

Talking About Epicurus With Someone Who Is Secular Humanist / Atheist

Post by “Cassius” of April 8, 2018 at 8:47 PM

This thread is to kick off discussion of how to approach discussing Epicurus with someone who is secular humanist / atheist.

This would seem to be a category that almost doesn't have to be discussed, because secular humanists/atheists are often thought of as already Epicurean. In fact, however, it has been my experience that this is far from the truth. Secular humanists often adopt Judea-Christian ethics almost totally, simply dispensing with the idea of a supernatural god. That's a good start, but in Epicurean terms it doesn't go nearly far enough to firmly endorse pleasure as the guide of life, death as the end of consciousness, and - even more controversially - the Epicurean view of justice as not built on abstract absolutes, but on the individual happiness of the people concerned.

For example, it is possible that in dealing with someone of this background that there are references in Nietzsche, or Dimitri Liantinis, which would point the way more directly to Epicurus.

Anyway this is a kickoff thread -- please add your suggestions.

Post by “Hiram” of April 13, 2018 at 12:32 PM

I think one key argument that helps them to consider E is to convince them of the need to take care of their existential health via some kind of therapeutic philosophy (and to then stress how E has something different to offer from Buddhism).

Post by “Patrick” of October 4, 2021 at 11:05 PM

Well, I am an atheist. But this whole thing called virtue, you can't possibly live up to it. So you might as well do what you want. I mean, I don't want to cause pain for other people. I can see an issue if you have some kind of sadist who doesn't care if they are hurting others, or even enjoys it. But come to think about it, I don't think that Christianity, or Secular Humanism for that matter will stop that kind of person. I don't think commandments from a supposed god or some kind of secular moral code is going to stop them.

Post by “Martin” of October 5, 2021 at 4:33 AM

From my little bit of knowledge of psychology at amateur level, I expect that even sadists can apply Epicurus' philosophy because it provides both feelings and reason as input for making decisions on what action to take.

Sadists who are not psychopaths may trust their feelings as guide because they have compassion, which stops them from excessively harming their masochistic partners. They need reason mainly to carry out sadistic techniques safely to prevent unintentional hazards.

Sadists who are psychopaths need to rely much more on reason to prevent themselves from severely harming or killing people. A life-time prison sentence might not scare them at the level of feelings but reasoning about such consequences might stop them from excessive actions.

Post by “Cassius” of October 5, 2021 at 5:57 AM

[Quote from Patrick](#)

I don't think commandments from a supposed god or some kind of secular moral code is going to stop them.

Yes your main point there and the rest of your post is directly stated in the first paragraph of [Dlogenes of Oinoanda fragment 20](#)

Quote

Fr. 20

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before.

That not only [is our doctrine] helpful, [but also the opposite doctrine harmful, is clearly shown by] the [Stoics as they go astray. For they say in opposition to us] that the god both is maker of [the] world and takes providential care of it, providing for all things, including human beings. Well, in the first place, we come to this question: was it, may I ask, for his own sake that the god created the world [or for the sake of human beings? For it is obvious that it was from a wish to benefit either himself or human beings that he embarked on this] undertaking. For how could it have been otherwise, if nothing is produced without a cause and these things are produced by a god? Let us then examine this view and what Stoics mean. It was, they say, from a wish to have a city and fellow-citizens, just as if [he were an exile from a city, that] the god [created the world and human beings. However, this supposition, a concoction of empty talking, is] self-evidently a fable, composed to gain the attention of an audience, not a natural philosopher's argument searching for the truth and inferring from probabilities things not palpable to sense. Yet even if, in the belief that he was doing some good [to himself, the god] really [made the world and human beings],

For god [is, I say], a living being, indestructible [and] blessed from [age to] age, having complete [self-sufficiency]. Moreover, what [god, if] he had existed for infinite [time] and enjoyed tranquillity [for thousands of years, would have got] this idea that he needed a city and fellow-citizens? Add to this absurdity that he, being a god, should seek to have beings as fellow-citizens.

And there is this further point too: if he had created the world as a habitation and city for himself, I seek to know where he was living before the world was created; I do not find an answer, at any rate not one consistent with the doctrine of these people when they declare that this world is unique. So for that infinite time, apparently, the god of these people was cityless and homeless and, like an unfortunate man — I do not say «god» —, having neither city nor fellow-citizens, he was destitute and roaming about at random. If therefore the divine nature shall be deemed to have created things for its own sake, all this is absurd; and if for the sake of men, there are yet other more absurd consequences.

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