

# Sunday May 25th, Zoom Discussion: "What Would Epicurus Say About the Search For 'Meaning' In Life?"

Post by "Cassius" of May 23, 2025 at 5:04 PM

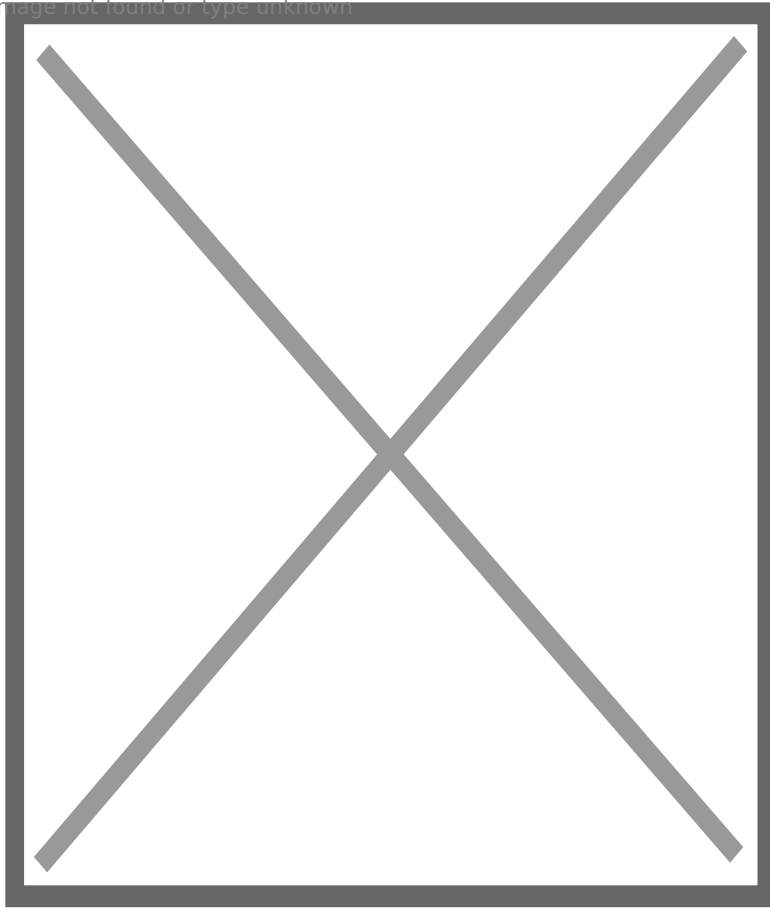
Just as a reminder we'll be doing our **12:30 PM EDT meeting again this Sunday 5/25** (in Central Europe that would be 6:30 PM CEST). For anyone whom this time is convenient, please feel free to join us.

My current thought for organizing a plan for this and future "Sunday Zoom" discussions will be to devote approximately the first twenty minutes to "What's up in your Epicurean thinking lately?" - with the remainder of the time devoted to reviewing one of our Frequently Asked Questions. We can use the discussion to update the FAQ, and that will both provide good conversation and help us help build out the FAQ for everyone's future use.

Why don't we start this week with "[What Would Epicurus Say About the Search For 'Meaning' In Life?](#)"

The full FAQ is here:

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Note: We distribute the Zoom link via private conversation. If you have an account at EpicureanFriends and would like to attend, please message a moderator or ask for the link in this thread.

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**Post by “Cassius” of May 24, 2025 at 12:25 PM**

I prepared an updated draft of a FAQ answer on this "Meaning" question. We can discuss this both in this thread and in the Zoom Sunday:

[Orientation To EpicureanFriends](#)

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**Post by “Joshua” of May 25, 2025 at 12:23 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4448-sunday-may-25th-zoom-discussion-what-would-epicurus-say-about-the-search-for-mea/>

This week's discussion will be on the concept of 'meaning'. I'm copying this post from another discussion;

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The first appearance of the phrase 'meaning of life' in the written record of the English language:

Quote

□

Quote

CHAPTER IX. THE EVERLASTING YEA.

