

Exploration of Epicurean Concepts of Justice, Contracts, & Not to Harm or Be Harmed

Post by "Kalosyni" of December 31, 2021 at 11:59 AM

*Admin Edit: This thread contains posts with a main focus on justice, which have been transferred here from the following thread:

Thread

[Should Epicurean Philosophy Be Made More Accessible?](#)

I found this article and wanted to share. This platform is clearly for highly literate people...and the 2 percent also need to have enough free time to enjoy the resources here.

There is so much good stuff here, and interesting exchanges that I want to post comments on....plus my own thoughts and questions...and yet life calls me to other fun projects and activities.

If anyone is wondering why there are so few people actively engaging, this could be why. Any individual who is curious to study...



Kalosyni

December 30, 2021 at 12:50 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

There is no absolute virtue or eternal "concepts" of any kind (because there is nothing eternal in the universe except the atoms, which means that there are no eternal combinations that could form a basis for anything absolute; and because there is no "center" to the universe from which there could be a single perspective by which to judge all others; because there is no supernatural god whose perspective could be deemed to be the only correct one, etc.)

The ethics would be that all animals and humans feel pleasure and pain. When you cause pain to another human, it results in a mental and/or physical reaction...and also as when they are not consenting to the painful thing that was done to them. When you do this inside the tribe or community, then you are violating a kind of social contract of the mutual understanding "to do

no harm". A tribe or community comes together for the benefits of shared interactions. So any kind of pain or harm goes against the purpose of the community. Yet as the population and civilization of Earth have increased, the boundaries of what is tribe or community are blurred. So now we must extend this "do no harm" to all people. We can use restorative justice...or if necessary when someone has caused violence and is dangerous we must take them out of the general population as a way to protect others...not as punishment, since punishment is a kind of violence. (My understanding of "free-will" is very complex).

Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2021 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The reason I haven't spent much time with Epicurean physics and epistemology is that I am a firm believer in modern science. I think it might be important to contrast Epicurus' ideas with modern scientific understanding.

Parts of Epicurean physics are certainly outdated, but not all by any means, and none of Epicurean epistemology would really fit the "outdated" parts. I think as you read further into it you will find much that you won't otherwise understand as to how the Epicurean Ethics works.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

So now we must extend this "do no harm" to all people.

And this would be example number one. I am no expert on Kant, but the notion of "extending to all people" sounds like a Kantian categorical imperative, which I would say has no parallel at all in Epicurus, which would be quite the opposite in viewpoint. In Epicurus there is no universal justice, but in fact only local and subjective justice, for example as stated in [PD33](#) and [PD34](#).

While I don't share the extreme conclusions of some about "live unknown" there is a very strong strain of "subjectivism" in Epicurean philosophy where you don't expect everyone to agree with you on everything, and so with those who don't (who can't be made your friends because of it, you don't force them and yourself to live we each, you "separate." [PD39](#)

And there is no reason that you would tolerate others doing what you believe to be harmful to yourself, even though they don't agree with it's correctness. Such people you don't "reform," you "restrain," *"Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, lust, gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more; inasmuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint*

rather than for reformation.

I think as you read more into these physics and epistemology issues you'll begin to resolve some of your questions about what Epicurus was teaching. Note that I am not saying that you will agree with them, but that you'll begin to understand why they don't lead toward universal ethical values for everyone at all times and all places. Yes, I do think that it is possible to generalize that in most cases pleasure is to be chosen and pain to be avoided, but we don't even do that ALWAYS even in our own cases -- sometimes we choose pain in order to bring more pleasure to us later.

Possibly the big question in all this is "*Whose pleasure?*" I think you'll eventually find that the "greatest pleasure for the greatest number" might be Utilitarian philosophy, but not consistent with Epicurus.

Post by "Matt" of December 31, 2021 at 1:57 PM

Although it is a generally good practice to do no harm, there is no universal imperative to do so. This doesn't mean everyone needs to be hostile to everyone, but nature tells us that violence is a very significant part of reality. We may not wish to do harm, however humankind follows no unified ideology and the evidence explicitly shows that humans harm each other every moment of the day. The Epicurean has to be ready for anything to preserve the individual's freedom and pursuit of pleasure...and that may mean a show of force or even as a last resort a violent interaction.

Violence does not bring about pleasure, but is necessary to preserve the ability to continue experiencing pleasure. As with everything prudent judgement is critical. Being too heavy handed with an adversary may backfire on you and cause you to have ill repute or likewise being too passive will cause other adversaries to perceive weakness. So it becomes a perpetual cycle of maintaining vigilance and evaluating risks.

Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2021 at 2:23 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

there is no universal imperative to do so

Yes that is the issue. For there to be a universal imperative there would need to be some kind of enforcing mechanism, some kind of "authority figure" with the authority and the right to set such a standard.

Of course in practice the vast majority of people have the same "sense" that pain is bad and pleasure is good, and there is a general baseline revulsion to pain in most people (we can leave out the psychopaths and ascribe that to clinical issues). So we largely get to the same place that most of us have an understanding that inflicting pain on others is undesirable MOST of the time, but we all can (or should) be able to quickly identify cases where even the most emphatic person can see that some infliction of pain (restraint or pain to someone who is about to murder innocent people) has such beneficial results that we are willing to do that.

There's a wide spectrum of views on these subjects among most people who I would consider normal, and the number of people who have no regard to others' pain is probably about the same small number who would never admit any exceptions to the infliction of pain -- both positions run smack into the reality of the pain that we would face if we tried to implement them in reality.

Post by "Don" of December 31, 2021 at 2:25 PM

I have to slightly disagree or provide an alternative perspective on the last few posts. [PD31](#), to me, states that the "justice of nature (What is naturally just)" is that agreement "to not harm each other nor to not be harmed oneself." I don't know if that's "universal" (probably not since the agreements aren't universal... but theoretically could be with international organizations and treaties).

[PD31](#) Τὸ τῆς φύσεως δίκαιόν ἐστι σύμβολον τοῦ συμφέροντος εἰς τὸ μὴ βλάπτειν ἀλλήλους μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι.

Looking at Nate's compilation may be helpful, but for now, here's my translation:

"The justice of nature (What is naturally just) is an agreement of interests to not harm each other nor to not be harmed oneself." **right, lawful, just, τὸ δίκαιον right, opp. to τὸ ἄδικον** **σύμβολον** n (genitive σύμβολου); second declension

- a sign or token by which one infers a thing
- a pledge or pawn, on which money was advanced
- in pl. tallies
- at Athens, a ticket, counter
- a permit or licence to reside, given to aliens

- n Eccl. the distinctive mark of Christians, a confession of faith, a creed
- in legal phrase, σύμβολα were covenants between two states for protection of commerce

συμφέρον n (plural συμφέροντα)

- interest, rights (business connection with material advantage)

Βλάπτω III. after Hom. to damage, hurt, mar, opp. to wilful wrong (ἀδικεῖν), Aesch., etc.
αλλήλους reciprocal or reflexive pronoun

- each other, one another

Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2021 at 2:32 PM

Yes there is definitely a lack of consensus on how to interpret those PDs so it is good for you to add that perspective. And in addition to what you have raised, there are the questions that arise from the changed circumstances that Epicurus starts talking about, because the conclusion that one would think would be obvious (that the breaking of a contract is unjust) does not seem to be nearly so obvious at all. In fact I would argue that Epicurus makes it so easy to justify breaking a contract that if "harm or be harmed" were held by some to be a universal standard of some kind, he's almost taking pains to show that even that is not universal.

So there's the issue that even if one were to suggest that all justice should be considered to revolve around contracts not to harm or be harmed, it appears that there is no injustice in breaking those contracts very readily.

Lots to unwind in the issue of Justice and this is definitely an area not to pin oneself down to a particular position to quickly.

Post by “Matt” of December 31, 2021 at 3:01 PM

I think a lot of this has to do with the compartmentalization of all violent actions in nature in general (including all forms human violence and natural violence which exists in all forms in nature) and our perception that there is a higher abstract idea that certain forms of violence are considered legal and illegal within contractual agreements. For example the types of violent actions outlined in the US Law of Armed Conflict and the more “universal” Geneva Convention

show us there are more regional ideas of what is considered "lawful" acts and "illegal" acts. However, as with any agreement like these particular ones, they apply only to those parties willing to agree to the terms and there are a great number of parties who do not recognize these compacts. Confounding any sort of universal agreements. Navigating this is difficult from 21,000 feet looking down, but on the ground dealing with individual acts of violence and self-preservation it becomes a matter of instinct and the circumstances of the moment. An Epicurean should feel no concern about self defense or self preservation.

For me, my entire career has been dealing with the philosophy of mutually assured destruction and the consequences of parties breaking agreements and treaties. I usually have a lot of time to think about this stuff because I'm immersed in it daily.

Post by "Don" of December 31, 2021 at 6:11 PM

We're probably straying from the title of this thread, but ..

I find it interesting that the word used for "harm" is βλάπτω (blaptō):

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, βλάπτω](#)

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

βλάπτω does NOT seem to convey willful harm just harm. Willful, unjust harm seems to be ἀδικεῖν which itself is connected to the meaning "unjust"

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

No conclusions, just food for thought.

Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2021 at 6:58 PM

But not a direct synonym for pain?

Unless that word is more etymologically helpful then "harm" is going to be just as ephemeral as "justice" itself.

Pain means something we can understand clearly, but "harm"?

Post by "Don" of December 31, 2021 at 8:00 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But not a direct synonym for pain?

Unless that word is more etymologically helpful then "harm" is going to be just as ephemeral as "Justice" itself.

Pain means something we can understand clearly, but "harm"?

Pain doesn't even enter into it, and there's no clear etymology for βλάπτω. It is definitely not connected to "feel pain" or "cause pain" or anything similar. It conveys hindering, damaging hurting, robbing, etc. "Natural justice is an agreement not to hurt or to be hurt."

This is also one of the PDs that, from my perspective, is better read as part of a paragraph with the following ones, not as some stand-alone aphorism.

From Nate's compilation:

"Natural justice is a covenant of what is suitable for leading men to avoid injuring onanother, and being injured." Yonge (1853)

"Natural justice is a contract of expediency, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another." Hicks (1910)

"Natural justice is a symbol or expression of expediency, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another." Hicks (1925)

"The justice which arises from nature is a pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed." Bailey (1926)

"The justice of Nature is a covenant of advantage to the end that men shall not injure one another nor be injured." De Witt, Epicurus and His Philosophy (1954)

"Natural justice is a compact resulting from expediency by which men seek to prevent one man from injuring others and to protect him from being injured by them." Geer (1964)

"Nature's justice is a guarantee of utility with a view to not harming one another and not being harmed." Long, The Hellenistic Philosophers 125 (1987)

"Natural justice is a pledge guaranteeing mutual advantage, to prevent one from harming others and to keep oneself from being harmed." O'Connor (1993)

“The justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor be harmed.” Inwood & Gerson (1994)

“Natural justice is the advantage conferred by mutual agreements not to inflict nor allow harm.” Anderson (2004)

“Natural justice is an expression of the <natural> interest <everyone has> and consists in both: a) not causing harm to others, and b) not suffering harm for oneself.” Makridis (2005)

“Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed.” Saint-Andre (2008)

“The justice that seeks nature's goal is a utilitarian pledge of men not to harm each other or be harmed.” Strodach (2012)

“Natural justice is a pledge of the advantage associated with preventing men from harming or being harmed by one another.” Mensch (2018)

“Nature's justice is a token [or pledge] of something that promotes not harming one another or being harmed.” White (2021)

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 11:28 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

Although it is a generally good practice to do no harm, there is no universal imperative to do so. This doesn't mean everyone needs to be hostile to everyone, but nature tells us that violence is a very significant part of reality. We may not wish to do harm, however humankind follows no unified ideology and the evidence explicitly shows that humans harm each other every moment of the day. The Epicurean has to be ready for anything to preserve the individual's freedom and pursuit of pleasure...and that may mean a show of force or even as a last resort a violent interaction.

If this is what this online forum advocates and believes then my feeling of a pleasant and safe stay here might have just ended. For I won't be able to trust anyone and that will create fear and trouble in my mind (and very likely also for others).

So this brings me back around to the role of tranquility within Epicureanism, and which we do find evidence of its importance in the Principle Doctrines.

From the materialist understanding of the universe, there is no absolute virtue since there are no gods who mandate this for us. However, we do have a sense of virtue based on the pleasure-pain principle, and when one takes this line of thinking to its conclusion we come to: "It feels good to be with people who will not harm me" and "It feels good to me to give the gift of non-harming to others". And "I enjoy a certain level of safety and tranquility in my environment and in my internal mental experience".

So now I have come around from an early stance of questioning tranquility... and so now I must embrace tranquility and say:

There is no adequate pleasure without adequate tranquility. And we can only hope to find this in the safety and peace of the Epicurean Garden. AND it seems now also that it must be a mutually agreed upon "contract".

I welcome any comments 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 12:28 PM

Kalosyni it sounds to me like you are right to be struggling with some of the core issues of Epicurus, and you will want to keep struggling with these core issues until you decide whether you find his "medicine" worthwhile or not.

I recall that you said that you have not read Lucretius. When you do, you will find that one of his most-repeated analogies is to the taking of wormwood as a medicine, which restores health, but is bitter to the taste.

For example:

Quote

For that too is seen to be not without good reason; but even as healers, when they essay to give loathsome wormwood to children, first touch the rim all round the cup with the sweet golden moisture of honey, so that the unwitting age of children may be beguiled as far as the lips, and meanwhile may drink the bitter draught of wormwood, and though charmed may not be harmed, but rather by such means may be restored and come to health; so now, since this philosophy full often seems too bitter to those who have not tasted it, and the multitude shrinks back away from it, I have desired to set forth to you my reasoning in the sweet-tongued song of the muses, and as though to touch it with the pleasant honey of poetry, if perchance I might avail by such means to keep your mind set upon my verses, while you come to see the whole nature of

things, what is its shape and figure.

And as Lucretius also said in a longer quote worth repeating here:

Quote

Herein I have one fear, lest perchance you think that you are starting on the principles of some unholy reasoning, and setting foot upon the path of sin. Nay, but on the other hand, again and again our foe, religion, has given birth to deeds sinful and unholy. Even as at Aulis the chosen chieftains of the Danai, the first of all the host, foully stained with the blood of Iphianassa the altar of the Virgin of the Cross-Roads. For as soon as the band braided about her virgin locks streamed from her either cheek in equal lengths, as soon as she saw her sorrowing sire stand at the altar's side, and near him the attendants hiding their knives, and her countrymen shedding tears at the sight of her, tongue-tied with terror, sinking on her knees she fell to earth. Nor could it avail the luckless maid at such a time that she first had given the name of father to the king. For seized by men's hands, all trembling was she led to the altars, not that, when the ancient rite of sacrifice was fulfilled, she might be escorted by the clear cry of 'Hymen', but in the very moment of marriage, a pure victim she might foully fall, sorrowing beneath a father's slaughtering stroke, that a happy and hallowed starting might be granted to the fleet. Such evil deeds could religion prompt.

[102] You yourself sometime vanquished by the fearsome threats of the seer's sayings, will seek to desert from us. Nay indeed, how many a dream may they even now conjure up before you, which might avail to overthrow your schemes of life, and confound in fear all your fortunes.

And justly so: for if men could see that there is a fixed limit to their sorrows, then with some reason they might have the strength to stand against the scruples of religion, and the threats of seers. As it is there is no means, no power to withstand, since everlasting is the punishment they must fear in death. For they know not what is the nature of the soul, whether it is born or else finds its way into them at their birth, and again whether it is torn apart by death and perishes with us, or goes to see the shades of Orcus and his waste pools, or by the gods' will implants itself in other breasts, as our own Ennius sang, who first bore down from pleasant Helicon the wreath of deathless leaves, to win bright fame among the tribes of Italian peoples. And yet despite this, Ennius sets forth in the discourse of his immortal verse that there is besides a realm of Acheron, where neither our souls nor bodies endure, but as it were images pale in wondrous wise; and thence he tells that the form of Homer, ever green and fresh, rose to him, and began to shed salt tears, and in converse to reveal the nature of things.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

If this is what this online forum advocates

Yes I do find that Matt's summaries on these points are accurate to what many of us advocate as true, but that's because we are here because we agree with what Epicurus wrote. A lot of what he wrote and taught are very different from what most people are taught nowadays, and in the end each person has to decide what they think is true.

There are lots of subtleties in all these points which make it important not to jump to conclusions too fast. Be sure that you take all the time necessary to be sure you understand the implications before you accept them. There's no rush and there are many people here who are happy to talk about these things!

Post by "Matt" of January 1, 2022 at 12:35 PM

My only comment is that it seems that you are interpreting very generalized and theoretical statements as somehow hostile to you personally...which is somewhat confusing, since nothing in my above statement should create "fear" or "trouble" in your mind. My statement is purely general (not directed at any particular entity) and certainly not meant to trouble anyone in the forum.

But obviously if you feel somehow uncomfortable discussing practical aspects of the philosophy that apply to a myriad of life situations, you must do whatever you must do to pursue your pleasure.

Post by "Don" of January 1, 2022 at 12:50 PM

[Kalosyni](#) , I'll write up a response to your post soon. I, too, see a place for ataraxia "tranquility" but I'm still, as I said elsewhere, seeing a better translation of it as "biological homeostasis," balance in body (aponia) and mind (ataraxia).

I find it also interesting that δίκαιο, usually translated as "justice," also has a basic connotation of balance: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...:entry=di/kaios> then expanding to what is right/legal... To me, what maintains balance in society which blends right into the connotation of keeping to a contract or agreement.

I think I need to emphasize, from my understanding, that balance, homeostasis, equanimity is NOT numbness or lack of feeling or similar ideas. It's proper functioning of the body, society, etc.

Random thoughts on a New Year's morning. More later.

Post by "Cassius" of January 1, 2022 at 1:13 PM

Kalosyni let's pursue these issues as deeply and at length as you are inclined to do so. And it's good to write them in the public threads too, because they have come up many times before and will come up many times in the future. I can't easily find cites, but just as Don is engaged now, he's always been interested in these issues too -- you will find in past thread many exchanges with Don and Elayne as well on these topics.

A significant part of the question involves how hard it is to accept that strongly-held beliefs may not be grounded in a view of nature that is "provable" to be universal. All of us have deeply held views which we find highly pleasurable to support and abhorrent to find challenged, and that is as it should be because our sense of pleasure and pain does not all work the same way for everyone.

But what Epicurus did was say something like: "I don't care if the truth doesn't support my own view of pleasure and pain, I want to know the facts of nature and what is true, and I'll deal with the consequences." It is only because he came to firm conclusions about the nature of the universe that he concluded it to be impossible for there to be absolute justice or absolute rules of anything -- rules imply rule-givers and rule-enforcers, and those just don't exist - at least to our liking of them. Yes in the end the way humans work means that often times people we consider to be "bad" will be punished by other people as a result of their actions. But the bitter truth is that that is not always so, and often people we consider to be bad prosper and people we consider to be good get ground in the dust. And to make matters worse, Epicurus emphasizes that there is no compensation for such "unfairness" after death -- there IS no life after death where the good are rewarded and the bad are punished.

All of which means not that we shouldn't fight for what we find pleasing and fight against what we find painful, but only that we have to be realistic that there are no supernatural forces fighting on our side. Even more, it means that if WE don't take action to fight for our tranquility and to fight against the forces both mental and physical that would take that from us, then it's very possible (and maybe likely, if we're unlucky) that we and our friends are going to die an early and miserable death because of our failure to take proper action.

And when you add to that that Epicurus taught that there is "no fate" in human affairs, then you've got a philosophy that isn't left-wing or right-wing or center in political terms, but is highly charged with personal responsibility. Even if we work as hard as we can for our pleasure and tranquility no paradise is guaranteed to us, but the way the world operates if we DON't Work as hard as we can, then we're very likely to miss out on the good things in life that might well be ours if we lean and apply a true philosophy.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 1:46 PM

[Matt ...](#)

...I see now that my fears are with an imaginary situation, since the reality is that this forum is virtual and not real life.

This whole discussion only makes sense in real life...in a real kepos, between real people, in real situations.

