

# Have PD35 and Vatican Saying 7 been straw-manned?

Post by “wbernys” of April 18, 2026 at 3:28 AM

EDIT: Grammar got screwed up as Eikadistes pointed out, so i corrected it.

Hello all,

I've been thinking about **PD 35** and **Vatican Saying 7**, A common interpretation (especially in modern discussions) is that *even a single unjust act* results in ever-lasting fear or instability until death, since one can never be certain of escaping detection. But I'm wondering whether that overstates the claim and may be a strawman to knock down Epicurus more by imagining that Epicurus says that someone who stole a DVD as a kid 10 years ago will still live in constant fear. To be clear he's absolutely against all injustice for it's anxiety but i wonder if the points on it destroying happiness are more about a single act or a persistent trait or lifestyle.

Both texts use present participles (τὸν λάθρη τι ποιοῦντα, δύσκολον), in Vatican Saying 7 it is "A wrongdoer (someone who is persistent in wrongdoing)" and in [PD35](#) it is "One who secretly violates the pact (a persistent trait)" which might suggest not merely a one-off action but someone *engaged in injustice as an ongoing practice or disposition*.

My main question is as follows: **Did Epicurus claim that any single act of injustice (no matter how small) ruins a life through constant anxiety unless caught or turning oneself in, or is he primarily targeting those who engage in injustice as a recurring pattern or stable trait being filled with fear because they constantly violate the pact?**

I'd be especially interested in how people read the Greek participles here, perhaps people like [Don](#) and [Bryan](#) could help in clarifying whether Epicurus' point is meant to apply universally to even a single unjust act, or more specifically to injustice as a way of life or permanent trait.

Thanks!

---

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 18, 2026 at 10:50 AM

Quote

**"Who that is wise practices that which the laws forbid, knowing that they will escape notice? A simple-minded accusation is easy to pass."** (Usener 18, from *Against Kolótēs*.)

Epíkouros stops short of saying, 'don't ever break the law'.

This reflection seems poignant in times of lawlessness and collapse, when **"someone establishes a law"** that **"no longer possesses the nature of the just"** (KD 37), or when many **"things appear not to fit the definition of what is considered to be just"** (KD 38).

When this is the case, I think the wise person would continue using comparative analysis to determine which options are most profitable (including potential law-breaking). In the case of betraying a friend versus breaking the law, the suffering one commits to the soul is greater with betrayal:

Quote

**"And so the wise tortured on a rack [suffer] no [more] pain than the torture of a friend, and in defense of them will die. For if one betrays a friend everything through one's life will become frustrated by doubt and strained"** (*Vatican Sayings* 56-57)

---

### **Post by "Eikadistes" of April 18, 2026 at 10:55 AM**

I'm curious about the phrasing you got. I might have it wrong and need to review.

In KD35, I have "**Οὐκ ἔστι τὸν λάθρα τι κινουῦντα...**"

I based my translation of Book 10 on [this text from Perseus](#).

---

### **Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2026 at 11:33 AM**

I have no ability to add anything to your parsing of the Greek, but I strongly agree with the direction you are going in each of your evaluations.

1 - *Certainly* we are going to sometimes break the law - that's inherent in the full analysis of how justice is contextual and changes over time. When something becomes unjust, you aren't going to wait for the next procedural permission-granting to consider the situation unjust and act on that consideration. Sure you have to take into consideration who has power and how they may punish you, but we're talking philosophy and justice, and there's no cosmic enforcement mechanism that would convert "the law" into something any more than it is - a social structure among living people.

2 - *Certainly* Epicurus would not consider "all sins to be equal" such that stealing a DVD when you are six years old leads to a life of torment.

Any readings which would go in the opposite direction from your thoughts would be highly suspect.

---

### Post by "wbernys" of April 18, 2026 at 12:13 PM

#### [Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I'm curious about the phrasing you got. I might have it wrong and need to review.

Hmm. Odd. You're right. I asked ai for grammar help and it may have f'd up the greek. Can't edit my original post to change it though for some reason.

For what I've seen the point still stands, relied on Cyril Bailey who translates it as "evil-doer" and "one who acts in secret contravention" with present tense. And Tim J. Young in classic caves translation does the same.

---

### Post by "Bryan" of May 25, 2026 at 3:12 AM

#### [Quote from Eikadistes](#)

τὸν λάθρα τι κινουῦντα.

#### [Quote from wbernys](#)

τὸν λάθρη τι ποιοῦντα

"τὸν λάθρα τι κινουῦντα = the one secretly moving [*i.e., doing*] something"

vs

"τὸν λάθρη τι ποιοῦντα = the one doing something in secret"

Editors use both, they really have the same meaning.

---

## Post by "DaveT" of May 25, 2026 at 11:22 AM

### [Quote from wbernys](#)

Did Epicurus claim that any single act of injustice (no matter how small) ruins a life through constant anxiety unless caught or turning oneself in, or is he primarily targeting those who engage in injustice as a recurring pattern or stable trait being filled with fear because they constantly violate the pact?

