

God and the Atom by Victor Stenger: A Very Brief Review

Post by "Cassius" of February 21, 2020 at 6:20 PM

Very interesting. It will take someone a lot smarter than me to unwind all this, and I hope others will do so in the future. But given that summary I would expect Epicurus a position something like the following:

If Gleiser's conclusion motivates people to say

(1) "i don't know whether the universe popped into existence from nothing," rather than

(2) "the 'best' evidence of the senses is that nothing comes from nothing, I have to live by my senses, and I am going to take as persuasive that the universe as a whole is eternal because nothing comes from nothing."

.... then probably Epicurus would, and probably explicitly did in the form it existed in his day, hold that Geiser's theories would be logically invalid. I would expect him to see them as unverifiable though sensory evidence, and contradictory to the readily available evidence that everything we see around us comes from something else, and thus that Gliesser's position is damaging to the confidence of virtually all humans in their ability to live happily, and thus not a position to be encouraged.

Ultimately I think that's where this debate ends up. No matter how elaborate the theory, there is not going to be satisfactory "proof" of an answer indicating that it is not eternal, while substantial evidence for eternity is within the grasp of every ordinary human being. Some people may legitimately prefer to go through life holding "i don't know" because it gives them pleasure to contemplate "unanswerable" questions. I think we have plenty of evidence that there are many such people.

But "ordinary" people in order to have confidence in their place in the universe and their decisions on how to live want to choose from what appears to them to be the most persuasive of the possibly valid options, and I would think that Epicurus would and did encourage them not to undermine their worldview by pursuing logical constructs that contradict readily available evidence that may not be as complete as we would like (we haven't lived forever to see it) but which is totally consistent for the duration of our own ability to reliably observe.

I would expect Epicurus to argue that his position is both (1) the most logically sound, if we properly apply reasonable rules of evidence to what is allowable in the debate, and (2) the most consistent with the goal of living happily, which requires that we not believe in supernatural / arbitrary theories absent the most compelling of evidence in their favor. And he would not

admit that choice (2) amounts to choosing happiness over "truth" because he would argue that the logical arguments in favor of taking the "I don't know" position about the ultimate question are unsound.

Godfrey as you can probably tell I am just summarizing more my general conclusions about this subject to date more than anything else. I really appreciate your taking the time to read and summarize those two books!