My question is how to trust other people who are in a shared real life environment? If everyone is pursuing firstly their own individual pleasure, they must also have a believe in the mutual motivation "to cause no harm"...or else there is no trust, and without trust there is no safety.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 1:52 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

let's pursue these issues as deeply and at length as you are inclined to do so. And it's good to write them in the public threads too, because they have come up many times before and will come up many times in the future.

Thank you Cassius 😊

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 1:58 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4331-exploration-of-epicurean-concepts-of-justice-contracts-not-to-harm-or-be-harmed/>

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

My question is how to trust other people who are in a shared real life environment? If everyone is pursuing firstly their own individual pleasure, they must also have a believe in the mutual motivation "to cause no harm"...or else there is no trust, and without trust there is no safety.

Good question. As far as trusting people, the old Russian adage "Trust but verify" may be applicable. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust%2C_...ify?wprov=sfla1

Do people's actions agree with their words? Let's say it's a matter of observation by our senses (to keep in the spirit of Epicurus).

For me and my understanding, my pleasure depends on warm, cordial and/or friendly relations with those around me. If I extend kindness to someone, there's a hope (or societal expectation?) that I'll receive kindness in turn when needed. I'm not an idiot and know this isn't always the case! But, overall, it's not a ridiculous way to operate.

I also need to point out that, from my reading, personal pleasure and pain don't enter into Epicurus's formulation of justice in the PDs. There's no mention on them in [PD31](#) to [PD38](#). It's all about the basic agreement, contract, covenant, mutual benefit, etc. These agreements should lead to a pleasurable life of safety from fellow members of society, but that's outside the direct scope of those PDs. That realization (just now for me) is food for my thought.

Post by “Matt” of January 1, 2022 at 2:12 PM

[Kalosyni](#) absolutely, if you are sharing a real life environment with likeminded people who are pursuing individual pleasure it is important to maintain a social compact of doing “no harm” within the confines of the society you are in. However, all compacts aren’t universal even among homogenous ideologically minded people. Living in a group of people who share your mindset only amplifies your safety, it doesn’t ever permanently ensure it. No compact that I am aware of could ever work in that way. As much as we all wish it could...

For me I pursue Epicurean philosophy from a less academic but more lived perspective. Using my own experience to test the philosophy. I am a career military member and formerly a person who worked for the Judicial Branch of my home state. For me Epicurean philosophy is not theory, but application. An application that must work in all forms of life. I know of Epicurean people who live in places like Mexico, who live in particular fear of cartel violence and others who live in countries that would deem Epicurean philosophy blasphemous. For those

people these online forums are their only outlet in a society that has made compacts to destroy them.

Building the Garden as you have said is one where everyone has a shared Epicurean goal...you would teach culinary activities and other types pleasurable forms of living, while others would practice medicine, law and yet still others will be law enforcement and military. But we share a common goal not to harm each other...is it a permanent assurance? No. It can't be because no idealistic Utopia exists, but it would be a very good place to be.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 2:12 PM

This idea comes to me now...

In Buddhism, when people formally join the community, they take precepts. The precepts contain within them an outline of the ways in which a person is to "do no harm" (to abstain from killing, to abstain from taking what is not given, and to abstain from false speech - being the main ones dealing with non-harming).

Since so much of what Epicurus wrote was lost, we can't know if back in Epicurus' time, his community had some sort of precepts that were taken or agreed upon.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 2:28 PM

Discussions of the Epicurean community always bring me back to ask "What was the Epicurean community in Hellenistic times?" "What was The Garden (Ο Κήπος) like?" Here are my thoughts:

- Ο Κήπος was only partially residential. Epicurus and the senior "instructors" probably lived on the grounds or associated house. Many students visited, maybe daily as life allowed, then went back to their regular lives to live the philosophy.
- It was not a commune! Epicurus specifically stated property was not held in common. That would imply mistrust, that aid would not be given if needed.
- It was situated on a major thoroughfare between the city walls and the Academy. It was not a remote retreat out in the hills.
- This also appears to be the case for other κήποι in other cities. They were accessible to the citizens of the polis.

Not sure if this is applicable to the current discussion, but it seemed like an appropriate place to drop it in.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 2:31 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Since so much of what Epicurus wrote was lost, we can't know if back in Epicurus' time, his community had some sort of precepts that were taken or agreed upon.

That is an interesting question. How did you "convert" to being an Epicurean in ancient times? Was it formal? Or did you just show up at your local Garden and start attending lectures and celebrations? Hmm... 🤔 Back to the books!

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 2:41 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I also need to point out that, from my reading, personal pleasure and pain don't enter into Epicurus's formulation of justice in the PDs. There's no mention on them in [PD31](#) to [PD38](#). It's all about the basic agreement, contract, covenant, mutual benefit, etc.

I would say that the Pds on justice are closely analogous to, and should be understood to be part of, Epicurus' overall view on virtue (justice generally being considered a virtue). As such, justice is ultimately a tool for the pleasure of ourselves and our friends, in the same way as is wisdom and prudence and the rest. And that's why it is so clear in those PD's that when circumstances change, that which was deemed "just" before is seen to be no longer just.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Since so much of what Epicurus wrote was lost, we can't know if back in Epicurus' time, his community had some sort of precepts that were taken or agreed upon.

I would expect that the Twelve Fundamentals and the [Principal Doctrines](#) probably served largely in that role, but yet presumably there were probably grades of agreement whereby

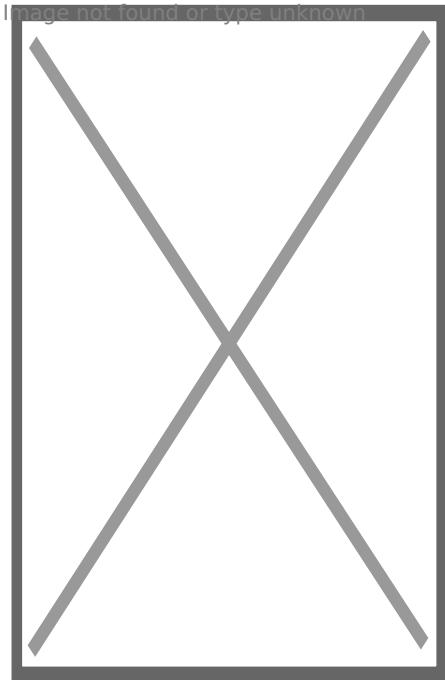
those who were closest were held to higher standards. That would certainly make sense.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 3:34 PM

I came across this over on The Humanist in a review of Hiram's book:

Quote

Epicurus is famous for demanding that his followers swear an oath of loyalty: “I will be faithful to Epicurus according to whom it has been my choice to live.”



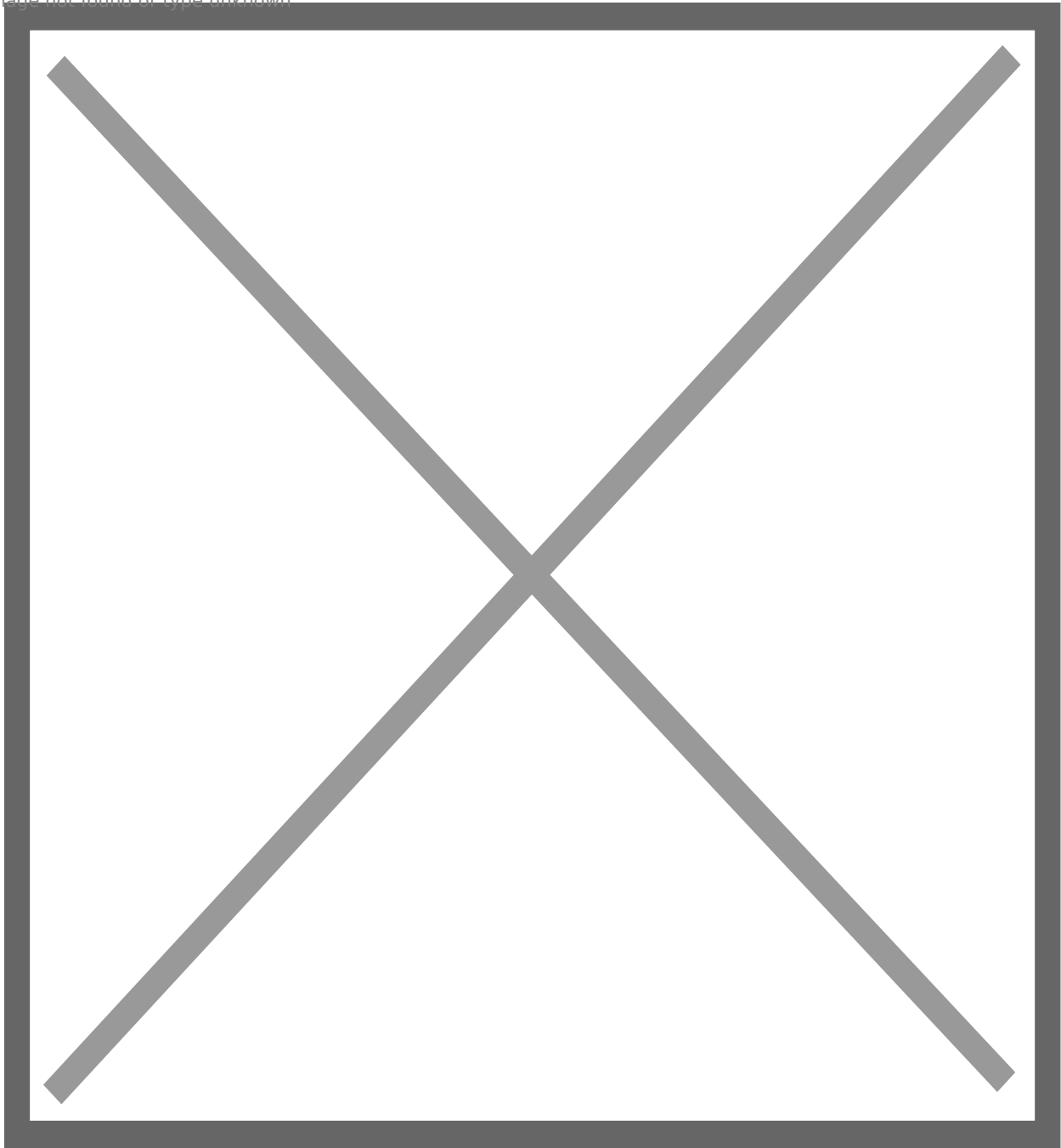
[Tending the Epicurean Garden - TheHumanist.com](https://www.thehumanist.com/2022/01/01/tending-the-epicurean-garden/)

