

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

Post by "Cassius" of November 9, 2024 at 8:07 AM

I know nothing about the site from which this comes, but I have a Google search which brings certain topics to my attention, and this came up today. I have read through the article and find it thoroughly anti-Epicurean, but I find it to be helpful to regularly remind myself of the directions from which this kind of thinking comes. This one is pretty representative of the spirit-based "meaningfulness" premise, and that's the reason I am posting it - for future reference as needed. It contains many of the standard references that people from this perspective cite, including references to Huxley's "Brave New World, Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search For Meaning." the argument equating happiness with materialism and that consumerism leads to unhappiness, etc.

Here I see the writer recognizes why so many people want to pursue "peace" and "contentment" rather than pleasure and happiness:

## Quote

Even deep spiritual interventions have the goal of happiness—if you are one with God, or Jesus, or Mohammed, you will be happy. Shouldn't the word "happy" be replaced with "content" or even "peace?" It certainly should be, because that is what I believe most of the religious traditions mean by the word "happiness." "Contentment" and "peace" have very different meanings to "happy."

If we are fully enlightened, are we even allowed to be happy? Of course, we are. Being happy is one of the most precious gifts of being a living creature. Should we expect to be happy all of the time? No, of course not. That would be a curse. Should we expect to be content or at peace all of the time? Yes, I believe that is indeed possible and should be a goal we all strive to attain.

How about this: death, suffering, and pain are illusions of the material world, and for large portions of our lives we should not expect to be happy! (Contrast that with Torquatus' On Ends 1:62 "And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation." and Epicurus's **U116 Plutarch, Against Colotes, 17, p. 1117A**: Such is ... the man who, in the letter to Anaxarchus can pen such words as these: "But I, for my part, summon you to sustained pleasures and not to empty

virtues, which fill us with vain expectations that destroy peace of mind)

