

What Would Epicurus Say About Searching For "Meaning?"

Post by "BrainToBeing" of January 12, 2024 at 9:46 AM

Perhaps this belongs in this column. It is from the excellent article referenced by [Don](#) in #37 above: "In fact, Marcus [Aurelius] admits that if Epicurean natural science were right, he would fall into despair. Without providence, he asks, 'Why care about anything?'" So, is this a pivotal issue: caring? That is, vis a vis Victor Frankl and the search for meaning. If we seek to avoid pain and find pleasure are we thereby finding meaning? Or, do we need to look further? Thoughts?

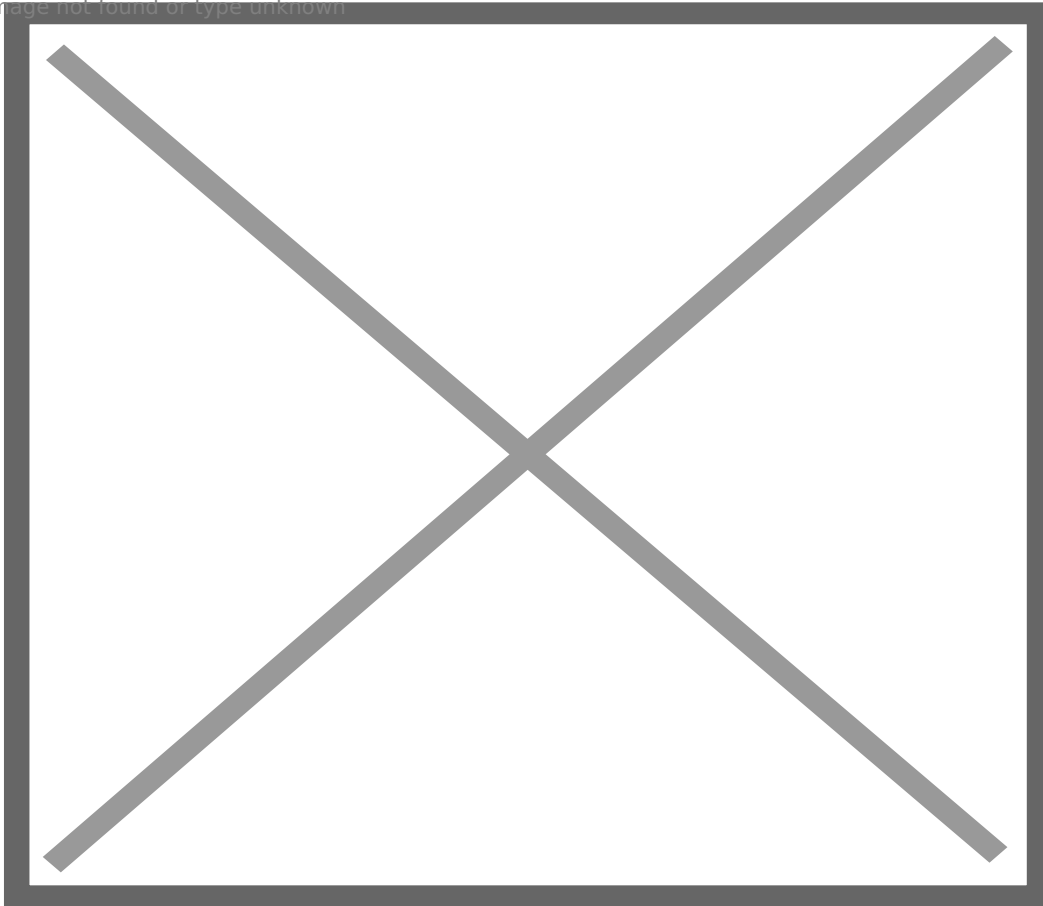
Post by "Kalosyni" of January 12, 2024 at 11:04 AM

[BrainToBeing](#)

The "search for meaning" is put upon a pedestal such that the word "meaning" becomes an empty abstraction, as empty as the word "virtue". It means nothing except in reference to something else, and everything always comes back to pleasure and pain, because those are what nature gives us by which to decide what to choose and what to avoid. The Epicurean goal of finding and pursuing pleasure (both physical and mental) seeks for joy and happiness in life. If "meaning" doesn't provide joy and happiness then it is worthless.

