

Thinking About Epicurean Viewpoints Such As The Eternal / Infinite Universe, And How To Discuss Them

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[Quote from Don](#)

His primary mission in this was to contend against rival theories of his day. He wasn't trying to establish the Standard Model of quarks, gluons, mesons we have today. He'd be intrigued by this maybe, but I don't think he'd change his system. His system was adequate for his purposes. So when people slight him or try to dismiss him or try to shoehorn atomoi into the modern Standard Model, they all miss some part of the point.

Yes I think this is a very key point. Most of us here are acclimated and fine with pointing out that Epicurus' "atom" was simply meant to be whatever is uncuttable, indivisible, etc., and we're not dismayed when we think about molecules, atoms, electrons, and further and further down. Epicurus wasn't concerned with the intermediate steps - he was making an ultimate logical point that at some point there "must" be something that is uncuttable and unchangeable in order to hold things together and provide the continuity that we observe. He would adjust his terminology, but probably not adjust his ultimate point against infinite indivisibility.

That's really the whole point of the argument against infinite indivisibility, and something very similar seems to me to apply to eternity and infinity as well. I think Epicurus would look at the latest observations and be intrigued by the clues it gives as to the intermediate steps, but it would not at all necessarily change his ultimate position on those points.

Obviously there are many points of his observations on lesser issues that would need to be drastically revised, at least in terms of terminology.

But to say flatly "Epicurean science was wrong. It has been superseded by modern science." Is in my view WAY overbroad. Parts have been superseded, parts have stood the test of time, as far as I can tell. But the biggest and most important assertions in the nature of things -- eternity of the universe, infinity of the universe, and the absence of infinite indivisibility - so far as I can tell do not need to be abandoned, and still stand as important parts of his system of thought.

And that is where your "adequate for his purposes" comes in. Some people don't think it's necessary to take a position on whether the universe had a beginning; whether there is an "end" to the universe in space, or whether it is possible to keep on dividing things "forever." I think we probably have more people today who are ok with that than ever before. But I don't think we should ignore people who want a "best" answer to those questions that is consistent

with a non-supernatural universe and which gives them something understandable to base their thoughts on. Such a system gives them a coherent response in their minds to those who would argue that there IS no stability of any kind in the universe, and that the universe might pop out of existence at any moment just like they say it popped in. (I note that these positions serve much the same function as the initial principle doctrines, which are ultimately logical positions which are relatively easy to understand and therefore inoculate us against all sorts of damaging errors.) All I can say is that for myself I think these big picture issues are legitimate questions, and Epicurus's answers are very legitimate responses, and that they have not outlived their usefulness for literally millions of people.

So in my view there is both a "logical" and a "practical" reason to not be overbroad in characterizing Epicurean physics. We should always be clear BOTH that some aspects have been superseded, while some has not, and that the study of the entire system is worthwhile for the benefit it brings in explaining a rational perspective on the interplay between observation and having a system of thought that allows us to live successfully.

So to finish on your key sentence: "He'd be intrigued by this maybe, but I don't think he'd change his system" I know from years of discussing Epicurus on the internet that some people just go ballistic at a sentence like that. The group of people who react that way is similar to, but not the same, as those who run for the hills when they hear the word "dogmatism." I don't know any way to deal with that but to repeat over and over something like:

"Yes, observation must always control, and that which is clearly and repeatedly observed over time must be incorporated into the system by revising the system as needed. But the fact that new observations can and will forever come in does not change our need for a system today by which to live our lives. Every one of us as we live our lives has to form judgments about what to have confidence in and what not to have confidence in. Some of the specifics of what Epicurus taught require considerable revision, but many of the major key points of the overall system which provide an understandable overview of the non-supernatural universe - such as eternity in time, infinity in space, absence of a center, absence of infinite indivisibility - still provide an intellectually viable way of seeing our place in the universe. And don't forget that error lies in the mind, not in observation, so the simple existence of an observation does not in and of itself give us an accurate understanding of what that observation means. It is the role of philosophy to guide us in the best rules for processing observation into a coherent system, and the perspective of Epicurus on how to apply both philosophy and observation to science is very worth of consideration even today."