"Temptations in the Wilderness!" exclaims Teufelsdröckh, "Have we not all to be tried with such? Not so easily can the old Adam, lodged in us by birth, be dispossessed. Our Life is compassed round with Necessity; yet is the **meaning of Life** itself no other than Freedom, than Voluntary Force: thus have we a warfare; in the beginning, especially, a hard-fought battle. For the God-given mandate, Work thou in Well-doing, lies mysteriously written, in Promethean Prophetic Characters, in our hearts; and leaves us no rest, night or day, till it be deciphered and obeyed; till it burn forth, in our conduct, a visible, acted Gospel of Freedom. And as the clay-given mandate, Eat thou and be filled, at the same time persuasively proclaims itself through every nerve,—must not there be a confusion, a contest, before the better Influence can become the upper?"

"To me nothing seems more natural than that the Son of Man, when such God-given mandate first prophetically stirs within him, and the Clay must now be vanquished or vanquish,—should be carried of the spirit into grim Solitudes, and there fronting the Tempter do grimmest battle with him; defiantly setting him at naught till he yield and fly. Name it as we choose: with or without visible Devil, whether in the natural Desert of rocks and sands, or in the populous moral Desert of selfishness and baseness,—to such Temptation are we all called. Unhappy if we are not! Unhappy if we are but Half-men, in whom that divine handwriting has never blazed forth, all-subduing, in true sun-splendor; but quivers dubiously amid meaner lights: or smoulders, in dull pain, in darkness, under earthly vapors!—**Our Wilderness is the wide World in an Atheistic Century**; our Forty Days are long years of suffering and fasting: nevertheless, to these also comes an end. Yes, to me also was given, if not Victory, yet the consciousness of Battle, and the resolve to persevere therein while life or faculty is left. To me also, entangled in the enchanted forests, demon-peopled, doleful of sight and of sound, it was given, after weariest wanderings, to work out my way into the higher sunlit slopes—of that Mountain which has no summit, or whose summit is in Heaven only!"

\*\*\*

On the roaring billows of Time, thou art not engulfed, but borne aloft into the azure of Eternity. **Love not Pleasure**; love God. This is the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved: wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him."

- [SARTOR RESARTUS](#):  
*The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, by Thomas Carlyle, ~1831

Display More

Note that this text is considered a parody of Hegel, and that modern scholars find [Carlyle's own opinions](#) difficult to isolate. Here is a quote from Carlyle himself in a letter:

Quote

□

Quote

Finally assure yourself I am neither Pagan nor Turk, nor circumcised Jew, but an unfortunate Christian individual resident at Chelsea in this year of Grace; neither Pantheist nor Pottheist<sup>1</sup>, nor any Theist or ist whatsoever; having the most decided contem[pt] for all manner of System-builders and Sectfounders—as far as contempt may be com[patible] with so mild a nature; feeling well beforehand (taught by long experience) that all such are and even must be wrong. By God's blessing, one has got two eyes to look with; also a mind capable of knowing, of believing: that is all the creed I will at this time insist on.

<sup>1</sup>'Pot-theist'; Carlyle was accused of pan-theism. Pot, pan, you get the idea

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## Post by “Cassius” of May 25, 2025 at 1:44 PM

Another good meeting today - thanks to all who attended.

Anyone who wants to suggest a particular FAQ topic for next week, please note it here.

Dave, the Tsouna article is here:

File

[Epicurean Preconceptions - Tsouna](#)



## Epicurean Preconceptions



Cassius

April 13, 2019 at 11:14 PM

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## Post by “Patrikios” of May 25, 2025 at 1:47 PM

Here is a reference to the previous discussion on prolepsis and epibole by Voula Tsouna.

## "Epicurean Preconceptions" by Voula Tsouna

Thread

["Epicurean Preconceptions" by Voula Tsouna](#)

I know that several of us had a long conversation about this article when it came out, but I can't find it. If anyone has notes in addition to Hiram, please post.