It seems that you are coming from a mindset that makes it difficult for you to think about the benefits of Epicurean philosophy, because it appears you don't agree with some basic concepts of Epicurean philosophy - especially with regard to the Epicurean criticism of "virtue". You can read more about it here:

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[Cicero's "Torquatus" Presentation of Epicurean Ethics - from "On Ends" - Epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)
www.epicureanfriends.com

Post by “BrainToBeing” of January 12, 2024 at 12:21 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

It seems that you are coming from a mindset that makes it difficult for you to think about the benefits of Epicurean philosophy, because it appears you don't agree with some basic concepts of Epicurean philosophy

[Kalosyni](#) You might be right Kalosyni. Indeed, I do have a different view of "meaning" and the "search for meaning" at an existential level. And, at a very big level I may have a different view entirely. That is, in my view all philosophies are opinions - perspectives of life and living. The opinions have "fought" with each other forever, in a kind of tribalism - just as the Epicureans

and the Stoics fought two hundred years BCE. We humans seem to like to "land on" (choose) one philosophy or another (or religion or another) and then we tend to defend that position as "the right" one. I don't think that way. So, maybe I really don't fit here. Again, it is not my intent to be an iconoclast. So, if it is true that I don't "think like" others here then I will say "thank you" (for the wonderful perspectives you have shared), and I'll move on.

Thinking of it, maybe that is best. So, a hearty "Thank You". And, exit - stage left.

Post by "Cassius" of January 12, 2024 at 1:00 PM

BTB I hope you will do more of the reading you indicated because I think you will get a lot out of it. However as you already indicate, the bottom line is that Epicurean philosophy is not consistent with radical skepticism, and someone who takes that position isn't ultimately going to be comfortable with Epicurus. That's very similar to how someone who is committed to radical hard determinism ultimately isn't going to be comfortable with Epicurus.

It's almost like clockwork and it's almost like we need a sign on the front page warning skeptics and determinists about the hazard. But we don't do that and probably won't because from the point of view I would expect Epicurus to take, people have a certain freedom of choice in determining their own futures, and they can change their minds even on skepticism and dogmatism. Even further, I would expect the ancient Epicureans to have said that a large part of the reason that radical skepticism and determinism is a problem is because those ideas aren't solely errors innocently arrived at, they are pushed as agendas by very influential parts of society with ulterior motives. Many people are "taken in" by them, innocently enough, because they have never had the opportunity to be exposed to a reasonable alternative like Epicurus provided.

So yes I realize that even though I am trying to write this considerately and compassionately, there are people who are going to take great offense to what I am writing here. They are committed to the view that no one can ever be "right" on anything, and that no one is responsible for anything because everything in the universe is just the current positioning of billiard-balls on the gaming table. And those people think that it's the greatest of offensiveness to suggest otherwise.

But if you're going to take Epicurean philosophy to heart and accept its foundations, that's just the way things are. You can't make everyone happy, and if you set out trying to do so you're on a fool's errand. Certain people are going to think you're the greatest thing since sliced bread, and others are going to think that you're talking like you just came down from the intermundia to deliver the wisdom of the gods.

Many of the questions you've raised BTB need to be the subject of FAQ entries, and so you've done us a favor by reminding us of how much work there is to do in explaining the Epicurean position.

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2024 at 2:46 PM

It just occurs to me to add this. I'd like to think that there were some people here who, before they started reading Epicurus, were radical skeptics or radical hard determinists, and after reading Epicurus decided to change their minds. But come to think of it, I don't think I can name anyone like that. I wonder if there are any! 😊

Post by “Pacatus” of January 12, 2024 at 4:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I wonder if there are any! 😊

I probably danced around skepticism for awhile – though closer to Pyrrhonian skepticism than Academic skepticism. Never hard determinism.

