

Elayne's personal outline

Post by “Elayne” of December 5, 2018 at 6:31 PM

I have been working on this for years but it was kind of in a chaos state. Organizing it according to headings helps a lot. This is a very rough draft and the first time I've tried to do it as a skeleton-- most of the pieces I've had for a long time, so I've got pages of elaboration that you probably don't need and maybe I didn't need, lol. I've done some editing on it since starting to learn about Epicurus.

The Nature of the Universe

1. There is absolutely no evidence for universal meaning, god(s), or a supernatural realm.
2. For phenomena which are not yet clearly understood, we gain no further knowledge or utility by inserting a god of the gaps as a placeholder. Or witches, or whatever.
3. I am a materialist monist. Matter and energy compose the universe and everything in it and interact according to laws of physics which are properties inherent in the matter/ energy, not superimposed from outside.
4. At the subatomic particle level, unexpected events occur which appear as random or chance. It is not yet clear what this really represents.
5. Time is directional, which has not been fully explained. I am most inclined to agree with Lee Smolin, who asserts that time is real, not illusory.
6. Humans, other animals, and inanimate objects are composed of matter/energy and are temporary and interdependent. The matter which composes us is not static but is interchanging constantly with the environment.
7. Human behavior is due to genetic/ epigenetic starting material interacting with the environment. Consciousness itself has not been fully understood.
8. It is best to be cautious about assuming any widely present human characteristic is vestigial or a “spandrel”, something left-over from or incidental to our evolutionary past with no current function.
9. Because the universe is material, other humans are REAL. They are not projections of my mind, and we are not all one universal being. They have individual consciousness, as do I.
10. Free will is a very difficult concept to think about correctly. There is no reason to think we will choose otherwise than according to our nature, absent temporary impairment—our choices

show us and others the nature of who we are at that moment. Our present nature has been formed through a combination of our genetic starting material and subsequent events, and thus we are not self-created. There is no supernatural being within us doing the choosing or influencing our development. It's not an illusion that we are choosing, just because we choose according to who we are, nor is it fate. This does not seem problematic to me. It bothers some people. I don't really understand what it is that they think could happen instead.

The Nature of knowledge

1. All human knowledge is obtained from specific vantage points.
2. We cannot observe our world from a non-human perspective. The human perspective is fundamentally NOT rational but sensory and emotional.
3. Reason is an evolved, more recently appearing brain function which has a social/ persuasive role. It is subject to errors and confabulation, but it is also beneficial to survival.
4. Our specific vantage points/ physical qualities mean that we never observe events from a purely objective position, as if we were machines.
5. However, our species has learned to use tools for measurement as well as to compare notes with each other, so that we can make more accurate measurements and predictions.
6. The communal examination of reality is a huge tool in deciding what is real and what is illusion.
7. No expert, group, or philosophy should be considered immune to questioning and examination for how well their ideas agree with experiences.
8. In isolation, each way of perceiving the environment can lead to errors of understanding the world. Then reasoning, both fast and slow, can add more errors of interpretation, both individually and in groups.
9. Despite these potential routes of error, we have so many different means of experiencing the world that it is pragmatically reasonable to accept certain redundantly confirmed conclusions as factual. I agree with Gould that a "fact" is something so likely to be true that it would be silly not to accept it.
10. Take care not to confuse language with the information it points to. Language is not a substitute for qualia and will never fully contain qualia. For this reason, language can be endlessly deconstructed and thereby be made useless for communication. Confusion over language is the main source of paradoxes.
11. A lot of people who congratulate themselves on being scientific are not being scientific. They are assigning credibility to groups or individuals, because of social affinity.

12. People who have meditated extensively or done other practices to change their brain functioning will often tell others that now they know the truth and that typical human brains operate under an illusion or delusion. In fact, these people have inactivated some of their brain functions. This does nothing to invalidate ordinary human experience or knowledge.

The nature of living well/ethics

1. An ethics cannot be derived from entirely consistent and rational rules, because of the irrational nature of the human brain. Even when a person pretends to have a rational basis for ethics, they will twist the rules as needed when their preferences arise, and they will have internal inconsistencies. Watch and see.

2. Feelings are the main way typical humans make our decisions, and then we explain them with reasons. We avoid actions that cause us to have a net painful feeling and seek actions which result in a net positive feeling, a feeling of pleasure.

