist versions at least remain at a first-person level; with the abstraction to all of "mankind" found in the Islamist version ("That which you want for yourself, seek for mankind.") virtually any atrocity can be justified. Other Islamist versions are translated/rendered using "brother", which opens up the loop-hole that non-conforming men simply aren't "brothers" and women are unprotected. The Christianist's "neighbour" seems less prone to being twisted in these ways.

I consider [PD31](#) to be an improvement, because it incorporates a mandate to self-defence, unlike the Christianist's "turn the other cheek" doctrine. (This mandate to self-defence reminds me of the Libertarian porcupine (a mascot loosely analogous to the elephant and donkey), which "[...] [was chosen because](#) the porcupine is a defensive animal. It does not shoot its quills (contrary to myth), so it does not harm anyone who respects its boundaries, analogous to the non-aggression principle.")

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Michel Onfray incorporated a somewhat more positively formed dictum in his Hedonist Manifesto: "Enjoy and have others enjoy, without doing harm to yourself or anyone else; that is all there is to morality" - especially if one takes that "have" in an active, rather than passive, sense.

I would not like to take "have" in an active sense, because that would make the pleasures of other people my responsibility; something which I am very firmly and vehemently against. If they are able, they can take care of their own pleasures, and I will not harm them. If they are disabled, I will take care of them to the extent that this pleases me. This is inherently ethical, because there is no reason that I should suffer for someone else, and furthermore, receiving "care" from people who are forced to provide it (because they aren't pleased by providing it) ends in abuse of the person in need, even if the one administering the care is an otherwise good person.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

...because rather than "personal conscience" I think you can substitute "pleasure." It gives a lot of people "pleasure" to want to make life better for "others in general" - even where you don't have direct relationships with those others.

But as to the general drift of your question as to whether there is anything in Epicurus that would provide some kind of general instruction analogous to a "great commission" to do so, I don't think such a thing would exist because that would come too close to a sort of "idealism" that would be inconsistent with much of the rest of the philosophy. But I think here is plenty of reason for thinking the it enhances your own happiness by making life better for others.

This is a line of thinking I first encountered in [Max Stirner's](#) egoism; to quote Wikipedia on that:

"[Stirner] believed that everyone was propelled by their own egoism and desires and that those who accepted this — as willing egoists — could freely live their individual desires, while those who did not — as unwilling egoists — will falsely believe they are fulfilling another cause while they are secretly fulfilling their own desires for happiness and security. The willing egoist would see that they could act freely, unbound from obedience to sacred but artificial truths like law, rights, morality, and religion."

Now, let me modify this excerpt by replacing some key words appropriately:

"[Julia [□□](#)] believed that everyone was propelled by their own *pleasure* and that those who accepted this — as willing *Epicureans* — could freely live their *pleasures*, while those who did not — as unwilling *Epicureans*, such as deceptive ("modern") *Stoics* — will falsely believe they are fulfilling another cause [such as virtue] while they are secretly fulfilling their own *pleasures*. The willing *Epicurean* would see that they could act freely, unbound from obedience to sacred but artificial truths like law, rights, morality, and religion."

To me, this way of phrasing it, is still quite persuasive and compelling. It doesn't beat around the bush. I'd paraphrase it as: "You'll be going after your own pleasure anyway; by being aware of and honest about it, things can only improve."

Quote from Diogenes of Oenoanda

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.

I haven't yet read the inscription; which is probably why I don't understand this: Why does Diogenes of Oenoanda want to help those who are "well-constituted"? Doesn't that mean helping those who don't need help? Shouldn't he want to help those who are badly constituted? Or does he want to help the rich to lead good lives, such that their examples might spread, and their wealth/power not be abused?

Semi-Political Tangent

I think the importance of the Golden Rule cannot be overestimated, because...

- ...I think it necessarily leads to a society based on *genuinely* voluntary win-win exchanges, which I consider a stepping stone to prosperity, freedom, and peace, which in turn I consider to be a requirement for the continuation of the human race due to the advent of the nuclear and genetic age. This is essentially the libertarian anti-capitalist free-market anarchist's perspective also found in Jay Snelson's book [Taming the Violence of Faith](#).
- ...I think it is hard to corrupt the well-phrased Golden Rule, because it refers back to the individual's own sensations and feelings, rather than referring to abstract concepts (which are prone to being misconstrued), and in this way can serve as a potent antidote to authoritarian sociopathy, the corruption through power, Stanford-Prison-Experiment- and Milgram-Experiment-esque effects, and so on, if only people's identity is firmly grounded in their philosophical/religious/... system of choice. Which is to say that, when push comes to shove, even a Christianist is less dangerous than someone without a firmly grounded identity. Note this excerpt of what [Joshua](#) quoted from Diogenes of Oenoanda above: "the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing (for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep)" That's why rulers like their subjects to have no identity other than as subjects of the rulers, and why the worst cases of indoctrination involve all areas of life that can impact identity formation: schools, media, culture, press, books, ...

In short, I consider the Golden Rule as a key element towards a life without "the crimes to which Religion [and institutionalised government and all other forms of unnatural power] leads".

(I hope this tangent is not too political; if it is, moderators please do delete it. I don't mean to cause any drama.)

Post by “Martin” of September 30, 2024 at 4:47 AM

Quote

Why does Diogenes of Oenoanda want to help those who are "well-constituted"? Doesn't that mean helping those who don't need help? Shouldn't he want to help those

who are badly constituted? Or does he want to help the rich to lead good lives, such that their examples might spread, and their wealth/power not be abused?

I guess that "well-constituted" refers to people who are still willing to learn and adapt as they see fit if they encounter ideas which are new for them or which they have neglected in the past.

Post by "Julia" of September 30, 2024 at 5:43 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

I guess that "well-constituted" refers to people who are still willing to learn and adapt as they see fit if they encounter ideas which are new for them or which they have neglected in the past.

Oh, I see. Thank you! 😊

Post by "Don" of September 30, 2024 at 9:17 AM

I would concur with Martin.

The word used there is εὐσυνκρίτοις and seems to possibly be word coined by Epicurus. I've seen it described as referring to men who have to help others and has the meaning of "well constituted, well composed." (remite a los hombres que han de ayudar a otros y tiene el significado de "bien constituido, bien compuesto"). And *well-compounded*, *well-constituted*, or *discriminating*, *Diog.Oen.1,2*.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ε , εὐσπολον: , εὐσύγ-κρι^τος](#)

The word also occurs in fragment 3 in the inscription, too:

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*. Now, if only one person or two or three or four or five or six or any larger number

you choose, sir, provided that it is not very large, were in a bad predicament, I should address them individually and do all in my power to give them the best advice. But, as I have said before, the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing