

Guilty conscience in Epicurean justice.

Post by “wbernys” of January 8, 2026 at 2:34 AM

Epicurus was a very forward thinker in his analysis on the virtue of justice being beneficial mainly for the mind because you don't have to deal with the constant anxiety of getting caught and a wise person would have no need of injustice as seen in PD 1, 17, 34, and 35, instead of some absolute golden rule out there.

But did he or other Epicurean ever adress the more "guilt-driven" aspects of being moral (murders regret of killing) and would he (and others in this thread) approve of it as Epicurean, it is a noticeable absence from their discussion on justice and was wondering if the perhaps downplayed it because "guilt-driven" morality was mostly framed in a religious context like with Stoic and Platonist talk of violating divine reason and "feeling of guilt" not being universal enough for him (obviously psychopaths and masochists exist). Or perhaps I've missed it. Interested for any unconsted evidence of "guilty conscience" playing a role in Epicurean justice.

Interested for folks like [Cassius](#) and [Don](#) to give their takes on this.

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2026 at 5:09 AM

Good issue for thought. My first thoughts:

[Quote from wbernys](#)

the perhaps downplayed it because "guilt-driven" morality was mostly framed in a religious context like with Stoic and Platonist talk of violating divine reason and "feeling of guilt" not being universal enough for him (obviously psychopaths and masochists exist)

I wouldn't think the universality or lack thereof would have been as central. More central would be - as you mention - the falsity of the religious / divine reason context of "guilt." I don't think Epicurus would embrace something he knew to be false regardless of its alleged practical benefits. And Diogenes of Oinoanda makes pretty much the exact point that the threats of religion do not in fact work out in practice.

Post by “wbernys” of January 8, 2026 at 5:35 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

More central would be - as you mention - the falsity of the religious / divine reason context of "guilt." I don't think Epicurus would embrace something he knew to be false regardless of its alleged practical benefits.

Agreed but with that said do you think a "feeling of guilt/disgust/shame" is something an Epicurean can hold as a genuine reason for virtuous activity or is it inheritantly reliant on a fallacy of "divine reason" or "fulfilling our function", the same as how we would never accept claims about fearing offending God's will?

Unfortunately the great fallacy is that I feel disgust is both one of the major reasons people are good (most people are just genuinely disgusted at pedophilia for example, i think even Lucretius makes this point about children being one of the biggest reasons for law) but also it's also recognize it's of the biggest reasons (maybe the biggest reason) for why moral progress often takes so long, disgust or shame at the idea of breaking tradition, race mixing, irreligiosity, or not being "patriotic enough", making it a real double edged sword.

Post by “Martin” of January 8, 2026 at 6:31 AM

From an Epicurean perspective, a guilty conscience may be considered a preconception if it has arisen from socialization in one's group and not from religious indoctrination. Such a preconception may be more efficient than fear of punishment.

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2026 at 7:30 AM

I think this is a very good topic. Let's be careful and stay away from hot-button modern political issues but I do think it's important to distinguish the type of activity we're talking about feeling guilty about. "Disobeying god" would be a cause of feeling guilt that would be rejectable by an Epicurean out of hand.

On the other hand causing certain kinds of unnecessary pain to someone else whom you value would likely be much more clearly a reason to feel bad oneself in a way that could be labeled

"feeling guilty." "Guilt" in the sense of "blame" makes sense to me and "praise and blame" seems to be such a common situation that it is mentioned in the letter to Menoecus.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 8, 2026 at 9:02 AM

[Quote from wbernys](#)

Agreed but with that said do you think a "feeling of guilt/disgust/shame" is something an Epicurean can hold as a genuine reason for virtuous activity

Absolutely.

We define *virtue* as a good used to achieve the goal of pleasure, and we recognize *virtuous behavior* as acting "*practically, properly, and peaceably*" (KD5). Practicing these virtues requires choice and avoidance, like avoiding things that lead to guilt, so avoiding guilt is **definitely** virtuous because it is a choice made to reduce pain and maximize pleasure, which is the goal of life. I'd put it right up there with avoiding doom-scrolling and yelling and political commentators on cable.

[Quote from wbernys](#)

moral progress often takes so long, disgust or shame at the idea of breaking tradition, race mixing, irreligiosity, or not being "patriotic enough", making it a real double edged sword.

I watched this documentary on Netflix last night about child abuse in Utah ... the bottom-line is that the perpetrators were controlling mothers and fathers by manipulating their religious guilt (*over **really** inconsequential things like masturbating and looking at adult porn*), and had those people surrender their children... AND THEY DID! Watching it, I couldn't decide if I was angrier at the vicious abusers, or their weak parents. Guilt was central in all of this, and a special kind of false, religious guilt, unjustified, but strongly felt, and it lead to **actual** crimes against children.

Even then, though, a proper analysis of guilt could have revealed that the religion is bunk. If you have guilt over an objectively non-harmful action, it's time for some therapy. Proper therapy would have revealed that the judgy messages from religion are harmful, not masturbating. Thorough analysis would also have questioned the methods of the abusers, rather than conform. I think the trick is in determining if your feeling of guilt is justified, or if you've been gaslit. That's tricky.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 8, 2026 at 9:11 AM

...and as far as gaslighting goes, that's how I'd describe the other activities to which I think you are alluding. It's tough to be racist when nature finds diversity attractive, and it's tough to be bigoted when nature finds novelty exciting, and it's tough to be violent when nature finds peace preferable. Nature is constantly overriding everyone's learned prejudice. Pornhub reminds us of this every year in that each State's political prejudices are usually subverted by their closet fetishes.

Brainwashing and gaslighting are pervasive, and brutally effective, so, even more important than just "following your nose", so to speak, or *listening to your gut*, is sober analysis. We can rely on the reality of our feelings, but not necessarily their truthfulness. We need the mind for that.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 8, 2026 at 12:34 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

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The underlined part of this quote is, for me, the key point. Guilt is experienced as pain. In evaluating the pleasures v the pains in any particular activity, if there is the potential for feeling guilt we would need to include that in our analysis.

[VS71](#): *Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?*

Post by “wbernys” of January 8, 2026 at 1:41 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

The underlined part of this quote is, for me, the key point. Guilt is experienced as pain. In evaluating the pleasures v the pains in any particular activity, if there is the potential for feeling guilt we would need to include that in our analysis.

[VS71](#): Ask this question of every desire: what will happen to me if the object of desire is achieved, and what if not?

This is probably the best way to look at it. If I fulfill a desire to say become a murderer I may feel scared, isolated, or filled with regret but if I don't do those things I simply have a minor pain of want which is easily dissolved.

Post by “wbernys” of January 8, 2026 at 1:49 PM

[Quote from Martin](#)

From an Epicurean perspective, a guilty conscience may be considered a preconception if it has arisen from socialization in one's group and not from religious indoctrination. Such a preconception may be more efficient than fear of punishment.

Can you elaborate more on this? Is the preconception (I prefer basic grasp from Inwood and Gerson) something like "I naturally care about the people I am socializing with". I recall Torquatus mentioning some Epicureans who took the view that friendship comes from familiarity and when why we die for them, is your view similar to that, we have a preconception of naturally caring about people we socialize with?