

A Useful Analogy: The Preflight Checklist

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 9:14 AM

Not An End in Themselves, But a PREFLIGHT CHECKLIST



After you banish from your mind the false contentions that supernatural gods control your world, that you will live on after death to be rewarded or punished, and that "virtue" and "reason" have any use beyond pursuing Pleasure and avoiding Pain, it is still up to you blast off from that base.

*"Religion, so, is trampled underfoot, and by his victory, we reach the stars."
- Lucretius Book 1*

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 9:57 AM

Note to self: I like memes/graphics with astronauts in them. I think it should be very hard to reconcile "astronaut" with the idea that Epicurus preached quietism, passivism, minimalism, and seclusion.

Post by "Joshua" of September 15, 2019 at 4:51 PM

I like this analogy! You've also used my favorite translation of that line in Lucretius. It's less literal, but with the change from passive to active voice the final clause hits harder.

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 6:28 PM

Do you have a copy of the Rolfe Humphries version in full? That's the first one that really hit home to me, as it is the one used in the Audible.com version.

As with all of them there are high spots and low spots, and I think the Humphries version sometimes plays too fast and loose with the meaning. One example that immediately comes to mind is that he made major changes to the famous line about evil being caused by religion which I didn't see any use in doing at all:

Munro: "So great the evils to which religion could prompt!"

Bailey: "Such evil deeds could religion prompt."

Browne: "such Scenes of villainy Religion could inspire!"

Humphries: "A mighty counselor, Religion stood With all that power for wickedness" <<<<
That's just WEIRD! 😊

Even the name of the book from "The Nature of Things" to "The Way Things Are" -

- I actually like that, and think it helps convey the intent, but wow that is some literary license!

Post by "Joshua" of September 15, 2019 at 8:11 PM

I don't have a copy of that one other than on Audible, Cassius, but I agree with your assessment.

But the translation I use has its own problems (W. H. D. Rouse, from the Loeb Classical Library with facing Latin text). For example, Rouse's translation of that line runs thus; "So potent was Superstition in persuading to evil deeds."

He explains the substitution of Superstition for *religio* in a footnote, but I don't think it adequate.

Post by "Joshua" of September 15, 2019 at 8:35 PM

It occurs to me--and I think we're finally off topic now ;)--that the first translation of Lucretius I ever read was by A. E. Stallings from 2007. She attempted to capture the flow of the hexameter by casting it into Iambic Heptameter, a very unusually long line for English. In addition she employed modern idiom ("hot off the presses", in one example) and direct quotation from English Poets like Tennyson and Keats.

I recall finding it very jarring. That copy must have disappeared in the downsizing from my apartment to my truck.

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 9:20 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

He explains the substitution of Superstition for *religio* in a footnote, but I don't think it adequate.

Yes I have that version too, and yes I have always thought that "superstition" was a copout.

I don't think I have ever read the Stallings version, and I don't think I have a copy. I've eventually come to the view that for me there's probably not a single "best" version, and what makes the most sense is to be sure to check a literal one (Martin Ferguson Smith, or Bailey, or Munro) and then compare the other editions to see which option seems most consistent with what seems to be the main thrust of the philosophy. I've grown particularly pleased with the

1734 "Daniel Brown" edition due to some of its editorial decisions.

For example this line has always bothered me from Book 2:

Quote

Munro: "But if we see that these things are food for laughter and mere mockeries, and in good truth the fears of men and dogging cares dread not the clash of arms and cruel weapons, if unabashed they mix among kings and caesars and stand not in awe of the glitter from gold nor the brilliant sheen of the purple robe, how can you doubt that this is **wholly the prerogative of reason**, when the whole of life withal is a struggle in the dark?"

Bailey: "But if we see that these thoughts are mere mirth and mockery, and in very truth the fears of men and the cares that dog them fear not the clash of arms nor the weapons of war, but pass boldly among kings and lords of the world, nor dread the glitter that comes from gold nor the bright sheen of the purple robe, can you doubt that all such **power belongs to reason alone**, above all when the whole of life is but a struggle in darkness?"

I have always been suspicious of those two on the grounds that I think Epicurus would have been very slow to praise "reason alone" given his views of the role of reason vs the senses. It might be explainable by concluding that Lucretius was referring to "true reason" in the sense of reason tied to the senses, but I think I recall reading that there are instances where he refers to "true reason" but this Latin doesn't include that modifier.

For that reason I prefer the Daniel Browne version:

Quote

But if these things are vain and all grimace, and the truth is that nor the fears of men, nor following cares fly from the sound of alarms or cruel darts, but boldly force their way among the kings and mighty of the earth; nor do they homage pay to shining gold, nor the gay splendor of a purple robe. Do you doubt but all this stuff is **want of sense**, and all our life is groping in the dark?

I can't recall tonight that I have looked back to see what the Latin looks like, and I am not good enough at Latin to have a strong opinion, but the Daniel Browne translator seems to have my same concern and came up with wording that avoids implying that "logic" or "reason in the abstract" are the things to which to look for a final answer.

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 9:40 PM

Here's another particular important passage that has always to me had a troublesome translation, from Book 4. Munro and Bailey seem fairly understandable, but awkward. Humphries (as we referenced before) seems to go over the top with his "idiotic" comment.