Ours is the age of science. We live in a time in which technology has performed such wondrous feats that many have come to believe, if only half consciously,...
thehumanist.com

Then, one of Cassius's sites gave me the citation:

Philodemus, On Frankness, fragment 45.9-11

Image not found or type unknown



[Letter to Herodotus](#)

Editions: Elemental Edition - Paraphrased in modern English to assist new readers in grasping the concepts before reviewing in greater detail. Reference...

epicureanfriends.com

The text of Fragment 45 runs:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4331-exploration-of-epicurean-concepts-of-justice-contracts-not-to-harm-or-be-harmed/>

Fr. 45: ...we shall admonish others with great confidence, both now and when those {of us} who have become offshoots of our teachers have become eminent. And the encompassing and most important thing is, we shall obey Epicurus, according to whom we have chosen to live, as even...

<https://librosycultura2.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/filodemo-1998-on-frank-criticism-konstan-y-clay-griego-e-ingles.pdf?ved=2ahUKEwiDobb0sZH1AhUUjYkEHc7kBSMQFnoECAQQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3BQTMX-rvoIFiAdzhRXK5->

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 4:53 PM

Ah that is one of those great divides of interpretation.

I would NEVER consider that phrase to be a "loyalty oath" -- I would immediately presume that it was much like the WWJD bracelets that Christians where almost in fun.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 5:03 PM

Yeah, it's not an oath in Philodemus's original text. Just a statement of how Philodemus sees how one applies Epicurus's teachings to his life... And how he thinks others in the community should, too.

"the encompassing and most important thing is that we shall obey Epicurus according to whom we have chosen to live,"

I agree this is more of a WWJD reminder than any oath. Epicureans can have their own SFOTSE bracelets anyway 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 5:28 PM

I was thinking that was a reference in Seneca, so I could be thinking wrong. Do you have a particular cite for it in Philodemus beyond what you quoted above? I am always more skeptical

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of Philodemus quotes too due to the uncertainties of the text.

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 5:33 PM

One can easily imagine how these disagreeable interpretations get started, depending on whether one is sympathetic or not.

There's no contradiction between these two positions, because that's our position here:

(1) ALWAYS use your own mind to your fullest ability and NEVER take as accepted anything on authority or without evidence that you consider to be persuasive.

(2) We want our own community of friends who believe the way we do, and we're going to have a set list of standards that everyone pretty much needs to adhere to -- and if you don't come around over time, you're going to want to look elsewhere for a community. 😊

Both of those are I think absolutely consistent with one another, and I feel sure that Epicurus saw that just like anyone else would see it who wants to run an organization. I feel sure he had some version of his pretty close to both (1) and (2). But he also would have known that you can't run a school that is nothing but a debate society among people who don't agree on core values. You can't have a Organization of those pledged to undermine all organizations."

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 5:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I was thinking that was a reference in Seneca, so I could be thinking wrong. Do you have a particular cite for it in Philodemus beyond what you quoted above? I am always more skeptical of Philodemus quotes too due to the uncertainties of the text.

That link in my post has the full PDF of Philodemus's On Frank Speech. It's in Fragment 45.

The SFOTSE is Seneca:

Quote

(Seneca's Letters, Book I- Letter XXV) But do you yourself, as indeed you are doing, show me that you are stout-hearted; lighten your baggage for the march. None of our possessions is essential. Let us return to the law of nature; for then riches are laid up for us. The things which we actually need are free for all, or else cheap; nature craves only bread and water. No one is poor according to this standard; when a man has limited his desires within these bounds, he can challenge the happiness of Jove himself, as Epicurus says. I must insert in this letter one or two more of his sayings: "Do everything as if Epicurus were watching you." (Sic fac omnia tamquam spectet Epicurus) There is no real doubt that it is good for one to have appointed a guardian over oneself, and to have someone whom you may look up to, someone whom you may regard as a witness of your thoughts. It is, indeed, nobler by far to live as you would live under the eyes of some good man, always at your side; but nevertheless I am content if you only act, in whatever you do, as you would act if anyone at all were looking on; because solitude prompts us to all kinds of evil. And when you have progressed so far that you have also respect for yourself, you may send away your attendant; but until then, set as a guard over yourself the authority of some man, whether your choice be the great Cato or Scipio, or Laelius, - or any man in whose presence even abandoned wretches would check their bad impulses. Meantime, you are engaged in making of yourself the sort of person in whose company you would not dare to sin. When this aim has been accomplished and you begin to hold yourself in some esteem, I shall gradually allow you to do what Epicurus, in another passage, suggests: "The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd."

Post by "Don" of January 1, 2022 at 6:05 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that the Pds on justice are closely analogous to, and should be understood to be part of, Epicurus' overall view on virtue (justice generally being considered a virtue). As such, justice is ultimately a tool for the pleasure of ourselves and our friends, in the same way as is wisdom and prudence and the rest. And that's why it is so clear in those PD's that when circumstances change, that which was deemed "just" before is seen to be no longer just.