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/filebase/file/17/](http://epicureanfriends.com/wcf/filebase/file/17/)

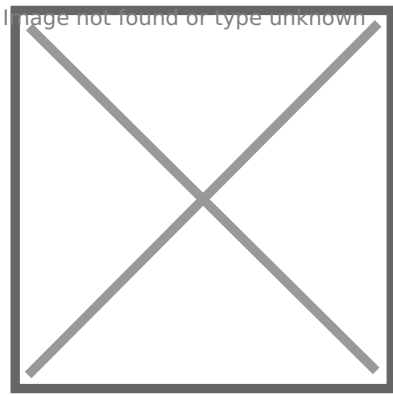


Cassius

April 13, 2019 at 11:32 PM

Here is a link to the full paper:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4448-sunday-may-25th-zoom-discussion-what-would-epicurus-say-about-the-search-for-mea/>



### [Epicurean Preconceptions](#)

This paper provides a comprehensive study of the Epicurean theory of 'preconception'. It addresses what a preconception is; how our preconception of...  
[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

She also wrote a paper on "**THE EPICUREAN NOTION OF EPIBOLÉ**"

[https://www.bsa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tsouna\\_310321\\_ABSTRACT-HANDOUT.pdf](https://www.bsa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Tsouna_310321_ABSTRACT-HANDOUT.pdf)

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### **Post by "Rolf" of May 25, 2025 at 1:55 PM**

Thanks for today everyone! Dave, it was good to meet you.

#### [Quote from Joshua](#)

The first appearance of the phrase 'meaning of life' in the written record of the English language:

This makes me wonder: Did the concept of a "meaning of life" even exist in the modern sense during Epicurus' time? And if not, why should we need it, if the ancient Epicureans got by perfectly fine without it?

Some additional thoughts:

- People who buy into the need for meaning rarely (if ever) talk about other animals having or requiring meaning. Why is that? In a strictly materialist universe, why would only humans have/require meaning?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4448-sunday-may-25th-zoom-discussion-what-would-epicurus-say-about-the-search-for-mea/>

- Is "meaning" just another platonic ideal, incompatible with a strictly materialist worldview?
- Let's say you eat a delicious slice of cake. It would sound ridiculous and nonsensical for somebody to ask you the meaning behind eating the slice of cake. You eat it because it tastes good and thus gives you pleasure. There is no need for a deeper meaning. With this in mind, why should life itself require a meaning?

With that said, I would personally phrase the FAQ response somewhere along these lines:

***Where is the meaning in Epicurean philosophy?***

*First we must ask ourselves: What do we mean by "meaning"?*

*Do we mean being a part of something bigger than ourselves? Then it is in friendship and community.*

*Do we mean a telos, objective, or aim? Then it is in pleasure.*

*Do we mean a sense of fulfillment? Then it is in the things that give us secure and consistent pleasure, varying by person. Some common sources are friendship, family, and hobbies.*

**Post by “Joshua” of May 25, 2025 at 2:29 PM**

I thought of a poem during our conversation, but it took me ages to find it again. It's called "The Bloody Sire" by the American poet [Robinson Jeffers](#):

It is not bad. Let them play.  
 Let the guns bark and the bombing-plane  
 Speak his prodigious blasphemies.  
 It is not bad, it is high time,  
 Stark violence is still the sire of all the world's values.

What but the wolf's tooth whittled so fine  
The fleet limbs of the antelope?  
 What but fear winged the birds, and hunger  
 Jewelled with such eyes the great goshawk's head?  
 Violence has been the sire of all the world's values.

Who would remember Helen's face  
Lacking the terrible halo of spears?  
Who formed Christ but Herod and Caesar,  
The cruel and bloody victories of Caesar?  
Violence, the bloody sire of all the world's values.

Never weep, let them play,  
Old violence is not too old to beget new values.

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And here is Tennyson from [In Memoriam](#):

Quote

Are God and Nature then at strife,  
That Nature lends such evil dreams?  
So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere  
Her secret meaning in her deeds,  
And finding that of fifty seeds  
She often brings but one to bear;

I falter where I firmly trod,  
And falling with my weight of cares  
Upon the great world's altar-stairs  
That slope thro' darkness up to God;

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is Lord of all,  
And faintly trust the larger hope.

LV

'So careful of the type?' but no.  
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone

She cries 'a thousand types are gone:  
I care for nothing, all shall go.

Thou makest thine appeal to me:  
I bring to life, I bring to death:  
The spirit does but mean the breath:  
I know no more.' And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,  
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed—

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,  
Who battled for the True, the Just,  
Be blown about the desert dust,  
Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,  
A discord. Dragons of the prime,  
That tare each other in their slime,  
Were mellow music match'd with him.

O life as futile, then, as frail!  
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!  
What hope of answer, or redress?  
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

Display More

Life without God is futile--we might say 'meaningless'--so where do we find hope? Beyond the veil of death and into new life.