I left long ago what I would call a “hard dogmatism” (in the more modern, pejorative sense) that demands a strict attitude of certainty, as opposed to a pragmatic confidence.* (DeWitt seems to veer there.) [I came to the conclusion that Sextus Empiricus simply confused Epicurus’ use of dogma with that of the Stoics and the Academics.]

As you put it in *Ante Oculos*: “Epicurus also saw that man’s natural fear of the unknown is seized upon as a tool by false priests, professors, and politicians who demand obedience through the call for ‘certainty.’ **The call for ‘certainty’ in human action is a false standard which can never be met,** and the real evil of those who call for it is that they are aware of the trap which they lay for the unthinking. The only remedy for this abomination is for men to acknowledge that their knowledge and their lives are ***limited to the scope to the bounds established by Nature.***”

– Cassius Amicus, *Ante Oculos: Epicurus and the Evidence-Based Life* 😊

We draw on senses (observations), feelings and intuition (my shorthand translation of prolepsis**) – and reasonable inference – to achieve a level of confidence that allows us to form opinions and act. Confidence is necessary, but absolute objective certainty is only available in deductive logic and pure mathematics. (Of course, sometimes we might say “I’m certain that ...” as a subjective expression of high confidence; not generally a problem.)

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* Don and I discussed the changing usage of “dogma” here: [RE: Philodemus of Gadara - Main Biography](#)

** As per these definitions from Merriam-Webster:

1a: the power or faculty of attaining to direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference

b: immediate apprehension or cognition

2: quick and ready insight

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2024 at 4:29 PM

You have a good memory! I think what I would say today to expand on what you quoted would be to clearly explain a definition of "certainty." If the word is defined to mean "godlike" certainty in that you are omniscient and omnipotent and have a full view of the universe through time and space, then you can never be certain (in that way) of anything, and that's the false standard that is foolish to seek.

If being certain is being used to me "I know this as well as an human can know it" then that definition of certainty is practical and usable.

So I think that's what Epicurus was talking about when he was using his canon. He set forth a set of tools that you can use, and if you use them appropriately then it is appropriate for you to say that you are "certain" of your conclusion. If you're talking to a priest and he says that he is certain of something, or that you can never be certain of anything, then I'd reject that proposition.

But just like when you're talking to Epicurus about "pleasure" you have to understand that he's talking about more than sensory stimulation, you can use the word "certain" in the proper sense of a human-style of certainty and be using the word acceptably.

I'd have to go back and see what else if anything I wrote at the time to see if I provided that context, but that's the context I would give it now. All the important words in Epicurean philosophy seem to have their own subtleties of meaning, and "knowledge" and "certainty" would be right in there with "pleasure," "virtue," "gods" and the rest! 😊

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Confidence is necessary, but absolute objective certainty is only available in deductive logic and pure mathematics.

I'm not sure that we should accept that "objective certainty" has a meaning unless we limit the term, should we? So I think I would be concerned about granting to deductive logic or pure mathematics the status of "objective certainty" either. I wouldn't want to go around casually implying that I think mathematics or logic have "objective certainty" when "objective certainty" sounds like a term that normal people would think applies only to that supernatural omniscient god whose existence we are rejecting.

Post by "Pacatus" of January 12, 2024 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If being certain is being used to me "I know this as well as an human can know it" then that definition of certainty is practical and usable.

So I think that's what Epicurus was talking about when he was using his canon.

Yes.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So I think I would be concerned about granting to deductive logic or pure mathematics the status of "objective certainty" either.