To your original question above: I'm concluding (perhaps from ignorance) that these PDs and VSs as well as interpretations of Epicurus' meanings are generally focused on why you shouldn't do unlawful or unjust acts that are immoral is because you won't be able to live happily since the pain will outweigh the pleasure of feeling good about yourself.

I can't get away from a belief that laws and morals are not REALLY established by social compact. Obedience to laws is by social compact, but the laws are not created that way. They are established by those who have power within of the community by lineage, or military or economic might. Is there an objection that in a democratic system that can't happen? I hope a comparative study of power politics today, will show that power was exercised in Epicurus' time too by virtue of power exercised by wealth etc in the same way. THEREFORE a discussion of just or unjust laws is missing the point within this discussion topic.

Lastly, I've always taken this PD 35 with a measure of salt. Our mental power of rationalizing allows us to violate every law we've ever violated. And our capacity to forget over time, allows us to suffer less and less over time. And don't forget the concept of self forgiveness which itself is a major factor in it's use or abuse. I'm not in favor of saying people are evil or stupid for thinking they can get away with it. But I think if you balance the real and potential pleasures of life actions against the real and potential pains of one's actions in life, that is still powerfully

within Epicurus' message.

---

### **Post by “Bryan” of May 25, 2026 at 8:02 PM**

[DaveT](#), I agree. Legal is not the same as just. Many harmful actions can be committed without much fear if the perpetrator has enough power or protection.

---

### **Post by “Cassius” of May 25, 2026 at 8:44 PM**

#### [Quote from DaveT](#)

I can't get away from a belief that laws and morals are not REALLY established by social compact. Obedience to laws is by social compact, but the laws are not created that way. They are established by those who have power withinof the community by lineage, or military or economic might.

I might have said some of what Dave said differently, but I think this part I quoted is especially correct. Some laws may actually be by compact but the evolution of the laws as set out by Lucretius makes clear that force has always been a factor and is a factor that never really goes away no matter how much we might like it to do so. if we perceive that there is no actual thread of someone punishing us for committing a crime, that's going to make a big difference, and I presume that's why Epicurus says that such circumstances (as when we are confident we won't ever be discovered) pose more difficult questions.

One thing is for sure - there are no supernatural forces that will punish us, so there have to be real-world factors in play to cause us real concern.

---

### **Post by “wbernys” of May 25, 2026 at 11:38 PM**

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

Many harmful actions can be committed without much fear if the perpetrator has enough power or protection.

Interesting point, I feel Epicurus would mainly counter this by saying that the power or protection that allows one to commit harmful actions is itself a constant source of stress and fear, they have to constantly be on watch to preserve their wealth and benefactors, they also tainted with restless desires which limit their own happiness along with shame or a "bad conscience".

Corrupt leaders need a ton of bodyguards for a reason. Besides even if they can feel freedom from fear of imprisonment, they will at least still live in some fear of keeping their crimes secret, leading to disgrace or political revolutions against them. One may imagine situations like corrupt presidents or oligarchs in Africa committing all sorts of acts of corruption due to their power, they are constantly under threat of politics and potential coups and the like and have to constantly watch for any developments with striking workers or something to keep their power.

It's always important to remember the firm confidence you see so many dictators and the powerful have on tv is mainly the face they want you to see and like to imagine themselves as having, and not what goes on behind the scenes. Which i like to think is more stressful than most think, perhaps that is naivety talking though.

---

### **Post by “Martin” of May 26, 2026 at 2:10 AM**

I agree with most of what Wbernys writes in comment #10. It seems most politicians in top government positions are psychopaths. They have no empathy, neither for their future selves, nor for anyone else, and appear to lack the ability of having a bad conscience. That should limit their fear and the impact on their happiness. Most of the struggle to maintain their power seems to be pleasurable to them. They become paranoid about losing their power when they lose the stamina to keep up the struggle in old age if they still want to stay at the top.

---

### **Post by “wbernys” of May 26, 2026 at 2:41 AM**

[Quote from Martin](#)

Most of the struggle to maintain their power seems to be pleasurable to them.

I just wonder if this relies too much on their own self-reports and what they like to present themselves as, *basically gaslight themselves and others* by acting like they really, deep down, enjoy the struggle. When objectively, when they are anxious, they don't enjoy it as much as they and other people think, and only talk about enjoying the struggle after coming out of a bad situation okay.

Emily A. Austin has a great chapter on this whe issue of self-reports of happiness versus objective standards in chapter 3, which highlights this issue of a detective investigating a husband who says he's happy, even though objectively, he seems not to be.

---

### **Post by “Martin” of May 26, 2026 at 10:12 AM**

That might or might not be the case. I thought about this in analogy to my own experience with math. Probably, most people do not like to solve math problems. Math nerds may get pleasure out of the struggle to solve a math problem. I know that because I used to be one in my youth. In the (rare) case of not finding the solution, there was no euphoria, but the attempt was nevertheless pleasurable.