## **Post by “Rolf” of May 25, 2025 at 6:57 PM**

Refined my FAQ response suggestion slightly:

### **Where is the meaning in Epicurean philosophy?**

First, let’s clarify what we mean by “meaning.” Are we asking if life has an objective purpose—a grand cosmic aim? Or are we talking about subjective meaning—a sense of fulfillment or significance in our daily lives?

Epicureanism doesn’t claim there is a cosmic or metaphysical meaning to life beyond the natural world we experience. Instead, it focuses on how to live well here and now.

- If “meaning” means being part of something bigger than ourselves, then Epicurean meaning is found in friendship, community, and mutual care.
- If “meaning” means having an ultimate goal or aim, then Epicurean philosophy identifies that goal as pleasure.
- If “meaning” means feeling fulfilled, then it comes from engaging with the things that reliably bring us pleasure. For some, this might be creative expression; for others, time spent in nature or honing a craft.

Just as you wouldn’t ask for the “meaning” behind enjoying a delicious slice of cake—you eat it because it tastes good and brings pleasure—life itself need not have a deeper “meaning” beyond the pleasure we experience in living it well.

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## **Post by “TauPhi” of May 25, 2025 at 7:34 PM**

As a wise man TauPhi once said when text auto-correction got the better of him:

"Stop ducking around searching for the meaning in life and start living your life like you ducking mean it."

(This sentiment is probably 58% Epicurean, 42% compelling only to drunk people, 17% non-sense and 100% approved by all the ducks in the nearest pond when uttered out loud at the precise moment of throwing breadcrumbs into the water).

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 26, 2025 at 9:23 AM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4448-sunday-may-25th-zoom-discussion-what-would-epicurus-say-about-the-search-for-mea/>

### [Quote from Rolf](#)

First we must ask ourselves: What do we mean by "meaning"?

Do we mean being a part of something bigger than ourselves? Then it is in friendship and community.

Do we mean a telos, objective, or aim? Then it is in pleasure.

Do we mean a sense of fulfillment? Then it is in the things that give us secure and consistent pleasure, varying by person. Some common sources are friendship, family, and hobbies.

These are very good questions, and I think that having a sense of meaning in one's life would encompass all three.

I would also add what is a human being's place in the universe.

### [Quote from Rolf](#)

People who buy into the need for meaning rarely (if ever) talk about other animals having or requiring meaning. Why is that? In a strictly materialist universe, why would only humans have/require meaning?

Is "meaning" just another platonic ideal, incompatible with a strictly materialist worldview?

I think the "idea" of "meaning" comes from religion - and religion comes about because it is difficult to fathom mortality (so all religions create a framework for the afterlife).

Also, the sense of consciousness that humans have creates a "gestalt" feeling of having a "spirit/soul" essence.

As far as I understand, Epicurean philosophy would say that this feeling of having a "spirit/soul" is legitimate, but it is dependent on the body, and so it dies when the body dies. And so we are not eternal, but we exist only for a short time.

Needing a sense of "meaning" can be considered "natural" and arising out of human consciousness.

Perhaps for those people who were not raised with a particular religion, they will cognate "meaning" as something different than those who were raised with religious "fundamentalism". Those raised with religion may end up needing more time to adjust from an "eternal consciousness" framework to a "finite consciousness". Also, the switch from "supernatural powers" permeating the earth, to "material forces that follow laws of physics" (but this would be a kind of "recovering from religion" issue that some may need to ponder - and what may

initially feel like a loss of meaning).

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of May 26, 2025 at 9:30 AM**

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

As far as I understand, Epicurean philosophy would say that this feeling of having a "spirit/soul" is legitimate, but it is dependent on the body, and so it dies when the body dies. And so we are not eternal, but we exist only for a short time.

Perhaps, if there is any aspect of Epicurean philosophy that could feel "spiritual", it would be this. And then we would value and honor our friends in a kind of awe of life - that this is amazing that we are alive, thinking, feeling, contemplating, reasoning, celebrating -- we would regularly bestow gratitude and words of appreciation.

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### **Post by “Don” of May 26, 2025 at 10:07 AM**

#### [Quote from Rolf](#)

Did the concept of a "meaning of life" even exist in the modern sense during Epicurus' time? And if not, why should we need it, if the ancient Epicureans got by perfectly fine without it?

