

Prolepsis / Anticipations As Epicurus' Answer to the MENO Problem

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2024 at 2:33 PM

Another aspect of this issue of focusing on what is most important is as explained in Asimov's article "[The Relativity of Wrong](#)". The full article explains the point in detail and gives example after example to show how Asimov is correct, but this excerpt is probably the most concise statement of the Asimov's ultimate position:

Quote

The young specialist in English Lit, having quoted me, went on to lecture me severely on the fact that in every century people have thought they understood the Universe at last, and in every century they were proven to be wrong. It follows that the one thing we can say about our modern "knowledge" is that it is *wrong*.

The young man then quoted with approval what Socrates had said on learning that the Delphic oracle had proclaimed him the wisest man in Greece. "If I am the wisest man," said Socrates, "it is because I alone know that I know nothing." The implication was that I was very foolish because I knew a great deal.

Alas, none of this was new to me. (There is very little that is new to me; I wish my corresponders would realize this.) This particular thesis was addressed to me a quarter of a century ago by John Campbell, who specialized in irritating me. He also told me that all theories are proven wrong in time.

My answer to him was, "John, when people thought the Earth was flat, they were wrong. When people thought the Earth was spherical, they were wrong. But if you think that thinking the Earth is spherical is just as wrong as thinking the Earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together."

Our problem is that the view of the "young specialist in English" is the predominant position among "educated" people today. They are not certain of anything other than that it is impossible to be certain of anything - *that* they are certain of. And as Asimov is echoing Epicurus in saying, *that* is the most nonsensical position of all. Yes we should adopt the latest terminology whenever the audience is looking to hear views on the latest terminology, but what the vastly larger audience needs to hear is Epicurus' explanation of how knowledge is possible. For that an approximation of the physical details is what is called for, not an explanation of how the science is constantly changing which plays into the "young specialist in English's" position.

We routinely say that the earth is a "sphere" even though technically it's not. Whether we can call photons or sounds "particles" or "images" or "waves" is something that we can explain when the context calls for it, and when we want to talk about the latest details. But the big picture is that vision and the other senses, and the processing of the mind itself, work through "material means" rather than through supernatural or incomprehensible means. That point needs to be hit on in new ways that don't require us to go to Scientific American for the best ways to discuss them, and as far as I can see we can profitably talk about both "atoms" and "images" today even though those words have been replaced in strictly scientific jargon.

The real tragedy would be if someone who is otherwise motivated to produce responsive youtube videos or general interest articles explaining the benefits of the Epicurean perspective decided not to do so because they were concerned that "atoms" and "images" are the equivalent of saying that the world is flat. No one in this thread would urge that, but we're writing these threads not only for ourselves but for readers we don't even know, and that's why I belabor this point. By all means explain the differences between atoms and images and modern terminology, but don't let that interfere with the basic point that of all the philosophers in western civilization it was Epicurus who first pointed the way to a rational system of knowledge-building.