

Pacatus' Personal Epicurean Outline

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A Personal Epicurean Outline

1. The nature of the Universe

The universe is physicalist in nature: matter and energy.

I rely on science, while realizing that empiricism is generally probabilistic and subject to revision, even paradigm shifts (the fear of which seems to mire many people in the supernatural promises of religion.)

The “atoms” of Democritus may well be sub-atomic particles and wave functions, or vibrational strings. The Epicurean “swerve” may well be understood in terms of the uncertainty principle in predicting subatomic events. Or the fugue-like patterns of chaos theory (complexity, interconnection, and sensitivity to initial and changing conditions).

I do not have the expertise in the physical sciences to side with one view as opposed to another when they are in disagreement, so I keep an open mind -- a kind of epistemological pluralism of possibilities. Anything else would seem to me to be presumption on my part (though perhaps not for others more knowledgeable).

2. The nature of knowledge

A valid deductive argument is one for which the conclusions follow necessarily from the premises. To loosely play on Wittgenstein, the opposite of logical (in this sense) is not “false” it is non-sense (e.g., the fallacy of affirming the consequent). A sound deductive argument is one for which the premises are also true.

Whether any proposition is true in any real-world sense is a factual, empirical question. Real-world knowledge is experiential, empirical and inductive. Although no number of observations can confirm a hypothesis as certain (there is always the possibility of a “black swan”), empirical observation (sometimes extended by technology: e.g. a medical MRI) based on the senses is still the best we have, and sufficient for making prudent decisions. At our level of existence, this means relying on senses (*aisthesis*), experiences and reasonable conclusions drawn from them.

Human knowledge is always perspectival (thinking of Jose Ortega y Gasset, rather than Nietzsche, here): we do not have access to any “view from nowhere” or “god’s eye view”).

This is not to deny intuition as a wholistic immediate grasp of phenomena and patterns (Epicurean *prolepsis*?). Nor is it to deny imagination in the exploration of possibilities.

I think it was the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio who wrote of “the feeling of what happens” affirming the role of feelings (*pathe*) as signals about reality.

There is no guarantee that the grammar of human consciousness is exhaustive of the syntax of the natural universe. Omniscience is unlikely no matter how far our knowledge progresses.

3. The nature of how to live

In our decisions, we exercise a version of “free will” that I call “constrained choice” (from my economics training): the fact that our ability to choose (or to have chosen differently, in the libertarian version) are constrained by circumstances, resources, our knowledge, our ability to analyze, etc. There is no coherent way to “have chosen differently” if none of those also changes -- unless we are “choosing” randomly. But we are still able to choose, to make decisions, to advance our understanding.

The ultimate human *telos* is *eudaimonia*: which I will translate as happy well-being (conflating two popular renderings) -- or sometimes just happiness.

Pleasure and pain are nature’s guide to well-being. That life is happiest which is the most pleasurable (pleasant), with the least amount of pain (suffering). Tranquility (*ataraxia*) is part of (even inherent to) the pleasurable/pleasant life -- but is not the telos: happiness is.

So, living well entails daily choosing to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering -- with attention to Epicurus’ astute breakdown of desires into natural and necessary, natural but unnecessary and unnatural (which may well be harmful). And part of that hedonic calculus involves prudential moderation: recognizing that overindulgence crosses the threshold from pleasure to pain (e.g. a hangover).

These are all, of course, personal choices based on our own understandings and observation of ourselves (self-reflection) and the senses: there is no-one-size fits all or cookie-cutter for this hedonic calculus.

For example --

I am by nature an introvert: that is, I restore my energy and serenity away from the pressures and stresses of the hurly-burly extroverted world (extroverts are opposite, but it is a continuum). That means that I need sufficient time in relative solitude. But I am not a total recluse, and I also treasure a few good friends. (My only respite in a crowd is relative anonymity.)

Thus, I am particularly amenable to Epicurus’ recommendation to, insofar as possible, live an obscure life (*lathe biosas*). It is only past programming and cultural conditioning that occasionally seduces me away from that.

I used to think that the notion of a daily hedonic calculus entailed a kind of (overly) effortful tension. But I am coming to realize that, following nature, it is a natural way to live that can be easy-flowing. And pleasant.

And, to borrow a quote from Saint Benedict: “Always, we begin again.”