That is an excellent question. Even if we can chart the appearance of the phrase "meaning of life" in the English language, how would we identify it in an ancient context.

The closest I can come off the top of my head is "meaning of life" = telos/supreme good/summum bonum. So, of that's the case, there's always been a "meaning" to life, but it seems the more modern idea is that each person is supposed to discover their own meaning? Whereas ancient-ly, the "meaning" was more generalized to humanity at large?

The universe does not "care" about us. The universe is not "looking out for us." The universe is not showing us the way or dropping hints to a "meaning" for our lives. The universe just is. We exist for a brief time in The All (TO ΠΑΝ) in our corner of this kosmos. Humans appear to have a need to feel more important than they actually are in the grand sweep of things. Now, that doesn't mean we get carte blanche to do as we will. Epicurus' philosophy gives us a grounded

perspective: we really don't matter in the most ultimate sense; however, if we want our brief life to be "good," there are some general principles we can use: don't willfully harm others, seek the most pleasurable outcome, have friendships, etc.

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## Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 11:16 AM

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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

As far as I understand, Epicurean philosophy would say that this feeling of having a "spirit/soul" is legitimate, but it is dependent on the body, and so it dies when the body dies. And so we are not eternal, but we exist only for a short time.

Perhaps, if there is any aspect of Epicurean philosophy that could feel "spiritual", it would be this. And then we would value and honor our friends in a kind of awe of life - that this is amazing that we are alive, thinking, feeling, contemplating, reasoning, celebrating -- we would regularly bestow gratitude and words of appreciation.

Perhaps. Though for me personally, even this strays too far from a strictly materialist worldview. That said, I'm not sure there's any harm in framing it as so if it helps people.

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Needing a sense of "meaning" can be considered "natural" and arising out of human consciousness.

This is an interesting topic, and something I'm not sure about. Is meaning something concrete, or is it just another mirage like enlightenment? The term almost reminds me of a secular version of such spiritual goals, when used in a certain way.

### [Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Perhaps for those people who were not raised with a particular religion, they will cognate "meaning" as something different than those who were raised with religious "fundamentalism".

This is a very good point - I was thinking something similar during our meeting yesterday, as from what I remember, the majority of us were raised in a somewhat religious environment. I, on the other hand, was raised incredibly secular. I wonder if this has any impact on the way one interprets "meaning", and whether or not they care for the idea at all.

When thinking about this conundrum, I keep circling back to the need to define "meaning (of life)". Wiktionary has it as follows:

Quote

1. (*philosophy, religion*) A hypothetical answer to all of life's ultimate questions; the purpose or *raison d'être* of human life.

Focusing on the second part, I feel this is incompatible with a strictly material Epicurean view of the world. As Josh so eloquently discussed in yesterday's meeting, a "purpose" or "reason for existence" implies, to me, that something has a preordained intent. However, in a world that is made up of only atoms and void, such an intent is impossible, and the realm of the supernatural.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy seems to have a [good page on the meaning of life](#). Upon a brief skim, it appears to go through differing takes on the concept, with a section devoted to discussing the *meaning* of "the meaning of life". One such perspective is as follows:

Quote

Focusing on meaning in life, it is quite common to maintain that it is conceptually something good for its own sake or, relatedly, something that provides a basic reason for action

Under this definition, "the meaning of life" describes the core of Epicurean philosophy very well. What is good for its own sake and provides a basic reason for action? Pleasure, of course!

To be honest, I feel debate over "the meaning of life" is mostly semantics and largely unnecessary (generally speaking, not here on this forum specifically). My personal view is that the word is, ironically, meaningless, and that it's a red herring in the pursuit of happiness. That said, it's obviously an extremely common point of discussion when it comes to philosophy, so I understand and agree with the need to discuss it in an FAQ, particularly for those new to Epicurus. I'm not entirely sure what the best way of doing this is - the answer depends very

much on how the reader is defining "meaning".

Additionally, is the aim to answer based solely upon Epicurean literature, or are our own interpretations permissible? If the former, I imagine it could be tricky to answer due to the idea of "meaning" perhaps not being conceptualised in the same way during that time period.

