

An Anti-Epicurean Article - "The Meaning of Life Is Not Happiness" (For Future Reference)

Post by "Don" of November 18, 2024 at 7:06 AM

I hesitated to weigh in on this thread, but let's dive in...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the argument equating happiness with materialism and that consumerism leads to unhappiness, etc.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The word "happiness" needs to be defined...because it is both the transitory feeling that arises when human needs are met/fulfilled, and also the feeling of being okay with (or satisfied with) how one's life is unfolding.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I would say that the decision to seek "meaning" rather than happiness is directly related to buying in, or being browbeaten, into thinking that pleasure and happiness are disreputable goals.

These are exactly the reasons I personally dislike using the word "happiness" itself. In modern Western culture, this is what happiness means for most people: a fizzy, effervescent quality that many people see as inherently short-lived. "Are you happy?" means, it seems to me, to most people to convey a bubbly, giddy feeling. Of course, you're not feeling like that all the time. To recalibrate people's idea of "being happy," I would prefer using a different word for the overall direction of one's life. This sentence from [a paper available through the National Library of Medicine](#) illustrates my point:

the term "happiness" has been used to refer to momentary assessments of affect as well as to overall life evaluations. This absence of precision precludes understanding of the complexities known to coexist. For example, a person who is engaged in stressful or difficult activities, such as working toward an education or a job promotion, may find substantial meaning or satisfaction with life overall; a person who is generally suffering or lacking hope may experience temporary reprieve in an enjoyable moment.

Although it sounds clinical, "subjective well-being" (which I would maintain is a decent translation of ancient Greek *eudaimonia*) is a better word/phrase to use. I realize it's not going

to catch on, but SWB is a common acronym for it in the academic literature now it seems. Again, I'm not advocating replacing "happiness" with SWB, but that's one of the reasons I tend to use well-being and not happiness when this comes up.

[Quote from SillyApe](#)

"meaning" is just a tool for the increase of our pleasure and the decrease of our pain...
Though I understand where it comes from, I still think this is not a helpful tool.

That's pretty well put.

"Meaning" means many things to many different people. To me, it has the same problems as "happiness." "Meaning" can mean almost anything you want it to mean. It expands to fill any semantic field you want. *"Happiness" is transitory and tied to materialistic culture; I'll just say "I live for meaning."* No, you're just transposing one for the other.

I think we are all striving for "subjective well-being," a sense of satisfaction with our lives, a feeling that we're headed in the right direction, even though we will, of course, be faced with pain, hardship, loss, and so on, but inwardly we can face those things within an overall disposition of mental fortitude and satisfaction with the way we live and the way we decide to approach life. If I'm going to dedicate myself to the idea that "the wise man has more reasons for joy than vexation" that's a choice I make to maintain my "subjective well-being." I will face the day looking for moments of joy, pleasure, kindness, and reasons to have a positive affect and approach to life *without* any Pollyanna-rose-colored-glasses. I won't be a pushover or a milquetoast doormat. But I will also not be a sad sack with a dark cloud hanging over my head my whole life.

"The Universe" does not imbue our lives with "purpose" or "meaning." There is no "ultimate meaning." Your "life's purpose" is not "revealed" to you. If one wants their life to have "meaning," that's self-imposed. And, to me, "meaning" is simply that which gives you pleasure and a sense of well-being in your own life. Your purpose and meaning may hold no meaning for me. We can't tell anyone "your purpose is wrong" or "you're pursuing the wrong meaning to life."

Monty Python's film *The Meaning of Life* ends with this: "It's nothing very special, really. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."