Ah! Well-caught! 👍 One might say they are only "logically certain" -- in terms of the conclusions following necessarily from the premises. But not "objective" in terms of the real, empirical world (a deductive syllogism can be valid while leading to a result that is -- not logically, but empirically -- false). [Wittgenstein, for example, distinguished between what he called "logical space" and empirical space.]

Post by “Cassius” of January 12, 2024 at 5:09 PM

I think [Eikadistes](#) 's latest graphic is applicable to our discussion here. When Democritus implied or stated that there's nothing in "reality" except atoms and void he should have taken greater care to explain what he meant by reality. If your definition of "reality" requires an unchanging and eternal existence, then darn right, nothing has that except atoms and void. But if your definition of "reality" is of relevance to human beings, and includes the kind of reality that includes railroad trains that will mow you down if you stand on their tracks when they come through, then to say that nothing exists "in reality" except atoms and void is the height of stupidity. I feel sure Democritus wasn't stupid, and I hope he made that distinction in real life. But regardless of that it does sound like Democritus got caught up in skepticism and hard determinism, so maybe he was in fact adversely influenced by his own theories. Rather than corrupt his ideas as Cicero accused Epicurus of doing, Epicurus straightened them out in some very important aspects.

EPICURUS
WAS HERE



"[Epicurus] called Nausiphanes a jellyfish, illiterate, a charlatan, and a whore. Plato and his followers he called 'Dionysian toadies,' and Plato himself 'golden'; Aristotle was 'a wastrel' who squandered his patrimony, fought in battles, and sold potions; Protagoras a 'delivery man,' 'Democritus' scribe,' and a 'village schoolmaster'; and Heraclitus is an 'agitator,' **Democritus 'Dumocritus' ...**"

Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book X

DUMB-OCRITUS



Post by “Pacatus” of January 12, 2024 at 7:09 PM

Some comments on this question of “meaning” herein:

First, for Viktor Frankl, meaning was just what enabled you to endure – to get through, perhaps to flourish (given the contextual possibilities). His immediate context was his interment in a Nazi concentration camp. His personal “meanings” there were (1) the hope that he would be reunited with his wife (both of them surviving) and (2) that he would have the opportunity to complete and publish his theories of psychotherapy (logotherapy). Nothing more idealist or esoteric to the word “meaning” than that (and his understanding was likely more therapeutically powerful for that reason).

Second, I have seen Camus contraposed to Frankl. But Camus didn’t say that the world is (existentially or metaphysically) absurd: what (for him) is absurd is the attempt to locate some exogenously-given meaning by a universe that discloses only facts and patterns. Deriving any “meaning” from those is up to us. The notion of being “given” meaning by the universe is what is absurd.

Third, when such down-to-earth ideas of “meaning” are seriously considered, the notion that Epicurean philosophy offers no means to (or opportunity for) personal meaning itself seems absurd.

With that said, [Kalosyni](#) is right: the term is broad, and needs to be pinned down – else any idealist/esoteric conception might be had.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 13, 2024 at 8:42 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Third, when such down-to-earth ideas of “meaning” are seriously considered, the notion that Epicurean philosophy offers no means to (or opportunity for) personal meaning itself seems absurd.

Further thoughts coming up in regard to “meaning”. Most concerning to me in the call to “search for meaning” is the implication that happiness is not possible so that the best one can do is have a “meaningful life”. This is so divorced from pleasure, especially normal animal pleasures, and shows how there is a mistaken and unnecessary distrust of pleasure. Also,

missing is that we have basic human needs for social interaction and for friendship, which we need for living a happy life.

It appears to me that Frankl's advice was born out of an extreme worst case scenario which required extreme coping mechanisms - a scenario that most people thankfully will never need to encounter. We are living ordinary and secure lives which are much much different. I see the "search for meaning" as an attempt to deal with severe mental anguish, but I think it is going about the problem in the wrong way.

Ultimately if we follow that which brings both short-term and long-term pleasure, we will naturally arrive at a "meaningful" life - one in which we do not have to prove that we are good or smart or talented in order to try to get approval from others. So Epicureans have a much different understanding of the word "meaningful".

