

"Faith" And Confidence In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Cassius" of August 27, 2025 at 10:09 AM

I don't recall that we've discussed in depth the word "faith" especially since it has a disreputable connotation of "belief without evidence." However we see "confidence" discussed regularly, and at least in the English/Latin the root of the word implies a use of a variation of "faith" that is indeed based on strong evidence. We don't say that we have "faith" when we get on an airplane, we say we have "confidence," and that would seem to be a fully legitimate use of such a term.

I want to build out a forum structure which addresses "Epicurean virtues" so this thread will start that discussion as to "Faith" (used appropriately) or "Confidence," and that will require looking for relevant texts. Here's part of what DeWitt has to say about this. I wonder if each of these cites he makes isn't better translated as "confidence," but on the other hand that doesn't make the issue go away that confidence means "with faith" - so as part of the answer to skepticism there must be legitimate uses of "faith" just as with "gods" and "virtue."

Quote

While this conjunction of faith in doctrine with faith in the leader introduces a dynamic emotional element, it still falls short of making a complete picture. The disciple cannot live to himself. Epicurus thought of his oracular teachings as "beneficial for all men," and he planned coherence for all the local brotherhoods in which his disciples were enrolled. All members depended upon one another for what St. Paul referred to as Peace and Safety. This means that the Epicurean must not only feel faith in doctrine and leader but also in friends and friendship. The authority for this is Vatican Saying 34, which exhibits a play upon words that is characteristic of the master's style: "We do not so much have need of help from friends in time of need as faith in help in time of need." [omit gratuitous Christianity reference]

There is a difference, however; Epicurus was more restrained and stopped short of fanatical trust in his creed. Friendship was subject to planning and began with advantage even if developing into affection and faith. Authorized Doctrine 40: "All those who have best succeeded in building up the ability to feel secure from the attacks of those around them have lived the happiest lives with one another, as having the firmest faith." Thus even faith is in part the result of planning.

Epicurus was aware nevertheless of the saving function of faith. He assures his disciples that his account of the soul will result in "the firmest faith,"⁸³⁴ and the sole objective of the study of celestial phenomena is to acquire "tranquility and a firm faith."

⁸³⁵His account of the soul would result in emancipating the disciple from the fear of death, and his account of celestial phenomena on a physical basis would spare men the fear of Plato's astral divinities.⁸³⁶The supreme function of faith was to banish fears and uncertainties from life.

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 27, 2025 at 1:15 PM

Just an etymological note, the word used throughout the New Testament for "faith" (πίστις or *pístis*) is also used by Epíkouros throughout his *Epistles*, and once in the *Key Doctrines*:

1. *Epistle to Herodotos* 63:

“Then it is necessary that those [who are] comprehending [all of this] are [always] referring to the sensations and [the faculty of] feeling — for the firmest **faith** will thus be established — seeing that the soul exists through a finely-grained body [that is] spreading [throughout] an amalgamation [of flesh].”

2. *Epistle to Pythokles* 85:

“So then, the first goal of knowledge about the meteoric, either [to] speak in conjunction [with facts] or to independently practice [science], is nothing else than tranquility and firm **faith**, just as in the case of the rest [of our investigations].”

3. *Key Doctrine* 40:

“Those who keep the means to be prepared enjoy the most confidence out of coexisting with other people, in this way also those who live pleasantly among one another keep steadfast **faith**, and engender the fullest intimacy so as not to mourn lamentably for those who died before their time had come.” (10.154)

Post by “Cassius” of August 27, 2025 at 1:30 PM

Thanks Eikadistes. That's exactly the threshold question I was concerned about but didn't know enough Greek to be confident about. I feel sure we've discussed this in the past but it's hard to keep it in mind over time.

So it IS proper to see Epicurus as talking about "faith," and coming from him, he definitely isn't embracing any kind of "belief without any evidence at all" definition of the term.

