

Episode 207 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 15 - Does Epicurean Philosophy Lead to Injustice?

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2023 at 5:25 AM

Welcome to Episode 207 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

This week we continue our discussion of Book Two of Cicero's On Ends, which is largely devoted Cicero's attack on Epicurean Philosophy. Going through this book gives us the opportunity to review those attacks, take them apart, and respond to them as an ancient Epicurean might have done, and much more fully than Cicero allowed Torquatus, his Epicurean spokesman, to do.

Follow along with us here: [Cicero's On Ends - Complete Reid Edition](#). Check any typos or other questions against the original PDF which can be found [here](#).

This week we move continue in Section XVI as Cicero begins a series of illustrations which he holds up as examples of moral worthiness (as if Epicurus' views do not embrace this conduct as well!)

XVI. ... It is not proper to imagine your bad man as a coward or a weakling, torturing himself about any- thing he has done, and frightened at everything, but rather as one who craftily judges of everything by his interests, being keen, shrewd and hardened, so that he readily devises means for cheating without detection, without witnesses, without any accomplice. Do you think I am speaking of Lucius Tubulus ? He, having presided as praetor over the court for trying murderers, took bribes in view of trials with such openness, that in the following year Publius Scaevola, the tribune of the commons, carried a bill in the popular assembly directing an inquiry to be made into the matter. Under this bill the senate voted that the inquiry should be conducted by Gnaeus Caepio the consul; Tubulus went into exile at once, and did not venture to defend himself; the facts were indeed evident.

XVII. We are inquiring then not merely about an unprincipled man but about one who is both crafty and unprincipled, as Quintus Pompeius shewed himself when he disowned the treaty with Numantia, one moreover who is not afraid of everything, but, to begin with, sets at nought the

consciousness that is within him, which it costs him no effort to suppress. The man whom we call secret and deep, so far from informing against himself, will actually produce the impression that he is grieved by another person's unprincipled action; for what does shrewdness mean, if not this? I recollect acting as adviser to Publius Sextilius Rufus when he laid before his friends this difficulty, that he was heir to Quintus Fadius Gallus, in whose will there was a statement that he had requested Rufus to see that the whole property passed to the daughter. This statement Sextilius said was untrue, and he might say so without fear, for who was to refute him? None of us believed him, and it was more probable that the falsehood lay with the man to whom it brought advantage than with him who had written that he had made the very request which it was his duty to make. The man said further that having sworn to observe the Voconian law he could not venture, unless his friends thought otherwise, to contravene it.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58116258>

Post by “Cassius” of December 23, 2023 at 7:48 PM

Just for reference in this episode I see that one sentence from Cicero is:

