

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.

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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.

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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! ☐).

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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.

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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.)

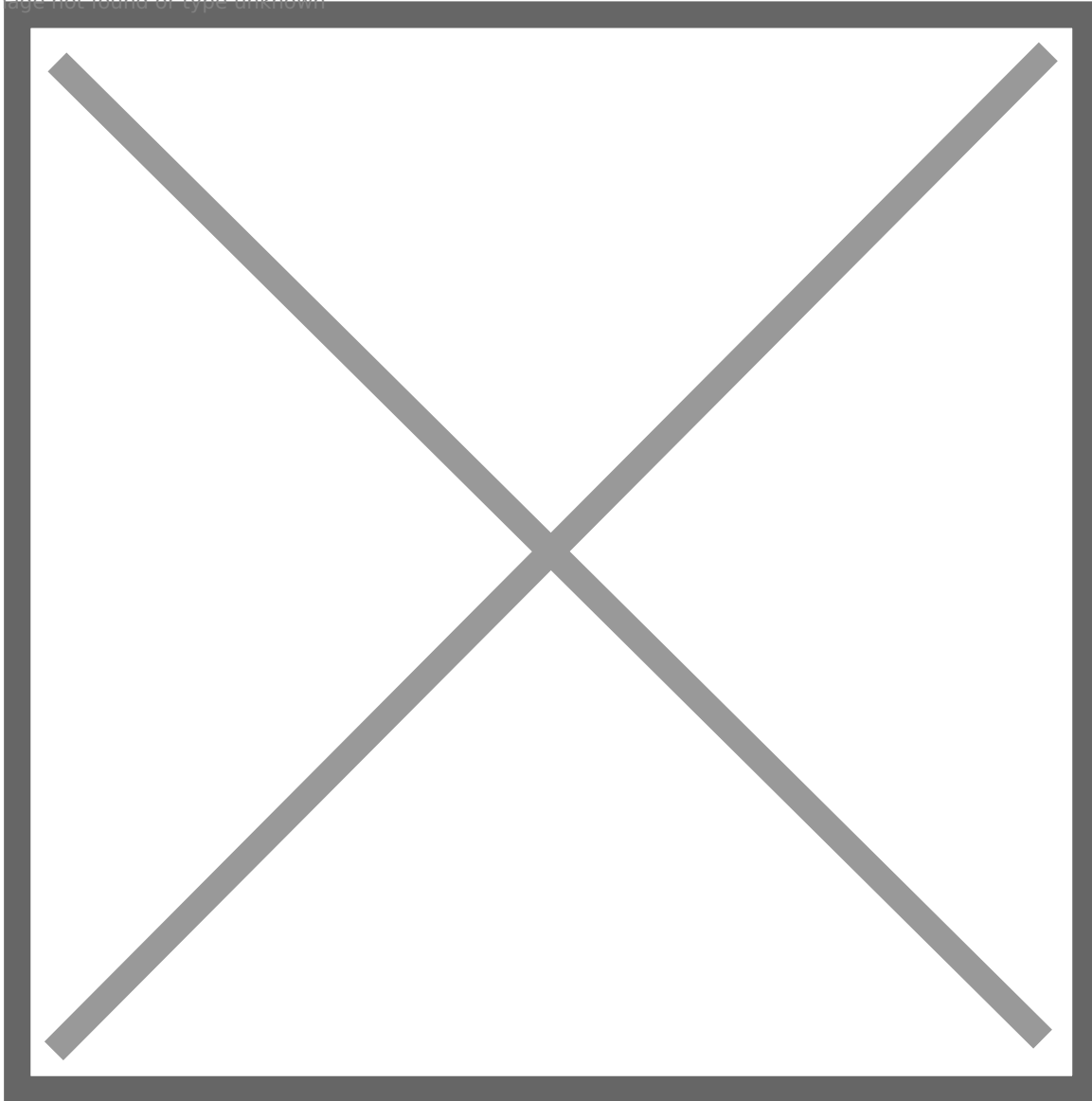
Now I need to get ready to watch the World Cup match between the Netherlands and Argentina. ☐

Post by "Don" of December 9, 2022 at 3:03 PM

Wonderful, enjoyable post!!!