3. Feelings are more important to typical humans than living longer.

4. Taking time to examine what actions are most likely to produce a net positive feeling will increase our chances of happiness.

5. Although there is no universal, absolute meaning, there is a sense of meaningfulness most humans experience that seems necessary for their happiness.

6. A sense of meaninglessness and a desire to pin down meaning into specifics does not arise unless life is otherwise distressing in some way. Unhappiness precedes and creates existential crises, but happy people are already enjoying life.

7. It is possible to enjoy life fully, and to be satisfied after attaining a desire. Desire is not fundamentally insatiable. There is no good reason to try and eliminate desires.

8. If a desire appears to be insatiable, it is likely because a person is otherwise unhappy or because the desire is for something impossible.

9. When a person is focused on an impossible desire, such as to live forever, the poor fit of substitute pleasures makes them feel their ordinary desires are insatiable.

10. Although there is no absolute, universal morality, there are instinctive basic desires most humans have about how they should treat and be treated by others. For instance, most humans prefer not to be assaulted or robbed.

11. Most typical humans have affection for at least certain other humans, which can range from mild to intense. They will experience unhappiness if they treat these others unkindly. This is true for me to a high degree. It is true for others in a spectrum of degrees and for some, it is not true at all.

12. It is an error to confuse preferences and behaviors we have evolved that made us “fit” with the sensed motive for those preferences and behaviors. Constantly inserting an evolutionary cause instead of the natural, felt, and often enjoyable motive appears to remove the sense of meaning for people and can result in unhappiness.

13. Adoration and hero worship is painful to endure, because it substitutes an image for me, and I am deprived of a real relationship. Temporary, task-associated and consensual hierarchies are acceptable.

14. Honesty and forthright communication is preferable for many reasons, including the relative ease compared to the difficulty of keeping lies straight.

15. Another reason to be honest is that it helps one avoid the anxiety-provoking “imposter syndrome”, where one is afraid one does not deserve the positive evaluations others assign.

16. I give people the benefit of the doubt until they prove me wrong or unless I have strong instinctive urges to avoid them, which I do not ignore.

17. There is no merit in stoicism and martyrdom, and these behaviors are unpleasant.

18. If you are standing in an anthill, don’t stay on and get bitten if you have the means to escape. If you cannot step out and will have inevitable pain, turn your attention to something pleasurable, such as the beautiful sky, a memory, or a good smell. Train your brain to always notice pleasure and you will have more pleasure.

19. Anger is a useful clue that your boundaries are being crossed in a way that may harm you, similar to physical pain.

20. Avoid extended, bitter anger, as it can become a habit that interferes with your happiness.

21. Remember that although you may have typical or increased empathy, some humans are exploiters/ intra-species predators.

22. Prefer amends to punishments. Amends and restorative justice are both statistically more effective and emotionally more satisfying.

23. Sometimes it is necessary to do painful, difficult, and strenuous things if not doing them would lead to more pain, or if doing them will lead to great pleasure. Be careful of the arrival fallacy, and seek to make steps towards a goal enjoyable, not just the goal.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2018 at 7:19 PM

Wow thank you for this detailed post! I know I will have lots more to say about this, but I wanted to go ahead and thank you for the time in posting this!

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2018 at 7:23 PM

Oh this prompts me already to say this:

4. At the subatomic particle level, unexpected events occur which appear as random or chance. It is not yet clear what this really represents.

Elayne I always recommend the article "Chance and Natural Law in Epicureanism" by AA Long for a very interesting discussion of how to reconcile "the swerve" and the indeterminacy which is implied there, with the determinacy that is also implied by that natural laws of physics which Epicurus also studied. If this is an area that interests you, I think you will find the Long article very helpful for an explanation of how BOTH exist within Epicurean philosophy, and how the ancients who had full access to Epicurean texts understood how Epicurus' position was not self-contradictory. I will find a link to that article and link it here. It is [HERE](#) in the files section of the main Facebook group.

