

Meaning and Satisfaction for Epicureans

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 21, 2024 at 4:20 PM

There are a few other threads and posts that bring up the topic of "meaning", but just this morning I was thinking about it again.

It seems to me that "meaning" and "meaningful" - as in "my life has meaning" or "my life is meaningful"...for an Epicurean could be translated to this:

--- I am feeling satisfied with how my life is going ---

We really can't put the "meaning"-genie back in the bottle, and so we need to reframe it in Epicurean terms.

To start, perhaps the idea "meaning of life" comes to us from the Judeo-Christian purpose in life with the roles dictated by God - serving or worshiping God. And also from society - being a "hero" or of service to others, or roles such as being a parent, etc., and all of these also mostly come through religious institutions.

Now, if you think about it, all of the above tends to increase connection or involvement with other people. And they have aspects which touch on "transcendence of time" and an "extension of consciousness into the future" (working for the good of heaven to "do God's will", working for the good of the community or for the good of children (one's own or other's) -- but ultimately they are also all touching on the desire for an "immortality of consciousness" (even if I die there is something that I have done that will exist into the distant future in future generations of people).

So one way of translating "meaning" into an Epicurean understanding, would be to think of it as a natural and necessary desire for human connection. And if there is a question of whether one's life feels meaningful, an Epicurean could examine whether the basic need for satisfying human connection is being fulfilled. (And this may be where the necessity of creating an "Epicurean Church" might be helpful for some people).

The need for "finding meaning" can come up when bad things happen or big changes in life occur (the need to make sense of things) or when life seems devoid of activity (boring/empty), or a lack of close friends (feeling alone/isolated).

So I would say that if you feel that you are not quite happy with your life, look at how your connections with other people can be improved or increased.

Regarding the desire for an "immortality of consciousness" which I brought up above - I think this may vary from person to person, and whether or not there is a belief that one "should" leave some kind of a legacy (having children is one form of leaving a legacy). [Martin Godfrey Don](#) maybe anything to say about this aspect of "meaning" (agree or disagree? or change it to an Epicurean viewpoint?)

Also, anyone else's ideas on "meaning" and translating it into an Epicurean frame of understanding? Whether it correlates with natural and necessary desire for emotional/relational connection?

Post by "Kalosyni" of August 22, 2024 at 8:12 AM

Another way of thinking about this could be this:

-- I am feeling satisfied with the "story" I am telling myself (internal thoughts) and others (external words). --

So many of the Vatican Sayings touch on this, especially this one:

Vatican Saying 48:

"While you are on the road, try to make the later part better than the earlier part; and be equally happy when you reach the end."

Seems like an Epicurean would evaluate and then take action to make their life better (perhaps based on natural and necessary for happiness).

Post by "Godfrey" of August 22, 2024 at 11:34 AM

That's a big topic! But since I'm not yet fully awake, I'll take a groggy stab at it...

I would start by saying that "meaning," at least in the way that I think that you're thinking of it, is a type of pleasure.

Perhaps a "multivalent" pleasure: by this I mean something that brings pleasure (say in the form of satisfaction or fulfillment) on more than one level.

Or maybe better described as an "organizing" pleasure: something that brings one's life into a type of focus, and that serves as a filter for choices and avoidances (commitments and rejections, pursuing and fleeing &c). Actually, I like this take on it better than the multivalent idea.

And that's it. Period. Anything else is just one's personal understanding of it and how it works in their particular situation.

Friendship is highly valued in EP, but I'm not sure that it would be classified as meaning, although it can multiply one's pleasure and one can derive personal meaning from friendship and/or family.

The definition of transcendence is a little hard to pin down, I think, but as I interpret what's written in post #1, that's not something that would enter into an Epicurean equation. I think that the best take on something close to transcendence or a legacy would come directly from the example of Epicurus, particularly in his last letter and his will. One can take steps during one's lifetime to try to influence what happens after they die, but at some point, that can turn into an unnatural desire and do one more harm than good.

VS48 is quite good! However, I don't think that it's referring to meaning, but more to how one can most effectively pursue pleasure in one's life.

My final thought is to reiterate that we can define "meaning" as "an organizing pleasure." However I reserve the right to revise that!

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 22, 2024 at 1:39 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Or maybe better described as an "organizing" pleasure: something that brings one's life into a type of focus, and that serves as a filter for choices and avoidances (commitments and rejections, pursuing and fleeing &c). Actually, I like this take on it better than the multivalent idea.

Yes, I like this also!

And brings to mind this:

VS17: "It is not the young man who is most happy, but the old man who has lived beautifully; for despite being at his very peak the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds,

whereas the old man has settled into old age as if in a harbor, secure in his gratitude for the good things he was once unsure of."

Especially: "the young man stumbles around as if he were of many minds" - makes me think of someone who is disorganized and is going in ten different directions and so does not get (or know how to get) what is needed or wanted.

So the "harbor" here could actually be a kind of clarity of mind with regard to what is important in life and what actions to take to bring about happiness.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 23, 2024 at 12:30 AM

Quote from Kalosyni

Vatican Saying 48:

"While you are on the road, try to make the later part better than the earlier part; and be equally happy when you reach the end."

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

VS48 is quite good! However, I don't think that it's referring to meaning, but more to how one can most effectively pursue pleasure in one's life.

If I look at my own definition of meaning as an organizing pleasure, VS48 could be read as a way of organizing pleasure and hence as a type of meaning. Hmm... 🤔 And I think I see where you're going, [Kalosyni](#), with VS17; that seems like looking at VS48 from another angle.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 23, 2024 at 8:21 PM

Perhaps meaning might also be thought of as an "encompassing" pleasure....