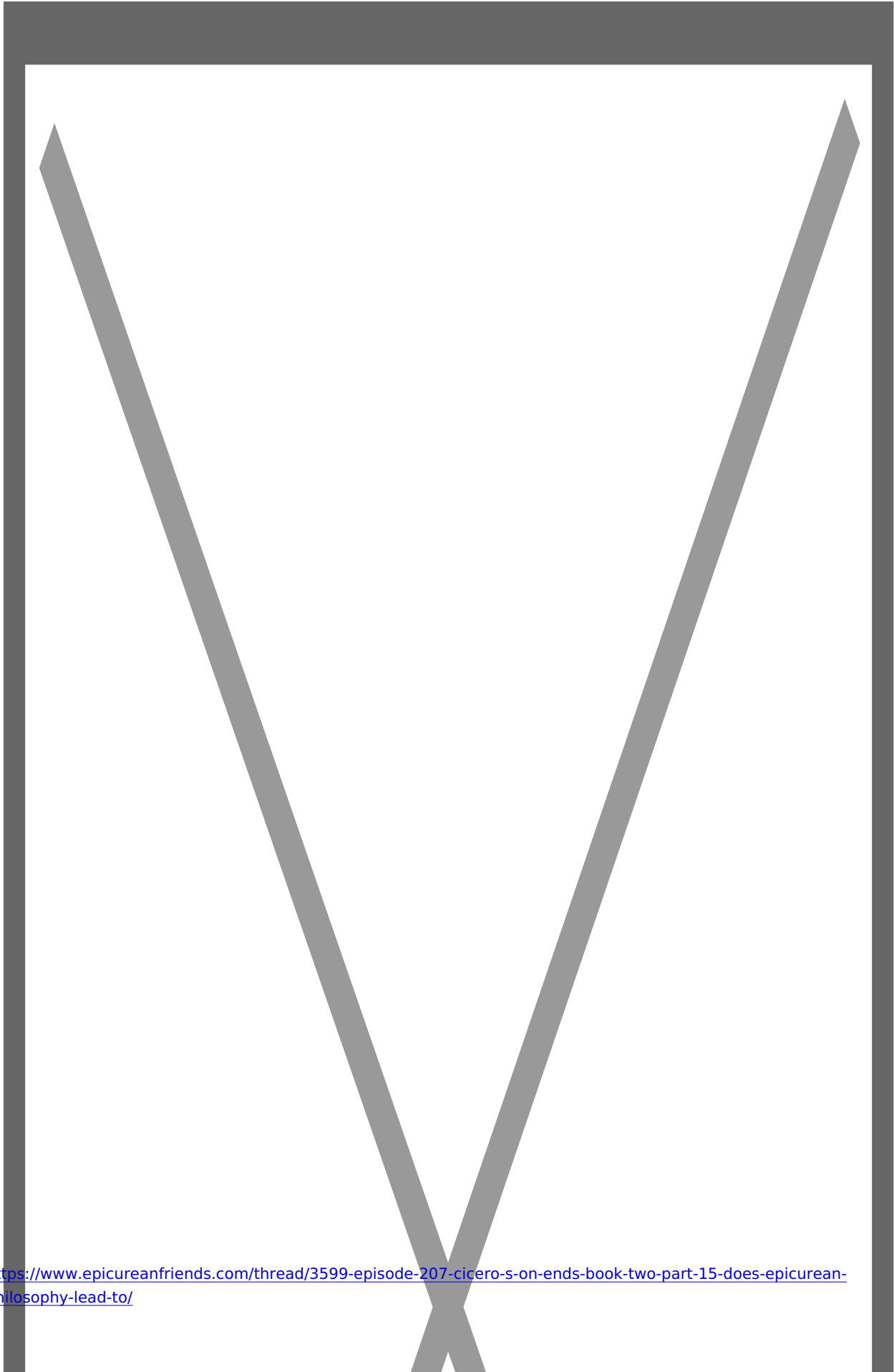
Quote

Pray do you think, Torquatus, that old Imperiosus, if he were listening to our talk, would find greater pleasure in giving ear to your speech about himself, or to mine, in which I stated that he had done nothing from regard for himself, but everything in the interest of the commonwealth; while on the contrary you said he had done nothing but what he did out of regard to himself?

I had to look up "Imperiosus" --- and I see that's one of the names given to one of Torquatus' ancestors:

Titus Manlius Imperiosus Torquatus

Image not found or type unknown



<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3599-episode-207-cicero-s-on-ends-book-two-part-15-does-epicurean-philosophy-lead-to/>

Post by “Cassius” of December 24, 2023 at 7:58 AM

This episode will be a good occasion to remember what Frances Wright has Epicurus say in his confrontation with Zeno (Chapter 7 of A Few Days In Athens). This is Epicurus answering Zeno's charge that Epicurean philosophy leaves an open door to vice:

[Quote from A Few Days In Athens Chapter 7](#)

“Zeno, in his present speech, has rested much of the truth of his system on its expediency; I, therefore, shall do the same by mine. The door to my gardens is ever open, and my books are in the hands of the public; to enter, therefore, here, into the detail or the expounding of the principles of my philosophy, were equally out of place and out of season. ‘Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.’ This is the thrust which Zeno now makes at Epicurus; and did it hit, I grant it were a mortal one. From the flavour, we pronounce of the fruit; from the beauty and the fragrance, of the flower; and in a system of morals, or of philosophy, or of whatever else, what tends to produce good we pronounce to be good, what to produce evil, we pronounce to be evil. I might indeed support the argument, that our opinion with regard to the first principles of morals has nought to do with our practice; — that whether I stand my virtue upon prudence, or propriety, or justice, or benevolence, or self-love, that my virtue is still one and the same; that the dispute is not about the end, but the origin; that of all the thousands who have yielded homage to virtue, hardly one has thought of inspecting the pedestal she stands upon; that as the mariner is guided by the tides, though ignorant of their causes, so does a man obey the rules of virtue, though ignorant of the principles on which those rules are founded: and that the knowledge of those principles would affect the conduct of the man, no more than acquaintance with the causes of the tides would affect the conduct of the mariner. But this I shall not argue; in doing so I might seem but to fight you flying. I shall meet your objection in the face. And I say — that allowing the most powerful effects to spring from the first grounds of a moral system; — the worst or the best, — that mine, if the best, is to be so judged by the good it does and the evil it prevents, must be ranked among the best.