Hmm ☐ I'm not entirely convinced, but I'll entertain your post.

As an exercise, I put [PD31](#) to [PD38](#) together as paragraphs and also threw in [PD17](#) (see if y'all can pick it out 😊) to get away from looking at them as discrete thoughts.

Quote

Natural justice is a covenant for mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed. Justice does not exist in itself; instead, it is always a compact to not harm one another or be harmed, which is agreed upon by those who gather together at some time and place. There is neither justice nor injustice with regard to those animals that do not have the power of making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed similar to those peoples who have neither the power nor the desire of making a covenant to not harm one another or be harmed.

Injustice is not bad in itself, but only because of the fear caused by a suspicion that you will not avoid those who are appointed to punish wrongdoing. One who acts aright is utterly steady and serene, whereas one who goes astray is full of trouble and confusion. It is impossible to be confident that you will escape detection when secretly doing something contrary to an agreement to not harm one another or be harmed, even if currently you do so countless times; for until your death you will be uncertain that you have escaped detection.

In general, justice is the same for all: what is mutually advantageous among companions. But with respect to the particulars of a place or other causes, it does not follow that the same thing is just for all.

Among things that are thought to be just, that which has been witnessed to bring mutual advantage among companions has the nature of justice, whether or not it is the same for everyone. But if someone legislates something whose results are not in accord with what brings mutual advantage among companions, then it does not have the nature of justice. And if what brings advantage according to justice changes, but for some time fits our basic grasp of justice, then for that time it is just, at least to the person who is not confused by empty prattle but instead looks to the facts. When circumstances have not changed and things that were thought to be just are shown to not be in accord with our basic grasp of justice, then those things were not just. But when circumstances do change and things that were just are no longer useful, then those things were just while they brought mutual advantage among companions sharing the same community; but when later they did not bring advantage, then they were not just.

I will say that when you say:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And that's why it is so clear in those PD's that when circumstances change, that which was deemed "just" before is seen to be no longer just.

I think the reason (which is started in the PD) is that something is no longer just is when it's no longer mutually beneficial and no longer adheres to the "basic grasp of justice" which, as I see it, is to neither harm nor be harmed.

Post by “Cassius” of January 1, 2022 at 6:21 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I think the reason (which is started in the PD) is that something is no longer just is when it's no longer mutually beneficial and no longer adheres to the "basic grasp of justice" which, as I see it, is to neither harm nor be harmed.

Ok this is going to help because I think we need to focus on this issue, which I was starting on when I called 'harm" ambiguous:

Who gets to decide whether some is being "harmed" or not? I don't think there can be much of any absolute standard on that, and it's difficult to decide where the limit might be, given the rest of Epicurean philosophy.

Because I think we all end up at the same position if we agree that "harm" is very subjective and relative. If we think "harm" can be defined objectively, then we're looking at an absolute standard of justice which I don't think Epicurus would allow.

In the end, the only thing that is desirable in itself is pleasure and the only thing undesirable in itself is pain, so just at there is no objective "good" but pleasure, there is going to be no objective "bad" but pain.

Agree or disagree?

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 6:41 PM

Just to add in an important point...The Epicurean philosophy arose within ancient Athens, where there were laws and a judicial system, so everyone had a civilized sense of "right and wrong"

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much like we do now.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 8:45 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Because I think we all end up at the same position if we agree that "harm" is very subjective and relative. If we think "harm" can be defined objectively, then we're looking at an absolute standard of justice which I don't think Epicurus would allow.

Broken record that I am, I'm going back to the Greek text of the PDs. There word consistently throughout those PDs to talk about natural justice, the nature of justice, to describe the compact, etc. is βλάπτω.

[Principal Doctrines, by Epicurus](#)

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

If Epicurus or the early Epicureans wanted to use a word less "ambiguous" than βλάπτω to convey another meaning, they would have. Whether we think the English translation of "harm" is ambiguous doesn't matter. We need to grapple with why βλάπτω is the word chosen to convey the "basic grasp of justice" throughout those PDs and its connection to what is δίκαιος "just, right, etc."

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2022 at 8:53 PM

[Cassius](#) and [Don](#) and [Matt](#) (and anyone else)

I hope we can preserve and continue the discussion of ethics and justice, and continue exploring.

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2022 at 8:57 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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[Cassius](#) and [Don](#) and [Matt](#) (and anyone else)

I hope we can preserve and continue the discussion of ethics and justice, and continue exploring.

We can resurrect this thread if anyone's interested:

Thread

[Toward A Better Understanding of Epicurean Justice And Injustice \(With Examples of "Just" and "Unjust"\)](#)

[ADMIN NOTE: This new thread was started so as to contain the responses to the following post, which is itself a response by Don to a post by Elayne. Please check [Elayne's post in the original thread](#) for past context. As per the title I gave the new thread, it would be good to produce some hypothetical examples of "just" and "unjust" so we can begin to see the common themes.]

[...]

Okay, this is helpful for me to flesh out my thinking if y'all will bear with me...

I would say this specific...



Don

March 21, 2021 at 9:34 PM