Post by “Don” of August 27, 2025 at 2:18 PM

In some contexts like Epicurus, I'd prefer "trust" instead of "faith" to get away from other religious contexts.

πίστις • (pístis) f (genitive πίστewς or πίστιος); third declension

trust in others, faith

belief in a higher power, faith

the state of being persuaded of something: belief, confidence, assurance

trust in a commercial sense: credit

faithfulness, honesty, trustworthiness, fidelity

that which gives assurance: treaty, oath, guarantee

means of persuasion: argument, proof

that which is entrusted

Post by “Cassius” of August 27, 2025 at 3:24 PM

This is definitely a tricky issue to navigate. I would think it really implicates issues of canonic and what Philodemus would be talking about in "On Signs/Methods of Inference." When is it appropriate to extrapolate from the known to reach conclusions about the unknown?

It's tempting to think of rationality as requiring direct evidence, but it's also common (in law for example) to reach conclusions based on "circumstantial evidence." We wouldn't normally refer to that as having "faith" or "trust" in something, but I suppose that's exactly what we're doing in trusting that the "circumstances" can indicate a reliable conclusion.

It really grates on the sensibilities to consider "Faith" to be an Epicurean virtue or a good thing at all, but I suppose it is and it's something to get used to discussing as part of the proper attitude toward Epicurean canonic.

"Trust" or "Faith" implies an object which we are trusting or having faith in. As general term in an Epicurean context, what would be that object? Here again maybe "Confidence" works just as well or better, and indicates where Cicero got that derogatory accusation in "On The Nature of the Gods":

Quote from On The Nature of The Gods Book One - VIII¶ (Yonge version)

After this, Velleius, with the confidence peculiar to his sect, dreading nothing so much as to seem to doubt of anything, began as if he had just then descended from the council of the Gods, and Epicurus's intervals of worlds. Do not attend, says he, to these idle and imaginary tales; nor to the operator and builder of the World, the God of Plato's Timæus; nor to the old prophetic dame, the Πρόνοια of the Stoics, which the Latins call Providence; nor to that round, that burning, revolving deity, the World, endowed with sense and understanding; the prodigies and wonders, not of inquisitive philosophers, but of dreamers!

Looks like the Latin is: "Tum Velleius fidenter sane, ut solent isti, hihil tam vereus quam ne dubitare aliqua de re videretur....."

Post by "Eikadistes" of August 27, 2025 at 4:26 PM

This is where there's a certain balance in one's choice of translation.

There will never be an absolutely "true" translation, because any receiver of a text is receiving that text through the filter of their own linguistic, cultural, generational, and academic contexts. Granted, there are definitely plenty of "false" interpretations ... but others are *good*, and some are *better*.

I present Epicurean *pístis* as "*faith*" to Christians to challenge their pre-existing assumption about the nature of "*faith*". With other Epicureans, we tend to avoid religious jargon and speak frankly, so "*faith*" is a much less helpful term. To those unfamiliar, "*faith*" *might* be a confusing translation.

Post by “Don” of August 27, 2025 at 5:12 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Trust" or "Faith" implies an object which we are trusting or having faith in. As general term in an Epicurean context, what would be that object?

Nature as in "the way things are."

Post by “Bryan” of August 27, 2025 at 5:19 PM

For ΚΔ 40, we have a slightly different word τὸ πίστωμα (instead of ἡ πίστις), and we have the privative version of ἡ πίστις (ἡ ἀπιστία) in VS 56.

ἡ πίστις αἱ πίστεῖς	belief [based on experience]	ΠΙΣΤΙΣ <i>trust</i>
ἡ ἀπιστία αἱ ἀπιστίαι	distrust	ΑΠΙΣΤΙΑ <i>no trust</i>
τὸ πίστωμα τὰ πιστώματα	assurance	ΠΙΣΤΩΜΑ <i>the result of trust</i>

Post by “Don” of August 27, 2025 at 5:43 PM

See also

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

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, π , πισσόχριστος , πίστ-ωμα](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of August 27, 2025 at 6:34 PM

In my arguments with some Christians over the years (who equated “faith” with a source of knowledge itself), I came to define “faith” as **“an attitude of confidence in the face of uncertainty.”**

[This also seems to accord with some practical (e.g., in sports) psychology.]

