

# Pleasure over truth

**Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 14, 2020 at 11:41 PM**

Hello,

Imagine that a person is about to die of natural causes and is aware of it. They are not experiencing any physical pain and the thing that is giving them peace of mind is the belief that their immaterial soul will be reunited with its supernatural creator; probably also that they'll go to heaven because they've "been good".

You make them aware that the soul is material and that no thing that is immaterial exists, that good depends on your take of what is pleasurable or not, but you realize that rather than bringing them more pleasure to these final moments you produce them more mental pain.

A false opinion that brings pleasure rather than turmoil.

Being truthful for the sake of it at a moment like this seems stupid and not likely to produce any pleasure to either party.

Is the value of truth relative?

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**Post by “Don” of September 15, 2020 at 3:07 AM**

I would first ask: Why do you feel the need to evangelize to the dying person? If the person is actually close to death - hours, days - and you care for the person, is it more important to be right or to create pleasurable memories for yourself and not create a situation that sets up conflict in your last moments with this person.

Epicurus seems to have addressed this in the Letter to Menoikos (DL X.134):

Quote

[134] **It were better, indeed, to accept the legends of the gods** than to bow beneath that yoke of destiny (Fate) which the natural philosophers have imposed. The one holds out some faint hope that we may escape if we honour the gods, while the necessity of the naturalists is deaf to all entreaties. Nor does he hold chance to be a god, as the world in general does, for in the acts of a god there is no disorder ; nor to

be a cause, though an uncertain one, for he believes that no good or evil is dispensed by chance to men so as to make life blessed, though it supplies the starting-point of great good and great evil. He believes that the misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool. [135] It is better, in short, that what is well judged in action should not owe its successful issue to the aid of chance.

From my reading, Epicurus seems to allow the "runner-up" position to be accepting "the legends of the gods." It's not the truth of the nature of things, but at least it doesn't afflict one with being subject to Chance and Fate.

And, as always, examine what will happen if a desire (here, the desire to evangelize to the dying) is achieved and if it is not. What is achieved by your bringing this philosophy to the dying? Are you doing it for selfish reasons (I'm right and you're wrong! I win!) or doing it to alleviate pain in a friend or loved one? If the dying one is in reality not troubled, why do you want to achieve the desire to evangelize?

I don't see this as a question of the relative value of truth. I see this as a scenario in which prudence needs to be exercised for the most pleasurable outcome overall.

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## Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2020 at 6:58 AM

This is a great question Camotero and a great use of the forum thank you!

### [Quote from Don](#)

I don't see this as a question of the relative value of truth.

i believe I am willing to go further and affirm that "yes," so long as we are careful with the definition of "truth," the value of "truth" is relative. Only "pleasure" is entitled to the status of being desirable in and for itself, neither "wisdom" nor "truth" should be viewed in that way, but as always the devil is in the details, or the definitions.

As Pontius Pilate asked, "what is truth?" In your example, rather than "truth," I would say that what you are talking about is "information" -- in this case information about the state of a disease and/or the state (if any) after death). As you say about this information "that good depends on your take of what is pleasurable or no." Certainly the information that the soul is mortal and does not live forever in the happy fields of an eternal hereafter is not "pleasurable" information to hear. It can and does often lead to more pleasure in the lives of many people,

who then are freed from fear of hell and armed with the information live life more productively for pleasure. But the information itself is not pleasurable, any more than sitting next to the deathbed of the dying person and reading to them the telephone directory of New York City would be bring them pleasure. Yes the data in the phonebook is "truth," but it is not calculated, relative to the situation, to bring them pleasure.

So yes I would say that if the dying person is afraid of death due to fear of hell, then such a person would benefit from hearing the truth about the absence of an eternal soul. But in your example of a person who has lived their life in the illusion of an afterlife, and is now near death, then such a person would be brought only pain in learning that they have wasted their life and now have no capacity to recover any part of it.