We also can avoid falling into the trap that something isn't truly "meaningful" unless others also see it as "meaningful" (a "meaningful" life for some could just be one step away from a "virtuous" life, for example according to the common idea that serving others is a pathway to a meaningful life.)

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2024 at 8:47 AM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

Third, when such down-to-earth ideas of “meaning” are seriously considered, the notion that Epicurean philosophy offers no means to (or opportunity for) personal meaning itself seems absurd.

I think we are together but i am not 100% sure. Any sense of "meaningfulness" is a pleasure, isn't it?

Once we strip "meaningfulness" of its aura of attempting to do an end-run around pleasure as the ultimate good, i see no problem with it or any of another ten thousand words that could be used to describe a particular aspect of a pleasurable life.

Aren't the issues revolving around "meaningfulness" the same as those around "virtue," with the devil being in the details of whether "meaningful" has some absolute ideal nature, or whether it has meaning only in terms of individual pleasure and pain?

"Virtue" in the hands of Epicurus is a wonderful word, and I see no reason why he wouldn't endorse "meaningfulness" either, as long as the word is clearly positioned within the framework of the Epicurean worldview in which there is nothing good that does not ultimately trace to

pleasure and nothing bad which does not ultimately trace to pain.

Post by “Cassius” of January 13, 2024 at 9:21 AM

I can easily see myself saying at some appropriate time and place to an appropriate person:

The meaning of life is PLEASURE, you dolt, and the reason that you kick back against it is that you have bought into a warped view of the world in which life is not a pleasure but a prison sentence for your "immortal soul" - which is nothing more than a figment of your imagination drummed into you by two thousand years of false religious indoctrination!

And after that I would warm up to be more blunt. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 13, 2024 at 10:41 AM

Thinking further about "finding meaning", a person is only going to have this question come up when they are feeling in doubt of their internal sense of resilience and when they are lacking in coping strategies -- check out this thread and the [post on the BASIC-ph model](#) for a much better way to build resilience.

Post by “Pacatus” of January 13, 2024 at 12:26 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Ultimately if we follow that which brings both short-term and long-term pleasure, we will naturally arrive at a "meaningful" life - one in which we do not have to prove that we are good or smart or talented in order to try to get approval from others. So Epicureans have a much different understanding of the word "meaningful".



Post by “Kalosyni” of January 15, 2024 at 1:40 PM

Thank you [Cassius](#) for your clarification on this topic in post 12 above.

More thoughts on this today...thinking it may be good to consider how popular "finding meaning" and "meaningfulness" is in "self-help" books and likely also modern therapy. And I think there is a lot of baggage with using these words -- especially for myself since I've read quite a few "self-help" books and perhaps that is why I find it to be such an issue (and I think this is going to be a little like a hydra monster, in that it could keep coming back over and over, and I still need to think through this some more).

[Joshua](#) brought this topic up in the last podcast ([Episode 210](#) will be up soon) and shared the historical context of "finding meaning", and this is a relatively new idea.

Post by “DavidN” of January 26, 2024 at 10:53 PM

I loved Kalosyni's response, the only thing I would add is I see the appeal to "meaning" often from religious or spiritual practitioners when faced with the idea that their beliefs might be wrong. That without this or that life has no "meaning", that in order for them to be happy, for some reason, they need "meaning" outside of themselves. I've never liked this line of logic, it's like an ego defense mechanism, that you must be wrong because the "meaning" I've devoted my life to doesn't fit within your world view. I've always responded that Life is meaning, that is to say life does not require some external meaning and nor do I. I derive all the "meaning" I need from life. And philosophy to me is a search for how to live that life better. Which is why I'm here.

Post by “Don” of January 26, 2024 at 11:41 PM

The Meaning of Life, according to Monty Python:

Quote

"M-hmm. Well, it's nothing very special. Uh, 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."