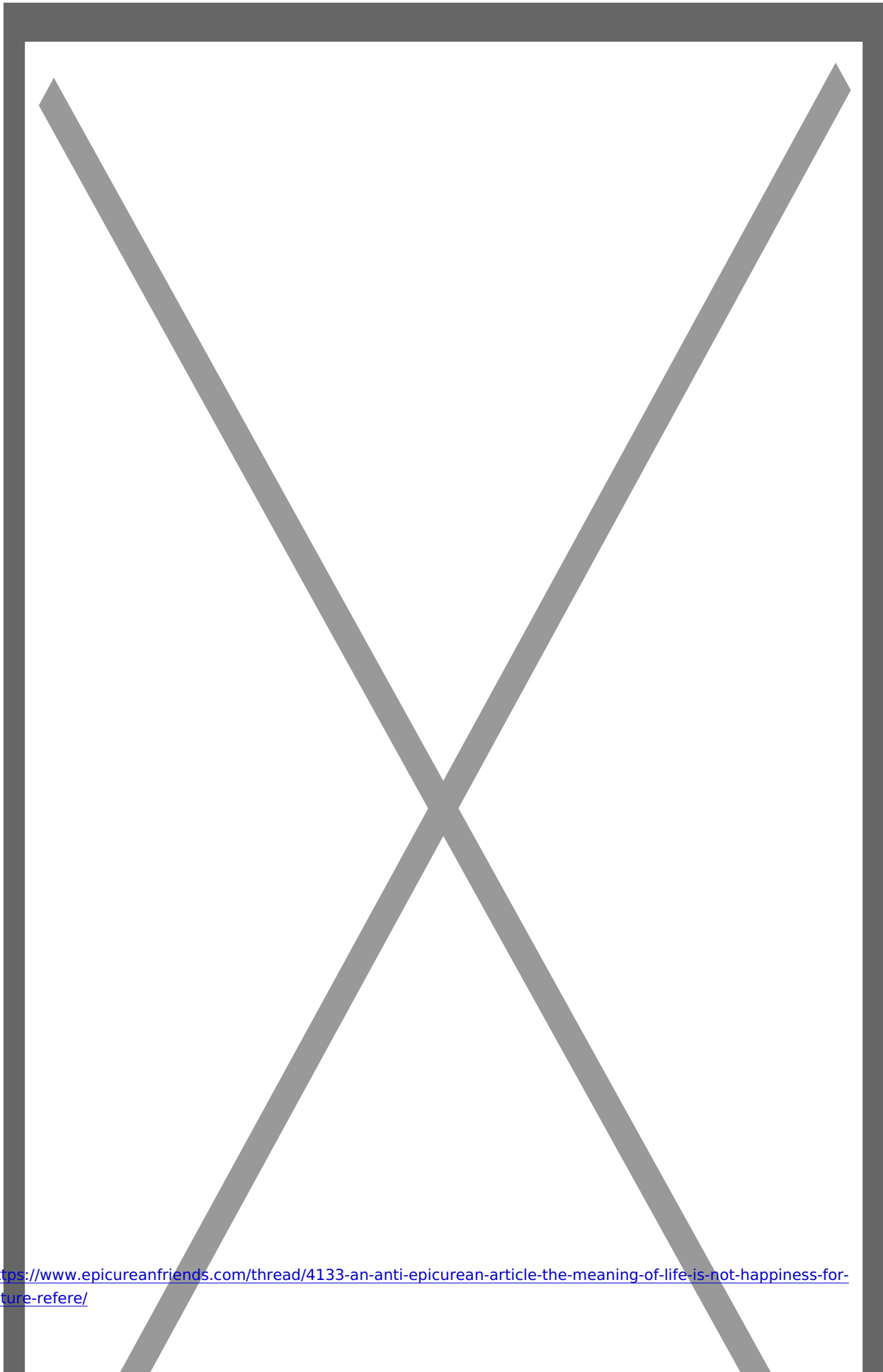
#### Quote

However, my view is that as long as we are in the material form, living in a material creation, we have to encounter the manifestation of evil, darkness, and suffering—not ignore it. Part of our purpose and meaning in this world is to deal with everything we encounter, not turn away from any of it. Therefore, for a large portion of our lives, we may not be happy.

Dealing with darkness is not typically a happy endeavour, however, it doesn't mean we cannot be at peace and be content when we are dealing with it. Darkness, suffering, and pain are but an "appearance"—an illusion—in the material realm. Through this illusion, we may even find meaning, and purpose, as we deal with the darker sides of life and existence.

I'm not recommending this article for a run read, but as a reminder of what Epicurean philosophy is up against. i don't consider this something resolvable by simply saying "meaningfulness is pleasure so that means we're all after pleasure so why don't we all agree just to have different definitions of happiness. This is a fundamental difference in world-view that 2000 years ago led to the active suppression of the freedom to hold Epicurean viewpoints.

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4133-an-anti-epicurean-article-the-meaning-of-life-is-not-happiness-for-future-refere/>

## [The Meaning of Life is Not Happiness](#)

I can't tell you the number of times every day I hear from clients in my practice, "All I want is to be happy." And they don't know why they are not happy,...

off-guardian.org

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### **Post by "SillyApe" of November 17, 2024 at 2:36 PM**

So, what do we have here? An author talking about metaphysical speculations, Christian beliefs, and the so desired(and abstract) "meaning".

"Meaning" is a funny thing. As the author says, we should pursuit it instead of "happiness". The question is: why do humans chase meaning? In my view, it is because it helps us endure the pains of life. If we go through a terrible situation for no reason at all, it feels way worse than if there was a "meaning" behind it all. That means that "meaning" is just a tool for the increase of our pleasure and the decrease of our pain.

Another factor that contributes to the human desire for "meaning" is our difficulty in accepting our own insignificance. It has always been hard for us to understand that we're just some random creatures walking on this planet, born not for a reason, but only by chance. In a desperate attempt to change that, we try to give "meaning" to ourselves, which would be fulfilled either in this World or in a theoretical "Next World".

Though I understand where it comes from, I still think this is not a helpful tool. Just like any other supernatural or abstract concept, it can quickly degenerate into senseless goals built upon absolutely nothing. Pure rationalizations of the human mind. That's why I like the teachings of Epicureanism on how to cultivate a good life: they are tangible and "real", not based on some abstraction or transcendence. Sensations are here and now, being way more reliable than abstract concepts.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 17, 2024 at 3:37 PM**

[Quote from SillyApe](#)

That's why I like the teachings of Epicureanism on how to cultivate a good life: they are tangible and "real", not based on some abstraction or transcendence. Sensations are here and now, being way more reliable than abstract concepts.