I think many of us face this question in relation to our elderly relatives, and either have or will go through this. I know that I personally have not chosen to use my last hours with them to discuss the eternity of death, while on the other hand I think it is one of the most important issues possible to discuss with younger and healthier people who have the capacity to put the information to good use.

Edit: I realize that I misstated this originally, and this is more correct: "in this case information about the state of a disease and/or the state (if any) after death)." I tend to blend / confuse this question into the issue of "Do you tell someone they are about to die if they don't realize it?"

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## **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 15, 2020 at 3:04 PM**

### Quote

that yoke of destiny (Fate) which the natural philosophers have imposed.

What is that yoke of destiny? I presume determinism.

Who are the natural philosophers? From DeWit I gathered (please clarify if I'm mistaken that Epicurus could be classified as a natural philosopher since part of his philosophy was based on observations of nature as the norm.

### Quote

nor to be a cause, though an uncertain one, for he believes that no good or evil is dispensed by chance to men so as to make life blessed, though it supplies the starting-point of great good and great evil.

A cause of *good or evil*? Or a cause of what?

Quote

He believes that the misfortune of the wise is better than the prosperity of the fool. [135] It is better, in short, that what is well judged in action should not owe its successful issue to the aid of chance.

Who is *he*?

What could be that which is well-judged-in-action?

[Quote from Don](#)

If the dying one is in reality not troubled, why do you want to achieve the desire to evangelize?

Indeed, it becomes obvious that if the person is troubled by the false opinions, *our truth* has the potential to set them free. But if they're happy with *their truth*, there's no gain for either to talk about it.

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't see this as a question of the relative value of truth. I see this as a scenario in which prudence needs to be exercised for the most pleasurable outcome overall.

I understand... but the question still remains, and indeed it does look like the value of truth is relative, which may be something that makes us uncomfortable but it might none the less be true. Perhaps, the question should not be if the value of truth is relative, but rather if the value of us honoring our truth is relative, which it seems to be the case.

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**Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2020 at 3:34 PM**

[Quote from camotero](#)

What is that yoke of destiny? I presume determinism.

Who are the natural philosophers? From DeWit I gathered (please clarify if I'm mistaken that Epicurus could be classified as a natural philosopher since part of his philosophy was based on observations of nature as the norm.

I think you're correct on both.

[Quote from camotero](#)

A cause of good or evil? Or a cause of what?

I think he means an initiating cause of either. I think he's saying that "Fate" does not exist as a force, and therefore it does not initiate any kind of results

[Quote from camotero](#)

Who is he?

What could be that which is well-judged-in-action?

I think "he" is the figurative wise man who is living the best life possible

I think "well judged in action" refers to a conscious decision that is well judged and therefore comes as close to the desired goal (whatever it is) as possible.

[Quote from camotero](#)

it does look like the value of truth is relative, which may be something that makes us uncomfortable but it might none the less be true. Perhaps, the question should not be if the value of truth is relative, but rather if the value of us honoring our truth is relative, which it seems to be the case.

I think Epicurus would say that there is no such thing as "truth" in the abstract, and so it wouldn't make him uncomfortable at all to face that fact. As far as the second sentence goes it would probably be better to ask you to restate that to make it more clear.

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## Post by "Don" of September 15, 2020 at 5:50 PM

The "natural Philosophers" are those opposed to Epicurus in this instance. He actually wrote a book against them: *A Summary of Arguments Against the Physicists/Natural Philosophers*. The same word is used for them in both the list of Epicurus's books and in DL X.134: *physikōs*. In this case, these are the philosophers advocating for Fate.

## Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2020 at 7:41 PM

Thanks for correcting me on the natural philosophers Don. I knew i was typing too fast earlier and I should have slowed down.

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## Post by “Don” of September 15, 2020 at 9:59 PM

Quote from camotero

...indeed it does look like the vallue of truth is relative, which may be something that makes us uncomfortable but it might none the less be true. Perhaps, the question should not be if the value of truth is relative, but rather if the value of us honoring our truth is relative, which it seems to be the case.