Needless to say, those Christians continued to claim that they actually *knew* things by faith ...



Post by “Cassius” of August 27, 2025 at 6:47 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

that they actually knew things by faith

I guess that's really the question of what we're talking about. Having confidence in something (the existence of atoms; life on other worlds, for examples) is pretty close to "knowing something by faith" depending on the precise meaning of those words.

Your confidence in your conclusion comes from your confidence in the analysis steps along the way even in the absence of "direct" observation, so I can see "knowing something by faith" to possibly be a correct use of those words, depending on the meaning of "faith." It all comes down to your starting point on what you accept as the facts on which to base the confident expectation.

Post by “Pacatus” of August 27, 2025 at 6:57 PM

If empirical evidence is certain, one has no need of “faith” – one has certain knowledge. If the available empirical evidence is subject to revision via new observations, as it generally is (whether one acknowledges it or not), then it is not certain. Faith cannot make it so. But we can act on the best evidence we have.

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 27, 2025 at 6:59 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Trust" or "Faith" implies an object which we are trusting or having faith in. As general term in an Epicurean context, what would be that object?

Nature as in "the way things are."

I'd also add, the *Canon*. We trust in the reliability and consistency of our senses, which reveal Nature, just as we reject scriptural inerrancy and its self-described revelations as a criterion of knowledge.

Post by “Don” of August 27, 2025 at 7:20 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I'd also add, the Canon.

Agreed.

I'd just add that we trust the Canon because, as a foundation, we have confidence that we live in a material world governed by knowledge laws and not capricious supernatural entities.

Chicken and egg? Does trust in Nature come first or does trust in the Canon come first so we can have trust in Nature?

Post by “Pacatus” of August 27, 2025 at 7:30 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Chicken and egg? Does trust in Nature come first or does trust in the Canon come first so we can have trust in Nature?

I'll take the chicken for 500, Alex. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of August 27, 2025 at 7:36 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

If empirical evidence is certain, one has no need of “faith” – one has certain knowledge. If the available empirical evidence is subject to revision via new observations, as it generally is (whether one acknowledges it or not), then it is not certain. Faith cannot make it so. But we can act on the best evidence we have.

Yes, we act on the best evidence we have. But I don't think the first sentence is obvious. No amount of empirical evidence is sufficient for certainty unless you have a working definition of certainty, and that's what the issue of trust / faith is all about -- or so I think at the moment.

I seem to remember that you Pacatus consider yourself to be either eclectic or skeptic or some combination rather than orthodox Epicurean, so I think we're getting here at some of the reason for that and lurkers reading this should be aware of that.

Epicurus appears to have had a working version of dogmatism in which he did consider certain things to be certain and beyond the expectation of need for revision. And of course that's highly controversial, and in the past and likely in the future will be a dividing line between those who consider themselves to be orthodox Epicurean vs those who don't. Of course calling yourself an orthodox Epicurean and a dollar might buy you a cup of coffee nowadays.

Post by "Pacatus" of August 27, 2025 at 7:44 PM

I suppose I was not clear -

My only point is this: *faith* (confidence, trust, belief) in a proposition P (any proposition P) does not **make** it true or false. I am not claiming that we cannot know anything - just that *faith*, under any sensible definition, does not make it so.

That is the case regardless of whatever I consider myself. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of August 27, 2025 at 7:50 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

just that faith, under any sensible definition, does not make it so.

Completely agree! 😊

Post by "Pacatus" of August 27, 2025 at 7:55 PM

An old quote attributed to Mark Twain:

"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

Just for a bit of (hopefully) comic relief ... 😄