I definitely agree with that as to transcendence, and as to "abstractions" I have used that formulation myself.

i write to talk about the meaning of "abstractions" probably not being clear enough would explanation. Mental pleasure is certainly recognized by Epicurus as being as much, or more, significant to us than "bodily" pleasures (the quotes are because all pleasures are ultimately of the body, and yet it is useful to distinguish the five senses from what we are talking about as "mental").

I think what we are concerned mostly about in attacking the writer's concept of meaningfulness is that he and many others are postulating that there is some 'higher' (transcendent) set of values that override the values of real living people. That's simply untrue - false - wishful thinking, and needs to be refuted as such.

On the other hand, there are mental pleasures - friendship would be one - that are extremely important to us, and are not to be dismissed because they are "abstract." I've probably been "guilty" in earlier years here on the forum of calling the problem "abstractions" when I probably should have called the problem "idealism" or "transcendentalism" or similar wording. Maybe there are even better words to describe what we are talking about, but the issue i think is, as you say, the "here and now" which is important to us, and not fictionalized idealism. The term "abstractions" probably includes feelings that are indeed real to us in the here and now, so we have to sort out whether they arise from things that are true and real (the reality of nature, including human nature) vs those things that are purely invented in our minds (the idealism of the supernatural and the idea that some things transcend nature).

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of November 17, 2024 at 4:35 PM**

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.

We need to feel that there are more moments of joy than vexation, and we need to feel like our life course is sailing along in a satisfactory way.

The quest and desire for "meaning" is brought about by feeling vexation and dissatisfaction with one's life. There is a feeling that something is missing, but what it is...is a mystery... because civilization (and the modern world) has made it difficult to get certain basic human needs met. And then these very basic needs are ignored and made out to be unimportant. Instead there is "God" or "helping others through volunteer work".

The mystery needs to be uncovered, and we can begin to see an indication in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

In the modern world everyone has a unique take on what is felt to be individually "meaningful" (or important). But something must be tied into a bigger picture of the human life cycle ...either with family or with chosen friends. And then, seeing what came before, what is occurring now, and what will continue on in the future (the next generation) is a kind of transcendence -- seeing the cycle of life and feeling a part of that cycle of life. I would say that this would be an "Epicurean meaning of life" -- both seeing "the way things are", and "teaching the way things are".

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2024 at 6:21 PM**

#### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

The quest and desire for "meaning" is brought about by feeling vexation and dissatisfaction with one's life.

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. The ancients didn't talk about "meaning" because they still had the intellectual integrity to see that the issue is between virtue, a type of Idealism, and happiness caused by pleasure, which is what Nature gives us.

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### **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."

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## Post by "Pacatus" of November 18, 2024 at 3:33 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)


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

I disagree (not what *I* generally mean - even without much reflection). And I disagree that there is (or can be) some non-contextual definition of "happiness" that can be applied except in the most abstract of cases. The same for "pleasure" - really no less problematic than "happiness."

I think the search for some philosophical, context-free precision in such language will always fail - except in the narrow hallways of academia. In this, I continue to follow Wittgenstein's insights on "ordinary language."

With that said, "happiness" and "well-being" (as opposed to "ill-being") are not - to my mind - unrelated. And, as has been discussed many times, that embraces the mental as well as (and maybe even more so than) the physical - e.g., Epicurus on his deathbed.

And, in Epicurean philosophy, "happiness" (and well-being, for that matter) is related to pleasure - the pleasurable/pleasant life. As opposed to, say, Stoic virtue.

[Don](#) , You and I have disagreed on this before. I have thought of *eudaimonia* as "happy well-being." I continue to do so, as I still think they are related. A disagreement *among friends*  : and one that itself may depend on context.

Oh -- and kudos on the Monty Python reference!  

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I have not addressed "meaning." Another broadly-defined term. And, to my mind, far more fraught than "happiness" - which is something that I *feel*.