Something doesn't feel right to me with that phrase "the value of truth" is "relative." I agree with [Cassius](#) that Epicurus would be comfortable saying there is no absolute capital-T Truth. No Platonic ideal of Truth. But I don't think you can really talk about the "value of truth" being relative or absolute. I'm not even sure what the "value of truth" means. There are things that are true and things that are false. And as Lucretius says, if it seems false, arm yourself against it.

However, I think I know what you're getting at in that second part. If by "honoring our truth" you mean proclaiming the truth of atoms and void and pleasure etc. loudly, publicly, and always, I think that would be a mistake. We make choices and rejections based on real situations to aim for pleasurable outcomes. Plus, check out the [characteristics of the Epicurean sage](#) in that they will make speeches if requested and other situations. Epicureans will not be the street-corner preacher handing out pamphlets and carrying a sign. We will share our Philosophy both individually and in groups of interested or receptive people, but we don't require people to listen to us. We're practical, prudent, just, and can take advantage of situations that arise to share what we know to be true, not false.

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## Post by “Godfrey” of September 15, 2020 at 10:23 PM

To follow up Don's post, our truth is found through the sensations, prolepses and feelings. The value of a practicing Epicurean honoring that truth is consistent, not relative. We individually uncover what is "practical, prudent, just..." through this measure of the Canon. Therefore it's

incumbent on us to gather the most reliable information available to us and to be extremely sensitive to our percepts so our actions will maximize our pleasure.

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### **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 15, 2020 at 11:13 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

In your example, rather than "truth," I would say that what you are talking about is "information" -- in this case information about the state of a disease and/or the state (if any) after death).

Yes. It could be a truth I accept and decide to believe, but not necessarily others'. Hence, depending on our worldviews, we could both hold our truths and these could be conflicting.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Certainly the information that the soul is mortal and does not live forever in the happy fields of an eternal hereafter is not "pleasurable" information to hear.

I think it is a function of time, as in if you learn this early on, you could be excused of much mental pain, but if you learn it late in life it could be shocking and painful.

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### **Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 15, 2020 at 11:22 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

As far as the second sentence goes it would probably be better to ask you to restate that to make it more clear.

What I meant is that truth is not valuable in itself, it just is ; but our decision to honor (that is, recognizing its importance, and think of it highly and respecting it highly, thus, perhaps, trying to communicate it regardless of circumstances) the truth of something could be less or more valuable to us depending on the situation, and using the criteria of pleasure. In the hypothetical scenario of this post, honoring it is of little value; but in other situations, some of them already stated in this thread, this value is higher.

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## Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 15, 2020 at 11:26 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

The "natural Philosophers" are those opposed to Epicurus in this instance. He actually wrote a book against them: A Summary of Arguments Against the Physicists/Natural Philosophers. The same word is used for them in both the list of Epicurus's books and in DL X.134: physikōs. In this case, these are the philosophers advocating for Fate.

This is what I had gathered from the post. So the naturalists are the Democritean determinists? Epicurus may have based his philosophy in the observation of nature, but he is not considered a naturalist, right?

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## Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of September 15, 2020 at 11:32 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Something doesn't feel right to me with that phrase "the value of truth" is "relative." I agree with Cassius that Epicurus would be comfortable saying there is no absolute capital-T Truth. No Platonic ideal of Truth. But I don't think you can really talk about the "value of truth" being relative or absolute. I'm not even sure what the "value of truth" means. There are things that are true and things that are false. And as Lucretius says, if it seems false, arm yourself against it.

Yes, my initial approach may have not been clear enough. That's why I later made reference to the value of our attitude towards promoting that truth. Which, as it's already been said, is high or low depending on its ability to be pleasurable or not.