If, as you say, and I partly believe, the iron and the golden ages are past, the youth and

the manhood of the world, and that the weakness of old age is creeping on us — then, as you also say, our youth, dandled on the lap of indulgence, shall turn with sickened ears from the severe moral of Zeno; and then I say, that in the gardens, and in the gardens only, shall they find a food, innocent, yet adapted to their sickly palates; an armor, not of iron fortitude, but of silken persuasion, that shall resist the progress of their degeneracy, or throw a beauty even over their ruin. But, perhaps, though Zeno should allow this last effect of my philosophy to be probable, he will not approve it: his severe eye looks with scorn, not pity, on the follies and vices of the world. He would annihilate them, change them to their opposite virtues, or he would leave them to their full and natural sweep. ‘Be perfect, or be as you are. I allow of no degrees of virtue, so care not for the degrees of vice. Your ruin, if it must be, let it be in all its horrors, in all its vileness; let it attract no pity, no sympathy; let it be seen in all its naked deformity, and excite the full measure of its merited abhorrence and disgust.’

Thus says the sublime Zeno, who sees only man as he should be. Thus says the mild Epicurus, who sees man as he is: — With all his weakness, all his errors, all his sins, still owning fellowship with him, still rejoicing in his welfare, and sighing over his misfortunes; I call from my gardens to the thoughtless, the headstrong, and the idle — ‘Where do ye wander, and what do ye seek? Is it pleasure? Behold it here. Is it ease? Enter and repose.’ Thus do I court them from the table of drunkenness and the bed of licentiousness: I gently awaken their sleeping faculties, and draw the veil from their understandings: — ‘My sons! do you seek pleasure? I seek her also. Let us make the search together. You have tried wine, you have tried love; you have sought amusement in reveling, and forgetfulness in indolence. You tell me you are disappointed: that your passions grew, even while you gratified them; your weariness increased even while you slept. Let us try again. Let us quiet our passions, not by gratifying, but subduing them; let us conquer our weariness, not by rest, but by exertion.’ Thus do I win their ears and their confidence. Step by step I lead them on. I lay open the mysteries of science; I expose the beauties of art; I call the graces and the muses to my aid; the song, the lyre, and the dance. Temperance presides at the repast; innocence at the festival; disgust is changed to satisfaction; listlessness to curiosity; brutality to elegance; lust gives place to love; Bacchanalian hilarity to friendship. Tell me not, Zeno, that the teacher is vicious who washes depravity from the youthful heart; who lays the storm of its passions, and turns all its sensibilities to good.

I grant that I do not look to make men great, but to make men happy. To teach them, that in the discharge of their duties as sons, as husbands, as fathers, as citizens, lies their pleasure and their interest; — and when the sublime motives of Zeno shall cease to affect an enervated generation, the gentle persuasions of Epicurus shall still be heard and obeyed. But you warn me that I shall be slandered, my doctrines misinterpreted, and my school and my name disgraced. I doubt it not. What teacher is