Post by “Cassius” of December 5, 2018 at 7:29 PM

On Knowledge Elayne wrote: 8. In isolation, each way of perceiving the environment can lead to errors of understanding the world. Then reasoning, both fast and slow, can add more errors of interpretation, both individually and in groups. 9. **Despite these potential routes of error, we have so many different means of experiencing the world that it is pragmatically reasonable to accept certain redundantly confirmed conclusions as factual.** I agree with Gould that a “fact” is something so likely to be true that it would be silly not to accept it.

On a similar train of thought Diogenes of Oinanda wrote:

[Fr. 5](#)

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue

natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. ***We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception.*** And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

Other comments:

12. People who have meditated extensively or done other practices to change their brain functioning will often tell others that now they know the truth and that typical human brains operate under an illusion or delusion. In fact, these people have inactivated some of their brain functions. This does nothing to invalidate ordinary human experience or knowledge. <<< I COMPLETELY agree with this! 😊

3. Feelings are more important to typical humans than living longer. YEP!! Letter to Menoecus: "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

Now that I have finished reading the entire list I'll just say in summary that it is really excellent. No doubt any list can be nit-picked but on first read-through absolutely none of them jump out at me that would be something hard to reconcile with what I believe to be true about Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "JAWS" of December 5, 2018 at 8:34 PM

This was great to read! Thanks for posting.

I'm curious if you had anything specific in mind for the following statement:

Quote

8. It is best to be cautious about assuming any widely present human characteristic is vestigial or a “spandrel”, something left-over from or incidental to our evolutionary past with no current function.

Post by “Elayne” of December 6, 2018 at 9:48 AM

Thanks for reading all that, and for the comments!

For each point, I had a lot more to say but putting it in skeleton form was very helpful. For the vestigial/spandrel point, this has been on my list of important concepts for a long time when teaching medical students.

When I was in training, we were taught that the appendix was vestigial. Now we know it serves as a reservoir for beneficial gut flora, to replenish the gut after something like a viral illness. The umbilicus was described as a spandrel, just a leftover feature from the cord. But it, also, is a reservoir for skin flora. The foreskin, in the US-- it's astonishing how many physicians are unaware of its functions and of our bizarre historical origins of circumcision here (the hygiene movement, whose adherents thought circumcision prevented masturbation and insanity). There's a pretty long list of this kind of thing.

So I tell students to be wary when they hear a feature or behavior commonly found in humans has no current advantage. Reasoning can lead them far astray.

Post by “Elayne” of December 6, 2018 at 10:14 AM

Y'all can probably see why I was so excited to find out about Epicureans. The prevailing ideas around me, even for non religious people, include that we are somehow "one consciousness", that we can be enlightened by losing our sense of self, that the ego is undesirable...that we "create our own realities" instead of that we are participating in reality. All sorts of stoicism too. Consequentialism. Various rule-based ethics where proponents can't admit they are using their feelings-- they say they don't trust "arbitrary" feelings and need rules instead.

The main atheist group in town has a rule on their FB page that all posts must be based entirely on rational thinking. I said it was irrational to think that was even possible for typical humans to do, but I had no takers, lol.

Post by “Cassius” of December 6, 2018 at 10:49 AM

That last post is an excellent example of how alone we are, and how important it is to work together to help develop an alternative.

Post by “Hiram” of December 6, 2018 at 5:49 PM

I’ve thoroughly enjoyed your outline and could think of dozens of links to our content that would reinforce many of the conclusions of your wisdom tradition, from the importance of concentric social circles to martyrdom and anger (Philodemus’ scroll) 😊

Post by “bradley.whitley” of March 10, 2019 at 9:58 PM

Elayne,

I have had interactions with our local atheist, aka the radical Objectivist, on why Epicurus is “weak”...He is all Rand and Aristotle...

Post by “Cassius” of March 11, 2019 at 8:41 AM

That's an interesting comment Bradley -- several of us here have backgrounds in dealing with Objectivism/Rand. Here are several articles I have written myself in the past on that topic. If there is a particular aspect of that in which you might be interested in discussing, it might be a good idea for you to start a separate thread.

<https://newepicurean.com/?s=Ayn+Rand>

<https://newepicurean.com/assistance-for...ns-of-ayn-rand/>

<https://newepicurean.com/a-case-study-i...e-objectivists/>

<https://newepicurean.com/objectivism-th...phy-in-america/>

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/608-elayne-s-personal-outline/>