### [Quote from Don](#)

Plus, check out the characteristics of the Epicurean sage in that they will make speeches if requested and other situations. Epicureans will not be the street-corner preacher handing out pamphlets and carrying a sign. We will share our Philosophy both individually and in groups of interested or receptive people, but we don't require people to listen to us. We're practical, prudent, just, and can take advantage of situations that arise to share what we know to be true, not false.

Great pont and I will check that out, thanks.

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## Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2020 at 5:31 AM

### [Quote from camotero](#)

thus, perhaps, trying to communicate it regardless of circumstances)

1 - I would generally say that looking at anything "regardless of circumstances" is going to be a bad idea. Even with pleasure, we sometimes choose pain.... so context is going to be important.

### [Quote from camotero](#)

So the naturalists are the Democritean determinists?

Seems like I have seen some translations actually suggest other names for this, but I am coming up short on details other than that they're almost certainly determinists, though not necessarily Democritean. I wonder if "naturalists" is not a more modern term that might not be exactly correct.

### [Quote from camotero](#)

Great pont and I will check that out, thanks.

Another example, camotero, if you are not familiar with it, is in Lucian's "Aristotle the Oracle-Monger," where Lucian specifically criticizes an Epicurean for being too vocal in attacking the lead character at the wrong time and thereby almost getting himself killed. So to the extent your honoring your truth comment was directed at speaking out regardless of context, that example is going to be directly on point, if we consider Lucian to be reflective of Epicurean views. (Of course by making his statement he was disagreeing with the Epicurean he criticized, so there's a difference of opinion there apparently).

**"what business had he to be the only sane man in a crowd of madmen...?"**

<http://epicurism.info/etexts/Alexander.html>

### Quote

As I have said, Alexander was much afraid of Epicurus, and the solvent action of his logic on imposture.

On one occasion, indeed, an Epicurean got himself into great trouble by daring to expose him before a great gathering. He came up and addressed him in a loud voice, 'Alexander, it was you who induced So-and-so the Paphlagonian to bring his slaves before the governor of Galatia, charged with the murder of his son who was being educated in Alexandria. Well, the young man is alive, and has come back, to find that the slaves had been cast to the beasts by your machinations." What had happened was this: The lad had sailed up the Nile, gone on to a Red Sea port, found a vessel starting for India, and been persuaded to make the voyage. He being long overdue, the unfortunate slaves supposed that he had either perished in the Nile or fallen a victim to some of the pirates who infested it at that time; so they came home to report his disappearance. Then followed the oracle [indicting the slaves with murder], the sentence, and finally the young man's return with the story of his absence.

All this the Epicurean recounted. Alexander was much annoyed by the exposure, and could not stomach so well deserved an affront; he directed the company to stone the man, on pain of being involved in his impiety and called Epicureans. However, when they set to work, a distinguished Pontic called Demostratus, who was staying there, rescued him by interposing his own body; **the man had the narrowest possible escape from being stoned to death—as he richly deserved to be; what business had he to be the only sane man in a crowd of madmen, and needlessly make himself the butt of Paphlagonian infatuation?**

This was a special case; but it was the practice for the names of applicants to be read out the day before answers were given; the herald asked whether each was to receive his oracle; hand sometimes the reply came from within: To perdition! One so repulsed could get shelter, fire or water, from no man; he must be driven from land to land as a blasphemer, an atheist, and—lowest depth of all—an Epicurean.

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### Post by “Don” of September 16, 2020 at 12:15 PM

[Lucian](#) is an interesting author including being called the first sci-fi author. Since he was writing satire, we need to interpret his works carefully. It's sometimes hard to tell when he's reflecting reality, expanding on stereotypes, turning things upside down.

It's been awhile since I read him but this was a good reminder!

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### Post by “Cassius” of September 16, 2020 at 12:45 PM

Aristotle the Oracle Monger is a good one to read in full - its the source of the "strike a blow for Epicurus" line that I feature on the home page.