safe from malevolence, what system from misconstruction? And does Zeno really think himself and his doctrines secure? He knows not then man's ignorance and man's folly. Some few generations, when the amiable virtues of Epicurus, and the sublime excellence of Zeno, shall live no longer in remembrance or tradition, the fierce or ambitious bigots of some new sect may alike calumniate both; proclaim the one for a libertine, and the other for a hypocrite. But I will allow that I am more open to detraction than Zeno: that while your school shall be abandoned, mine shall more probably be disgraced. But it will be the same cause that produces the two effects. It will be equally the degeneracy of man that shall cause the discarding of your doctrines, and the perversion of mine. Why then should the prospect of the future disturb Epicurus more than Zeno? The fault will not lie with me any more than you: but with the vices of my followers, and the ignorance of my judges. I follow my course, guided by what I believe to be wisdom; with the good of man at my heart, adapting my advice to his situation, his disposition, and his capacities. My efforts may be unsuccessful, my intentions maybe calumniated; but as I know these to be benevolent, so I shall continue those, unterrified and unruffled by reproaches, unchilled by occasional ingratitude and frequent disappointment."

Post by "Cassius" of December 25, 2023 at 11:02 AM

Episode 207 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we address Cicero's contention that Epicurean philosophy leads to injustice.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58116258>

Post by "waterholic" of December 26, 2023 at 2:04 AM

A simple argument in favour of virtue or fear of gods is that of efficacy. I think most would agree that it takes time and effort to build a proper appreciation of the Epicurean philosophy, particularly when it comes to the role of virtue, law and order as a covenant between people. If the wellbeing of the whole society (and individuals) depends on how well individuals understand and accept the covenant, isn't it easier to have the majority believe in a simple fairy tale (punishment after death and the all seeing eye of god)?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3599-episode-207-cicero-s-on-ends-book-two-part-15-does-epicurean-philosophy-lead-to/>

One could argue that knowledge itself is part of wellbeing, but then it's a bit more complex than the red pill vs. blue pill of the Matrix: as individuals some may choose the truth, while others would prefer comfortable ignorance. But what has better efficacy for the society as a whole? Put it simply: is it easier to convince people in absolute natural virtue (in whatever form) or teach them the nature of randomness, pleasure as a goal and the need for a collaborative outcome for pleasure?

I am playing here the devil's advocate, please be gentle 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 26, 2023 at 2:27 AM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

If the wellbeing of the whole society (and individuals) depends on how well individuals understand and accept the covenant, isn't it easier to have the majority believe in a simple fairy tale (punishment after death and the all seeing eye of god)?

If "the wellbeing of the society" were indeed the ultimate Epicurean goal, then that argument would at least be entertainable. But the great weight of the evidence in the texts is that "the wellbeing of the society" is *NOT* the ultimate Epicurean goal, so using such a presumption would not carry much weight with an Epicurean.

[Quote from waterholic](#)

isn't it easier to have the majority believe in a simple fairy tale (punishment after death and the all seeing eye of god)?

And that might be true too if you're content for the society to be composed of people who are ignorant of natural science, but there's no evidence that an Epicurean would be content with such a thing.

And as far as the relative hardness of convincing people to believe in 'virtue' for it's own sake (and I would say this also applies to trying to people who have studied natural science to believe in a god:

"For it is hard to convince men that "the good is to be chosen for its own sake"; but that pleasure and tranquility of mind is acquired by virtue, justice, and the good is both true and demonstrable. " --

[Cassius to Cicero](#), [15.19] [Brundisium, latter half of January, 45 B.C.]

[Quote from waterholic](#)

as individuals some may choose the truth, while others would prefer comfortable ignorance.

And those individuals who would choose "comfortable ignorance" rather than truth would not be following Epicurean philosophy. Choosing "comfortable ignorance" would not be consistent with choosing wisdom, and as Torquatus put it:

[46] XIV. But if we see that all human life is agitated by confusion and ignorance, and that wisdom alone can redeem us from the violence of our lusts and from the menace of our fears, and alone can teach us to endure humbly even the outrages of fortune, and alone can guide us into every path which leads to peace and calm, why should we hesitate to say that wisdom is desirable in view of pleasures, and unwisdom to be shunned on account of annoyances?

EDIT: I had to add the *NOT* early in the post above to correct a typo/admission that changed the meaning of my sentence. Hopefully the mistake was obvious, but it is corrected now 😊

Post by “waterholic” of December 26, 2023 at 2:38 AM

Thank you [Cassius](#). Let me press this a little further: the goal is not wellbeing of the society - fair enough. But as an individual, I elect to live among a broader set of people (not necessarily friends but rather say a country), who have established certain rules based on their interpretation of virtue (let's say the commandments) that make my life pleasurable. Is it then wise for me to offer the Epicurean evidence and thinking or is it more prudent to just let it be?

