

Keen Reasoning Based on the Evidence of the Senses

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 7:13 PM

Pacatus you are approaching this exactly the way I appreciate detailed scientist to do, and that analysis will help inform whatever conclusions need to be reached. I think you're saying this yourself and therefore you won't take offense to note that this kind of approach is just totally beyond the reach of the "average man" who has need of guidance for living today - in the moment - and who will never be able to appreciate half of where you are coming from.

There is a segment of people who are into such calculations as you are discussing who will take the position: "Well the masses will never understand what I am talking about so they just need to listen to ME! 😊" That's an attitude that I think well describes most "priestly classes."

But I think the reason you and most of us are interested in Epicurus is because we recognize that real people need a real and effective approach by which to guide their lives, and implying to them that nothing can be reduced to a P=1.0 certainty is not relevant to their lives or thought processes. Many of them when faced with such a discussion will simply conclude that what is being asserted is that nothing is knowable and that they should just give up trying to make sense of anything -- which is to play into the hands of the aforesaid priestly class, whether they are priests of Yahweh or priests of "science."

So that leads back to the question of how to understand and appreciate Epicurus' perspective on this, which was apparently understood by the people of his time to be a combination of skeptical questioning of all claims of authority combined with a common sense attitude that certain decisions do have to be made with confidence, and that we do the best we can to make the best decisions we can without holding ourselves up to unrealistic expectations. What I perceive, and what I think Epicurus was also perceiving and saying, is that the pendulum can swing too far in the direction of skepticism leading to nihilism, and that it is necessary to articulate a common sense and usable approach to knowledge formation which allows for happy living.

So that seems to me to be the direction that these discussions need to proceed. By all means we take the input from all of the complicated abstractions to which we can gain access and on which we can draw upon, but that in the end we articulate an understandable technique for trusting the senses and making the everyday decisions with confidence that allow us to live happily -- rather than take the position of a Socrates and play games with the idea that we know nothing except that we know nothing.

Quote from Lucretius Book IV

Many more things of this kind we observe and wonder at, which attempt to overthrow the certainty of our senses, but to no purpose - for things of this sort generally deceive us upon account of the judgment of the mind which we apply to them, and so we conclude we see things which we really do not; for nothing is more difficult than to distinguish things clear and plain from such as are doubtful, to which the mind is ready to add its assent, as it is inclined to believe everything imparted by the senses.

Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards. And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before to lead him into such a knowledge) whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what it was that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty? But you will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us?

Will reason, derived from erring sense, claim the privilege to contradict it? Reason - that depends wholly upon the senses, which unless you allow to be true, all reason must be false. Can the ears correct the eyes? Or the touch the ears? Or will taste confute the touch? Or shall the nose or eyes convince the rest? This, I think, cannot be, for every sense has a separate faculty of its own, each has its distinct powers; and therefore an object, soft or hard, hot or cold, must necessarily be distinguished as soft or hard, hot or cold, by one sense separately, that is, the touch. It is the sole province of another, the sight, to perceive the colors of things, and the several properties that belong to them. The taste has a distinct office. Odors particularly affect the smell, and sound the ears. And therefore it cannot be that one sense should correct another, nor can the same sense correct itself, since an equal credit ought to be given to each; and therefore whatever the senses at any time discover to us must be certain.

And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power, to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.

Lastly, as in a building, if the principle rule of the artificer be not true, if his line be not exact, or his level bear in to the least to either side, every thing must needs be wrong and crooked, the whole fabric must be ill-shaped, declining, hanging over, leaning and irregular, so that some parts will seem ready to fall and tumble down, because the whole was at first disordered by false principles. So the reason of things must of necessity be wrong and false which is founded upon a false representation of the senses.