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 18, 2024 at 3:48 PM

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

And I disagree that there is (or can be) some non-contextual definition of "happiness" that can be applied except in the most abstract of cases.

Which leads to the question: Do we stop trying, or do we simply define our terms as we think best, such as "believe that a god is a living being blessed and imperishable" or "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain."

I think Epicurus is with you, and that he therefore - rather than give up or give in to false presumptions - determined that he was going to state his own terms to explain the answer to contentious questions.

I therefore think Dons "subjective wellbeing" helps explain the issue, but in Epicurean terms Epicurus decided the best term for this either is or falls under "pleasure."

## Post by “Don” of November 18, 2024 at 3:55 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

living being

LOL 😂 Don't get me started on "living being," but that's a topic for another thread.

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## Post by “Pacatus” of November 18, 2024 at 4:04 PM

@ Cassius : With regard to the gods, I agree (but there remains the idealist-versus-realist question...). With regard to pleasure=absence of pain, that formula is somewhat dependent on the context of Epicurean philosophy (in which there is no “neutral” state) – much, perhaps, as *pathe* in Stoicism needs to be understood, formulaically, as something other than *eupathe*.

But – on his deathbed, Epicurus was clearly in pain. He was able to find compensating pleasure (and happiness) elsewhere. That is part of the power of the philosophy.

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In that context 😊, I think we stop trying for non-contextual understandings generally. A famous (infamous?) Wittgenstein quote on terminology: "Don't look for the meaning; look for the use."

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## Post by “Pacatus” of November 18, 2024 at 4:16 PM

Just a note on personal “context”: Epicurean philosophy offers – to me – well-prescribed guardrails against my innate Cyrenaic instincts, and a cogent, practical countervailing philosophy vis-a-vis my Kantian/Stoic upbringing/programming. A late discovery on both counts. 😭 Everything else is secondary (though clearly intellectually interesting – and therefore a source of pleasure 😊).

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## Post by “Don” of November 18, 2024 at 10:59 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4133-an-anti-epicurean-article-the-meaning-of-life-is-not-happiness-for-future-refere/>

### [Quote from Pacatus](#)

Don , You and I have disagreed on this before. I have thought of eudaimonia as “happy well-being.” I continue to do so, as I still think they are related. A disagreement among friends ❤️ : and one that itself may depend on context.

Maybe disagreement is a little strong 😊

I had to go back and see where we discussed this previously (Nothing dies on the internet 😄) and found one of our threads:

Post

### [RE: Fundamental Issues In Hedonism](#)

[...]

Whilst I agree about the semantic difficulties with the word “happy/happiness,” I think that eudaimonia cannot be a strictly objective state – such that, say, you might claim that Pacatus is clearly in a state of eudaimonia/well-being, even though Pacatus might not be aware of that at all. So, I think there has to be a subjective element – such that I **feel** that state of well-being, which is a feeling of pleasure/pleasantness. And, semantic difficulties aside, I know when I **feel** happy, just...



Pacatus

December 11, 2023 at 6:02 PM

So, I do agree with you that everything is contextual. I do think it is nigh impossible to look at someone and say "Well there goes a happy person!" Without having access to their inner life, we can't objectively say if someone's happy or not... or experiencing well-being, for that matter. Feelings and emotions are, by definition, subjective to the individual.

And I would agree that the Venn diagrams of "happiness" (writ large) and "well-being" intersect. I'm still not quite ready to completely embrace an expansive "definition" of happiness, but depending on how we're defining it or - maybe better - using it, I can accept talking about happiness as a sense of well-being which both equate to feeling pleasure about your life and the direction it's headed.

And, just to be clear, we're talking about a 2,300 year old philosophy originally taught in a language other than English which had its own semantic issues... evidenced by the fact that the people of Epicurus' and Philodemus' time argued with them about the Epicureans' use of the word ἡδονή (hedone) to encompass the full spectrum of what Epicurus saw as "pleasure."

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**Post by “Pacatus” of November 19, 2024 at 12:17 PM**

[Quote from Don](#)

Maybe disagreement is a little strong 😊

