

Episode 166 - The Lucretius Today Podcast Interviews Dr. David Glidden on "Epicurean Prolepsis"

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Here I think is a useful analogy:

Many people come to Epicurus because they have read in a scientific article that Epicurus was the precursor of modern quantum theory with atomic particles "swerving." In fact "The Swerve" is the title of one of the most popular books on Epicurus in recent years.

But I would submit that if Epicurus were here today and we told him that he was primarily known for having predicted atomic swerve, he would be very displeased and probably rebuke us as not understanding him at all.

That's because as David Sedley points out in his "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," it is likely that the swerve was not a central part of Epicurean physics development at all. Instead, Epicurus deduced the swerve from observation of "free will" in more intelligent animals. As Lucretius explains, Epicurus based his confidence in the existence of the swerve on the necessity of there being such a mechanism to free these higher animals from the billiard-ball chains of strict billiard-ball determinism. If I recall correctly, Sedley even says that the swerve likely played no necessary role in the formation of universes, so the idea of the swerve really should not be considered mainly for its significance in physics.

Instead, the swerve is the mechanism by which we have confidence that we are not entirely slaves of our circumstances, and that we have the ability to effect those circumstances and our futures, which is a necessary part of controlling our lives so as to live happily.

Likewise, prolepsis should not be seen primarily as a matter of technical interest. It is certainly validating that modern science is moving in the same direction, but if we start and stop at that analysis we totally miss the point Epicurus was driving at.

Absent the mechanism of prolepsis there is no means of explaining why Plato was wrong to assert that all knowledge comes from remembering ideal forms from prior lives. There is no way to establish that knowledge is not something that supernatural gods implant within us, or to establish that knowledge itself is totally impossible or impractical as the skeptics would argue. There must be a mechanism that explains how intelligent animals develop and use knowledge itself.

I recall Dr. Glidden warning us that "canon" does not tell us the "content" of truth - the canon (even prolepsis) is not a set of conclusions about the universe or anything else. Certainly that is

the point made by Norman DeWitt that we should never confuse the "tools of precision" with "the stones of the wall" when we are building a wall. The "canon" is the measuring tool given by Nature against which we compare our thoughts and speculations to decide if they are consistent with reality and with our feelings of pleasure and pain. It is not truth itself, but it is the way we decide whether our opinions comport with the outside world.

Much of the controversy between Stoics and Epicureans in the ancient world was about the proper use of "logic" and whether through logic alone we can reach some higher plane of supernatural insight. Epicurus said that there is no such higher plane, and he told us to look to the guidance of nature for all that is possible to us. The faculties contained in the canon are what Nature gave us by which to test all our thoughts and decision-making.

That's why the orthodox commentators rejected Dr. Glidden's articles so forcefully. The ancient Platonists, the Ancient Stoics --- and their modern successors -- know that if you have confidence in the guidance of Nature to live successfully, then you don't need their speculative logic and their manipulations to stand in their way. Epicurus' work on the canon, significantly including his work on prolepsis - is the key to breaking free of the Platonic idealistic and absolutist chains.

We can all profit by focusing on "how" to pursue pleasure and happiness prudently, but if we skip over the "why" then we are missing Epicurus' real contribution to philosophy.

So as we discuss where Dr. Glidden's insights lead us I think we should keep the analogy of this with the swerve firmly in mind.