

# Dealing With Friends Who Are Struggling

Post by “Cassius” of June 24, 2021 at 6:52 AM

That's a great question and I have a couple of comments.

First, a similar thought has come up in several discussions, and one comment that I associate with Elayne making it is that some people in some situations are not looking for a solution, but for empathy and confirmation of their feelings, and no matter how insightful the information you give might be, they aren't going to hear it and it actually does no good (or even causes more friction between the two of you) to talk about solutions. That way of thinking is very foreign to me but I do agree that it exists in some situations, so first I think it is necessary to determine whether the person you are talking to is looking for solutions or just a shoulder to cry on.

## [Quote from Marco](#)

That their lives are a result of wrong choices and avoidance.

That the ideal they chase is just a dream, there are only atoms and void.

Of the Epicurean suggestions you were listing, I would suggest a finer point on these two.

Remember as to agency that Epicurus said in the letter to Menoecus:

## Quote

(He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.

So while I very much agree that in general terms it is likely that the problems are the result of their choices and avoidances, it is also possible that the problem was in fact beyond their control. Depending on the situation it is probably a good idea to be sure to include that possibility so that at least in the beginning, until they come to terms with the view that they are "chiefly" in control of their lives, that we acknowledge that some things (death for instance) are beyond our control.

As to this second item:

## [Quote from Marco](#)

That the ideal they chase is just a dream, there are only atoms and void.

I think (again depending on context) that this needs clarification. Yes Epicurus taught that "ideal forms" do not exist, but the way that sentence comes across in English (again, I realize your first language is Dutch) the formulation has a nihilist ring to it that I do not think Epicurus would embrace.

If what is meant by "ideal" is the person's "goal" or "view of life" or many other types of 'conceptions' then I think we have to be careful about condemning those as "ideals." This is one of the reasons that I think it is so important to think about what Epicurus was talking about in discussing "conceptions" and "PRE-conceptions." Our thoughts are extremely important to us, and they are the sources of great pains and pleasures, and so we should not disparage them just because they do not have eternal unchanging properties as do atoms and void. They may not be eternal, but they are all we have at our human level of experience.

In discussing the differences between properties of elemental properties vs. the qualities of "bodies" in the Letter to Herodotus and also in Lucretius, I do not think that the Epicureans were suggesting that we should look at the qualities of things as less significant to us than the properties of the atoms. I think Epicurus was suggesting that it is essential that we understand that one is permanent and the other is not, and that the qualities arise from the movement and combinations of atoms and void and not from supernatural beings. I think that Epicurus would have seen (and did see) nihilism as an enemy just as much as supernatural religion, and that he would stress that even things we consider to be "dreams" can have very potent impact on us. In fact come to think of it there are explicit statements about how the things we experience in "dreams" can impact us.

So as to the "there are only atoms and void" I think what I have said above illustrates the issue. The more precise point is that "the only things that have permanent independent unchanging properties are atoms and void." While that is true, we live on a different level - the level where the qualities of bodies (as discussed in Epicurus) are the only things that rise to our level of sensation and experience. I therefore think at the outset of explaining Epicurus to people that we need to stress this point very strongly so as to avoid any nihilistic implications. We don't "worship" atoms and void (which is the "weak and beggarly elements" slander from the New Testament). We simply understand that the qualities of things we experience arise from and are limited by the elemental particles of which they are composed (and not by supernatural gods).

Now I realize not everyone agrees with me on this last point, but this is also why I much prefer the translation "events" as the best way to translate the Latin "eventum" in Lucretius rather than "accidents." The 1743 edition uses "events," but many others use "accidents" - in my view influenced by the idea of the swerve and by the deduction they draw from Epicurean philosophy that everything is "accidental."

I think that is a very harmful point of view that is not Epicurean and leads to nihilism too. If this issue interests you I strongly recommend AA Long's article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism." In that article Long emphasizes how in fact the effect of the swerve is not nearly so extensive as many people seem to infer. He emphasizes that in fact the swerve does not appear in the letter to Herodotus at all, and appears in Lucretius primarily as the explanation of "free will" (for which reason David Sedley concludes that the swerve did not originally occur to Epicurus as a principle of physics at all). The point is that most things in the universe do occur in a manner that may not be predictable to us, but which is in essence "mechanical" in the sense of being determined directly by the properties of the atoms and the void and their movements. There is also a reference in Herodotus that supports this conclusion, to the effect that all things continue along the way that they were set in motion "from the formation of our world."

Sorry to be so long-winded on this but your post hits some excellent and very important points. Thank you for posting that!