---

### **Post by “Bryan” of May 26, 2026 at 3:42 PM**

Possessing power is clearly harmful to the extent that it brings increased stress and dangers. However, possessing power is clearly beneficial to the extent that it can be used to provide security and stability.

KΔ 7: "Some people want to become respected and popular, thinking to preserve for themselves stability from people in this way. If the life of those like this is stable: then they fully acquire the good of nature. However, if it is not stable, then they do not possess that which they craved from the beginning according to what is naturally compatible to them."

KΔ 14: "...stability from people is produced to some extent by a resistant force and resourcefulness..."

Many people like the idea that the powerful person who harms other people will inevitably come to a bad end.... if not in this life, then at least in the next. But, very often, powerful people are convinced they are living "prudently and correctly and justly" in relation to their group -- and many are able to live a stable and pleasurable life even if there is a trail of victims (from a different group) behind them.

While it is true that "What is just by nature exists as that which is of mutual interest among what mutually benefits in not harming each other and not being harmed. (KΔ 31)" Epicurus is clear that this justice is not universally applicable:

KΔ 32 "As many among the living beings as do not have the ability to make mutual agreements for themselves (those regarding not harming one another and not being harmed) regarding these things, in no way are they just or unjust, and likewise also as many among the ethnicities as do not have the ability or do not want to make mutual agreements for themselves regarding not harming and not being harmed."

---

## Post by "DaveT" of May 26, 2026 at 7:05 PM

### [Quote from Bryan](#)

KΔ 32 "As many among the living beings as do not have the ability to make mutual agreements for themselves (those regarding not harming one another and not being harmed) regarding these things, in no way are they just or unjust, and likewise also as many among the ethnicities as do not have the ability or do not want to make mutual agreements for themselves regarding not harming and not being harmed."

I'm probably missing something here.

But in that case if we average folk are among what he called ethnicities, what are our obligations when it comes to dealing with others?

And how about obeying laws coming down from on high in modern day USA. For example, me (hypothetically) paying a higher percentage of my income in taxes than (insert any billionaire's

name)? I never consented to that inequality. Should I worry about being unjust to my neighbors if I'm tempted avoid paying some of my taxes illegally? Should I not be anxious if I'm willing to do the time if I commit the crime?

Perhaps an absurd question in the real world

---

### **Post by “Todd” of May 27, 2026 at 1:06 PM**

#### [Quote from DaveT](#)

For example, me (hypothetically) paying a higher percentage of my income in taxes than (insert any billionaire's name)? I never consented to that inequality.

Did you agree with this billionaire that you would pay equal percentages of your income in taxes?

#### [Quote from DaveT](#)

Should I worry about being unjust to my neighbors if I'm tempted avoid paying some of my taxes illegally?

Did you make some kind of agreement with your neighbors that you would each pay a certain amount of taxes?

#### [Quote from DaveT](#)

Should I not be anxious if I'm willing to do the time if I commit the crime?

Despite what people may say when they're angry, I think the sober answer is that most people would not be willing to do the time. It would mean risking your freedom in exchange for a few % more dollars. That doesn't sound very Epicurean.

---

### **Post by “DaveT” of May 27, 2026 at 8:36 PM**

#### [Quote from Todd](#)

[Quote from DaveT](#)

For example, me (hypothetically) paying a higher percentage of my income in taxes than (insert any billionaire's name)? I never consented to that inequality.

Did you agree with this billionaire that you would pay equal percentages of your income in taxes?

[Quote from DaveT](#)

Should I worry about being unjust to my neighbors if I'm tempted avoid paying some of my taxes illegally?

Did you make some kind of agreement with your neighbors that you would each pay a certain amount of taxes?

[Quote from DaveT](#)

Should I not be anxious if I'm willing to do the time if I commit the crime?

Despite what people may say when they're angry, I think the sober answer is that most people would not be willing to do the time. It would mean risking your freedom in exchange for a few % more dollars. That doesn't sound very Epicurean.

Display More

Perhaps I could have written more clearly. My point is that in his wisdom, Epicurus may have not considered that most people in his time or ours don't negotiate the terms of the social compact. And then, perhaps that is the reason we see so many who secretly violate the pact, by minimizing their input into it, and then being willing risk the possibility they might be discovered.

---

**Post by “Todd” of May 27, 2026 at 9:41 PM**

[Quote from DaveT](#)

My point is that in his wisdom, Epicurus may have not considered that most people in his time or ours don't negotiate the terms of the social compact.

Epicurus didn't say anything about a "social compact". He talked about justice and laws. Justice is defined by agreement. Laws can be just (if they result from agreement), or unjust (if not).

Where is the agreement in your examples?

---

### **Post by "DaveT" of May 28, 2026 at 2:35 PM**

#### [Quote from Todd](#)

Epicurus didn't say anything about a "social compact". He talked about justice and laws. Justice is defined by agreement. Laws can be just (if they result from agreement), or unjust (if not).

Same Diff