I personally am convinced of the latter, partly because you can never be sure what side of random irrational beliefs you can inadvertently end up at (witch hunts, inquisition etc). But this is half an argument for Cicero's position in my view.

Post by “Cassius” of December 26, 2023 at 9:03 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3599-episode-207-cicero-s-on-ends-book-two-part-15-does-epicurean-philosophy-lead-to/>

[Quote from waterholic](#)

Is it then wise for me to offer the Epicurean evidence and thinking or is it more prudent to just let it be?

Ok I see that question as particularly important. "Offering it" brings to mind the issues of Lucian's "Alexander the Oracle Monger" where the Epicurean almost got stoned to death and Lucian criticizes him for being foolhardy.

I see the question more as one of electing whom to live among ... And that would be a very individual decision. Certainly Epicurus recommends living among friends, and being a closer friend is going to involve shared views. But as for the calculation of how to do that and where to compromise, that's very hard to say.

What seems to me *not* hard to say is (1) you only live once, (2) life is short, and (3) you get no credit after death for doing things that did not bring you pleasure. So to me these questions come down to what you personally find desirable into getting the most you can out of life. In my own situation I am as cordial and nice to everyone as I can be when I come into contact with them, but I also organize my time to spend as much of it as possible with people I share the closest friendships.

There are many people with whom I come into casual contact who I try to be nice to, but who end up having no clue that I have any interest in philosophy at all.

I think one of the sayings is that you should run risks for friendship, and I think that plays into the answer too. If someone is so clearly not a candidate for discussing the most important things in life with you, then that person would seem to be a poor candidate to want to devote much time to.

Post by "Joshua" of December 26, 2023 at 2:46 PM

Show Notes;

Thomas More, *Utopia*

I collected the most pertinent passages (including the passages quoted in this episode) relating to Epicureanism in a thread [here](#).

Cosma Raimondi

Quote

The humanist Cosma Raimondi (1400–1435/1436) was a native of Cremona and the pupil of Gasparino Barzizza (1360–1431). He helped to decipher an important manuscript of Cicero's rhetorical works and wrote a [well-known defense of Epicurus](#): A Letter to Ambrogio Tignosi in Defence of Epicurus against the Stoics, Academics and Peripatetics (1429). Leaving Italy, he moved to Avignon, where he later committed suicide.

The Inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda

Martin Ferguson Smith's translation of the text of the inscription is [here](#).

John Locke, *Letter Concerning Religious Toleration*

The full English text of this letter which was originally written in Latin is [here](#).

Horace - Epistle VI Book 1: Ad Numicium

Quote

If your lungs or kidneys were attacked by cruel disease,
You'd seek relief from the disease. You wish to live well:
Who does not? If it's virtue alone achieves it, then
Be resolute, forgo pleasure. But if you consider
Virtue's only words, a forest wood: then beware
Lest your rival's first to dock, lest you lose Cibra's
Or Bithynia's trade. Cleared a thousand, and another?
Then add a third pile, round it off with a fourth.
Surely wife and dowry, loyalty and friends, birth
And beauty too are the gifts of Her Highness Cash,
While Venus and Charm grace the moneyed classes.
Don't be like Cappadocia's king, rich in slaves

Short of lucre. They say Lucullus was asked
If he could lend the theatre a hundred Greek cloaks.
'Who could find all those? he answered, 'but I'll see,
And send what I've got'. Later, a note: 'It seems at home
I've five thousand: take any of them, take the lot'
It's a poor house where there isn't much to spare,
Much that evades the master, benefits his slaves.
If wealth alone will make you happy, and keep you so,
Be first to strive for it again, and last to leave off.
Display More

Post by "Matteng" of December 30, 2023 at 3:03 PM

Thank you for your deep investigation of Ciceros critics, especially about Epicurean justice.

In this subject the Stoics often seems to have the "better ethics" because they emphasize cosmopolitism, altruism, philanthropy for all humans, not only friends.

