

A Word About Words

Post by “Pacatus” of December 9, 2022 at 1:13 PM

Words carry meaning, or else we wouldn't be able to communicate with them. But they don't come with some “formal” (in the Platonic sense) meaning. They are given meanings by how we use them, and carry meanings forward as we try to understand how, say, people used them in the past as opposed to how we might now. (That's one of the things, I think, that makes translation such yeoman's work.) And why context is so critical. And why Wittgenstein famously said: “Don't look for the meaning, look for the use.” And it's why dictionaries are continually being updated: not just new words, but new usages for words that have been around.

~ ~ ~

An example that I looked at years ago is the English word “evil.” Several, very different definitions are listed in Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evil>.

According to Etymology Online: “Evil was the word the Anglo-Saxons used where we would use bad, cruel, unskillful, defective (adj.), or harm (n.), crime, misfortune, disease (n.). **In Middle English, bad took the wider range of senses and evil began to focus on moral badness.**” https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=evil&...hbar_searchhint

Now, the word evil was used in the King James Version of the Bible to translate the Hebrew word “*ra*” – which, in Hebrew, just meant “bad”, not especially or even generally morally bad (as in “the tree of good and evil”). The opposite of *mazel tov* (“good luck”) would be *mazel ra* (“bad luck”). Years ago when I was fiddling around a bit with Hebrew, I noticed that Jewish translators often made that point. In reality, it was likely closer to definition 2. and 3.b in Merriam-Webster.

The ancient Greek word *κακό*, I think, had a similar fate: i.e., becoming religiously limited to the moral dimension. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%BA%CE...2#Ancient_Greek

Similarly for translating the Greek word *ἁμαρτία* as “sin.” https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E1%BC%81...1#Ancient_Greek Over time, as Christianity evolved, it took on the strict meaning of moral violation or a wicked (“evil”) act.

Thus, evil and sin, became justifications for (especially divine) punishment in Christianity. Theologians and philosophers of religion argue about whether the biblical writers (in the original languages at least) – or the immediate post-apostolic church fathers and early rabbis – intended such strict usage.

~ ~ ~

Cassius is correct that we must not “lose appreciation for the usefulness of words at the same time that we acknowledge their limits. ... so we don't go on explaining forever, while at the same time we acknowledge that that image does not come from God or from a realm of forms or from an ‘essence’ that exists independently of the examples.”

For me, there are **two critical contexts** here: (1) what Epicurus et al intended in **their** usage, and (2) whether that usage remains truly useful (for understanding and agency) in the modern world. I don't think, for example, that we would have to hew to Epicurus' particular physics of “atoms and void” in the face of modern physics and quantum mechanics (which have their own differences of opinion among scientists). That's a crude example, for sure. I have also used the example of modern logics that were not in the Hellenistic toolbox. Other discussions on here have focused on how we should understand the gods (or lack thereof).

I think it's clear that not all Epicurean scholars agree about context (1) – but that does mean that we cannot come to some agreements in order to communicate among ourselves (**we will always need a Don!**). Context (2) seems trickier, and likely will entail some adjustments as knowledge evolves (maybe not in my lifetime, though! ☐).

~ ~ ~

As a poet of sorts, I am also cognizant of poetic usage (metaphor, imagery, how word-sounds can evoke feelings or moods, etc.) versus propositional usage and descriptive usage. It seems Epicurus was also cognizant of such things, and rightly (to my mind) eschewed poetry (e.g. Homer) and rhetoric as vehicles for knowledge. Philodemus seems to have agreed, as both a philosopher and a poet. Lucretius – ah, Lucretius! – took the leap of re-presenting philosophy in poetic form; but he did not derive that philosophy from poetry.

~ ~ ~

I don't think any of these things are to suffer stress or angst (**ταραχή**) over. I agree with Wittgenstein that our ordinary usages are just fine for getting along, with due recognition of more technical usages within a given “language game” (his use of that word “game” had no connotations of frivolousness). I certainly don't think any of this entails continual disagreement in the “language game” of discussing Epicurean philosophy here – let alone for communication in general.

This is more intended as a (wordy, pun intended ☐) discussion of a few of what I might call “meta-principles” of language (to my mind anyway). I think they are important, but not critical to reaching practical agreement on what we mean here. (Just as we can all agree on what the word “castle” means in chess, as opposed to some feudal estate.)

Now I need to get ready to watch the World Cup match between the Netherlands and Argentina. ☐