Your mention of ἁμαρτία brought to mind ἄρρεσις (hairesis) which meant "choice" in Epicurus's time (and is the word he uses for "choice" and avoidance). By the time the Christians got a hold of it (and it changed pronunciation through the centuries), it took on the meaning (and sound) of "heresy" as in "the wrong *choice*".

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[heresy | Etymology, origin and meaning of heresy by etymonline](#)

HERESY Meaning: "doctrine or opinion at variance with established standards" (or, as Johnson defines it, "an opinion of... See origin and meaning of heresy.

Post by "Pacatus" of December 9, 2022 at 7:15 PM

Thank you! And thank you for the αἴρεσις example.

Post by "Pacatus" of December 9, 2022 at 7:49 PM

[Don](#): Could you weigh in on the use of the Greek word [δόγμα](#)? Not only does it today have connotations (often pejorative) that it seems not to have had for Epicurus, but I have suspected that it was a source of confusion for Sextus Empiricus in his criticisms of Epicurus.



Post by "Don" of December 9, 2022 at 9:23 PM

LOL! Be careful what you ask for 😄

Let's start with some definitions from LSJ:

δόγμα (dogma)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, δόγμα](#)

From the LSJ definition's references, we can see it translated as opinions, public decree, convictions, beliefs, etc.

δογματίζω (dogmatizo) "to dogmatize" The "controversial" word used in the characteristics of an Epicurean sage "δογματιεῖν τε καὶ οὐκ ἀπορήσειν"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, δ , δμω-ή , δογμα^τ-ίζω \(tufts.edu\)](#)

- ἀπορήσειν "to be in doubt, to be puzzled,"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀπορ-έω \(tufts.edu\)](#)

This is the same word as used in talking about when the sage will make money and is translated in some texts as "to be in poverty/need" so each instance could be translated as "to be in want."

This means the Epicurean puts trust in the picture of reality painted by Epicurus, *declares* those beliefs to be trustworthy, and doesn't remain in doubt - doesn't go through life in want or need - of an explanation of reality.

At its most basic, dogma just means a settled opinion or something firmly established. It doesn't *need* to be something taken on blind faith. Epicurus has reasoned out his "dogma" and built it on a firm foundation, that's why we can trust it or, if you will, have "faith" in it.

I'm becoming more convinced of the significance of the juxtaposition of δογματιεῖν (dogmatiein) and ἀπορήσειν (aporēsein) after looking at various references, especially the Diogenes Laertius excerpt below from the life of Pyrrho. If Diogenes Laertius was copying from some Epicurean text for those characteristics, it seems there was a definite contrast being made between those who δογματιεῖν and those who ἀπορήσειν.

Check this out:

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, BOOK IX, Chapter 11. PYRRHO \(c. 360-270 b.c.\)](#)

Besides these, Pyrrho's pupils included Hecataeus of Abdera, Timon of Phlius, author of the Silli, of whom more anon, and also Nausiphanes of Teos, said by some to have been a teacher of Epicurus. All these were called Pyrrhoneans after the name of their master, but Aporetics, Sceptics, Ephectics, and even Zetetics, from their principles, if we may call them such-- [70] Zetetics or seekers because they were ever seeking truth, Sceptics or inquirers because they were always looking for a solution and never finding one, Ephectics or doubters because of the state of mind which followed their inquiry, I mean, suspense of judgement, and finally Aporetics or those in perplexity, for not only they but even the dogmatic philosophers themselves in their turn were often perplexed (ἀπορητικοὶ δ' ἀπὸ τοῦ τοὺς δογματικοὺς ἀπορεῖν καὶ αὐτούς). Pyrrhoneans, of course, they were called from Pyrrho. Theodosius in his Sceptic Chapters denies that Scepticism should be called Pyrrhonism ; for if the movement of the mind in either direction is unattainable by us, we shall never know for certain what Pyrrho really intended, and without knowing that, we cannot be called Pyrrhoneans. Besides this (he says), there is the fact that Pyrrho was not the founder of Scepticism ; nor had he any positive tenet ; but a Pyrrhonean is one who in manners and life resembles Pyrrho.