

Virtue Is Not Absolute Or An End In Itself - All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation

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1. Explanation

- Skepticism and Determinism do not exhaust the list of lies and errors plaguing humanity. Epicurus saw that false priests and philosophers have erected a false ideal - "virtue" - as the goal of life. Epicurean philosophy has shocked the sensibilities of conventional thinkers for two thousand years by committing itself boldly to the conclusion that "virtue" is not absolute or an end in itself, and that Nature alone provides us the proper guide of life.
- As with "gods," Epicurus held that "virtue" is a useful concept, but one that has been drastically misunderstood. True "virtue" is not something given by divine revelation, or through logical analysis of ideal forms, but is instead simply a set of tools for living the best life possible. Epicurus held that virtue is not the same for all people, or the same at all times and places, but that instead what is virtuous varies with circumstance, according to whether the action is instrumental for achieving happiness. Good and evil are not absolutes, but instead consist in sensation, as Epicurus explained to Menoeceus: "Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). *For all good and evil consists in sensation*, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality." (124)
- Likewise, even something as highly regarded as *justice* is not absolute, but observable only in practical effects: "In its general aspect, justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country, or any other circumstances, the same thing does not turn out to be just for all." (PD36)

2. Citations

1. Letter to Menoeceus [124]

1. *Bailey*: "Become accustomed to the belief that [death is nothing to us](#). **For all good and evil consists in sensation**, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality."
2. *Hicks*: "Accustom thyself to believe that [death is nothing to us](#), **for good and evil imply sentience**, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an illimitable time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality."
3. *Inwood-Gerson*: "Get used to believing that [death is nothing to us](#). **For all good and bad consists in sense-experience**, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality."
4. *Epicurus Wiki (Epicurism.info)*: "Accustom yourself to thinking that death is no concern to us. All things good and bad are experienced through sensation, but sensation ceases at death. So [death is nothing to us](#), and to know the truth of this makes a mortal life happy -- not by adding

infinite time, but by removing the desire for immortality."

5. Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 33
 1. Bailey: "Justice never is anything in itself, but in the dealings of men with one another, in any place whatever, and at any time, it is a kind of compact not to harm or be harmed."
6. Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 36
 1. Bailey: "In its general aspect, justice is the same for all, for it is a kind of mutual advantage in the dealings of men with one another; but with reference to the individual peculiarities of a country, or any other circumstances, the same thing does not turn out to be just for all."
7. Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 37
 1. Bailey: "Among actions which are sanctioned as just by law, that which is proved, on examination, to be of advantage, in the requirements of men's dealings with one another, has the guarantee of justice, whether it is the same for all or not. But if a man makes a law, and it does not turn out to lead to advantage in men's dealings with each other, then it no longer has the essential nature of justice. And even if the advantage in the matter of justice shifts from one side to the other, but for a while accords with the general concept, it is nonetheless just for that period, in the eyes of those who do not confound themselves with empty sounds, but look to the actual facts."
8. Epicurus' Principal Doctrine 38:
 1. Bailey: "Where, provided the circumstances have not been altered, actions which were considered just have been shown not to accord with the general concept, in actual practice, then they are not just. But where, when circumstances have changed, the same actions which were sanctioned as just no longer lead to advantage, they were just at the time, when they were of advantage for the dealings of fellow-citizens with one another, but subsequently they are no longer just, when no longer of advantage."

3. Notes

1. Major Implications:
 1. Absolute ideas of good and evil, as well as virtue, are not valid because such things do not have an independent existence in reality.
 2. Good and evil are relevant only to living beings.
 3. Justice is relative to the individuals involved and is not the same for all people at all times, and at all places.
 4. What is just at some times for some persons will change with circumstances.
 5. Justice is but one example of a "virtue," and just as there is no absolute justice there is no absolute virtue.
2. *Find out more in our [Ethics Forum](#)*
3. [Discussion Forum](#)