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### **Post by “Don” of May 26, 2025 at 11:40 AM**

I'm looking at the word "meaning" itself. Wiktionary gives definition 2 as:

*The purpose, value, or significance (of something) beyond the fact of that thing's existence. (the meaning of life)*

People seem to want/need a "greater purpose" for their lives, or to understand the "value" of the lives, to understand the significance of their lives in the grand scheme. That search for "meaning" seems like trying to chase a mirage. There is no ultimate or supernatural or divine purpose, value, or significance to an individual's living their life over and above pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, just like every other living creature. That's it. Now, that said, people can derive a lot of pleasure out of what are often lumped into "meaningful" acts and experiences. But I sincerely think people are fooling themselves (and more power to them) when they call that their life's purpose or meaning rather than acknowledge they're seeking pleasure. The pundits who pontificate about having a life of meaning have it backwards. Sincerely investigate what will truly bring you pleasure, and pursue that (within the limits of justice and ethical behavior Epicurus outlined). That might indeed be humanitarian causes like working in a war-torn country providing assistance, but it might not be. It might indeed be a life spent in service to people in need, but it might not be. Looking for a "grand purpose" almost seems to set people up to see themselves as inadequate in some way. "Pleasure is the highest good" seems a good antidote to that.

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### **Post by “Rolf” of May 26, 2025 at 12:14 PM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

I'm looking at the word "meaning" itself. Wiktionary gives definition 2 as:

*The purpose, value, or significance (of something) beyond the fact of that thing's existence. (the meaning of life)*

People seem to want/need a "greater purpose" for their lives, or to understand the "value" of the lives, to understand the significance of their lives in the grand scheme. That search for "meaning" seems like trying to chase a mirage. There is no ultimate or supernatural or divine purpose, value, or significance to an individual's living their life over and above pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, just like every other living creature. That's it. Now, that said, people can derive a lot of pleasure out of what are often lumped into "meaningful" acts and experiences. But I sincerely think people are fooling themselves (and more power to them) when they call that their life's purpose or meaning rather than acknowledge they're seeking pleasure. The pundits who pontificate about having a life of meaning have it backwards. Sincerely investigate what will truly bring you pleasure, and pursue that (within the limits of justice and ethical behavior Epicurus outlined). That might indeed be humanitarian causes like working in a war-torn country providing assistance, but it might not be. It might indeed be a life spent in service to people in need, but it might not be. Looking for a "grand purpose" almost seems to set people up to see themselves as inadequate in some way. "Pleasure is the highest good" seems a good antidote to that.

Well said Don, I couldn't agree more.

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## **Post by "Kalosyni" of May 26, 2025 at 2:31 PM**

### [Quote from Don](#)

People seem to want/need a "greater purpose" for their lives, or to understand the "value" of the lives, to understand the significance of their lives in the grand scheme. That search for "meaning" seems like trying to chase a mirage. There is no ultimate or supernatural or divine purpose, value, or significance to an individual's living their life over and above pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, just like every other living creature.

Another thought occurs to me now...

What about ancestors and descendants, or where we have come from (or out of) and where our off-spring are going. I'm thinking that this should be the kind of "meaning" that people consider, and it would be natural to wish a pleasant and long life for one's off-spring. And perhaps the world would be a different place if this would be fully considered when politicians and CEOs made decisions.

### [Quote from Don](#)

But I sincerely think people are fooling themselves (and more power to them) when they call that their life's purpose or meaning rather than acknowledge they're seeking pleasure.

What happens when you no longer believe you are experiencing "peak pleasure"? I would define "peak pleasure" as the kind of pleasure that doesn't require any contemplation because the pleasure is direct and at a level of intensity that you directly feel it in your body (no need to ask yourself "is this pleasurable?" because it just is). This may be the kind of pleasure that can "be okay" when you are young, but you wouldn't engage in (nor can you) as you get older because 1) your body isn't at the fitness or endurance level needed; 2) your nerves and reflexes have aged; 3) you can't safely metabolize sugar/alcohol anymore; 4) there are some risks involved which involve you and other people - "gather ye rose-buds while ye may" (intentionally vague here 😊).

And so...all that you are left with are the quiet pleasures of brief moments of mental enjoyment. Then it seems that "meaning" becomes a way to enhance mental pleasure (depending on how you cognize it).