As a defense I only know 2 aspects:

- Injustice leads to disturbance (guilty conscience, fear of being discovered)

(both not the strongest arguments I think, see platons ring of gyges which makes invisible)

- The Epicurean Sage only pursues natural/necessary desires and there is no need for injustice because these are easy to optain and no one must be harmed.

(But what when in extreme situations, even they are not fulfilled ?)

What I miss is that doing good feels good, reduces stress and sociability is part of human nature (the Stoic had there oikeiosis, I heard Hermachus took over parts of it. But here is a

stronger point for Epicureans to emphasize (social) feelings)

So that it is a natural/necessary desire (compassion, charity) to do good things and to get pleasure from it.

Or maybe that is in the virtue of friendship ?

That justice is limited to strangers and there a limit in doing good being benevolent makes sense to protect from harm from strangers ?

And Friendship/Kindness is for all worthy of it ?

Seneca says of the Stoics this, (how far goes it in Epicurean Philosophy ?)

"No school has more goodness and gentleness; none has more love for human beings, nor more attention to the common good. The goal which it assigns to us is to be useful, to help others, and to take care, not only of ourselves, but of everyone in general and of each one in particular' (On Clemency 3.3). "

Have all a good and pleasant transition into the New Year 😊

Post by "Joshua" of December 30, 2023 at 3:44 PM

Thank you, [Matteng](#) ! I think the best text we have left regarding the Epicurean feeling of compassion for mankind is the Inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda;

Quote

Fr. 30

... time ... 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.

Fr. 56

[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.

But it isn't much, I grant you. The primary ethical mode of the Epicureans seems to be of the "teach a man to fish" variety; Lucretius' whole ethical project was more or less of that nature, whereby he brings good health to mankind through remedies that are philosophical rather than extrinsic.

When Julian the Apostate was trying to revive paganism after an interlude of Christian governance, he actually complained to his high priests that even pagan Romans were going to the Christians for charity rather than to the temples. We might consider this the practical result of 'taking no thought for the morrow', which, take it any way you like, is certainly not advice that Epicurus would condone. Security and self-sufficiency require taking thought for the morrow, and they are both natural goods.

Thread

Natural Goods in Epicureanism

The topic of natural goods briefly came up in last Wednesday's Zoom discussion. So thinking about what are natural goods within Epicureanism, as well as references such as the Principle Doctrines, etc.

It seems that friendship, freedom, and self-sufficiency are all natural goods, and there could be others?

Also, I just found this article (written in 2021) by Alex R. Gilham.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27007901>

This article starts out with saying that pleasure is the only intrinsic good, but that...



Kalosyni

June 12, 2022 at 9:06 AM

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2023 at 5:34 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

In this subject the Stoics often seems to have the "better ethics" because they emphasize cosmopolitanism, altruism, philanthropy for all humans, not only friends.

As a defense I only know 2 aspects...

Matteng:

I agree with Joshua's response but I would also say this - that I do not not think that it is as all a given that the Stoic ethics is "better" for the reasons you state.

To what authority would someone check to see that "altruism" (which is generally defined as a flat "placing others above self" regardless of circumstances) is always a better course, or that I should as a rule show equal concern and action for "all humans" most of whom I will never know, rather than for my friends, who I do know. I would say that I would call into question anyone who claimed to be my friend who placed the interests of random strangers over those he or she has known for a long time.

I'm phrasing this kind of challengingly just to make the point that if you take the philosophy seriously and conclude that in fact there are no supernatural gods and no ideal forms, then indeed there is no authority to approve of "love of humanity" being superior to "love of friends." That leaves the decision between the two to be a purely personal one that varies according to circumstance.

So first and foremost I would dismiss the haughtiness of the Stoics on this (as on many other subjects concerning "virtue") as a lot of hot air. The Stoic view of the universe is nonsense from an Epicurean perspective, and without that Stoic supernaturalism there is no real-world basis for them to assert that their ethics is "better" in the first place.

The perceived irony (that Epicureans are more compassionate than many others) derives from that same commitment to reality. In the absence of high-minded and high-sounding calls to divine fire and the reward of absolute virtue, people operating from an Epicurean perspective have only what they perceive as the short space of time between birth and death to get all they are going to get out of life -- and that includes the emotional reward of benevolence toward others.