But maybe the most difficult of the phrasing is the reference to "false senses" at the end of the line. "False senses" or any phrase similar to that jumps out at me as a huge red flag of possible confusion. Once again it seems to me that the Daniel Browne translator feels the same concern I do, and his "false representation of the senses" gives us a limiting word that helps explain that it is not the senses that are false, but our conclusions based on them. And to me that is a HUGE point of clarification which even Munro, who I think is the considerably more sympathetic to Epicurus than Bailey or Humphries, fails to make. So my practice nowadays is to compare any translation that I find to any degree questionable against the Daniel Browne version.

Quote

Munro:

And if reason shall be unable to explain away the cause why things which close at hand were square, at a distance looked round, it yet is better, if you are at a loss for the reason, to state erroneously the causes of each shape than to let slip from your grasp on any side things manifest and ruin the groundwork of belief and wrench up all the foundations on which rest life and existence. For not only would all reason give way, life itself would at once fall to the ground, unless you choose to trust the senses and shun precipices and all things else of this sort that are to be avoided, and to pursue the opposite things. All that host of words then be sure is quite unmeaning which has been drawn out in array against the senses. Once more, as in a building, if the rule first applied is wry, and the square is untrue and swerves from its straight lines, and if there is the slightest hitch in any part of the level, all the construction must be faulty, all must be wry, crooked, sloping, leaning forwards, leaning backwards, without symmetry, so that some parts seem ready to fall, others do fall, ruined all by the first erroneous measurements; so too all reason of things must needs prove to you distorted and false, which is founded on false senses.

Bailey:

Therefore, whatever they have perceived on each occasion, is true. And if reason is unable to unravel the cause, why those things which close at hand were square, are seen round from a distance, still it is better through lack of reasoning to be at fault in accounting for the causes of either shape, rather than to let things clear seen slip

abroad from your grasp, and to assail the grounds of belief, and to pluck up the whole foundations on which life and existence rest. For not only would all reasoning fall away; life itself too would collapse straightway, unless you chose to trust the senses, and avoid headlong spots and all other things of this kind which must be shunned, and to make for what is opposite to these. Know, then, that all this is but an empty store of words, which has been drawn up and arrayed against the senses. Again, just as in a building, if the first ruler is awry, and if the square is wrong and out of the straight lines, if the level sags a whit in any place, it must needs be that the whole structure will be made faulty and crooked, all awry, bulging, leaning forwards or backwards, and out of harmony, so that some parts seem already to long to fall, or do fall, all betrayed by the first wrong measurements; even so then your reasoning of things must be awry and false, which all springs from false senses.

Humphries:

And if your reasoning faculties can find

No explanation why a thing looks square

When seen close up, and round when farther off,

Even so, it might be better for a man

Who lacks the power of reason, to give out

Some idiotic theory, than to drop

All hold of basic principles, break down

Every foundation, tear apart the frame

That holds our lives, our welfare. All is lost

Not only reason, but our very life,

Unless we have the courage and the nerve

To trust the senses,

If a building

Were planned by someone with a crooked ruler

Or an inaccurate square, or spirit-level

A little out of true, the edifice,
In consequence, would be a frightful mess,
Warped, wobbly, wish-wash, weak and wavering,
Waiting a welter of complete collapse -
So let your rule of reason never be
Distorted by the fallacies of sense
Lest all your logic prove a road to ruin.

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So here again I like Browne, which seems to me at least a little more clear:

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.

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 17, 2019 at 4:50 PM

I mentioned it in passing at the end of July, but a large section of Kennedy's "Moon Speech" to Rice University really encourages Epicurean attitudes, so I whole-heartedly agree that astronauts are great points of focus to use.

ERGO VIVIDA VIS ANIMI PERVICIT ET EXTRA
PROCESSIT LONGE FLAMMANTIA MOENIA MUNDI
ATQUE OMNE IMMENSUM PERAGRAVIT MENTE ANIMOQUE

De Rerum Natura; I : 72-74

Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2019 at 5:48 PM

Nate that is a very interesting point of reference. Do you have a place where you refer to that speech in writing, or do you watch it on youtube. If you have a preferred place to review it let me know as I would like to go back and check it out. Not sure I have heard anything but the shortest of quotes from it (is that where he said "before this decade is out.... put a man on the moon and return him safely to the earth...." ?

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 17, 2019 at 10:11 PM

Absolutely--I watch it for encouragement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZyRbnpGyzQ>

(The language contains *some* seeds of nationalism, so I'm including the bits that inspire me, regardless of national identity; and, I think, the attitude can inspire others as well.)

With regards to Epicurean philosophy, it particularly reminds me of the courage and boldness of Epicurus to have founded a school against the prevailing ideologies of the time, and the hardships against which he struggled.

*"We meet at a college noted for **knowledge**, in a city noted for progress, in a State noted for strength, and we stand in need of all three, for we meet in an hour of change and challenge, in a decade of hope and fear, in an age of both knowledge and ignorance. [...] condense, if you will, the 50,000 years of man's recorded history in a time span of but a half-century. Stated in these terms, we know very little about the first 40 years, except at the end of them advanced man had learned to use the skins of animals to cover them. Then about 10 years ago, under this standard, man emerged from his caves to construct other kinds of shelter. Only five years ago man learned to write and use a cart with wheels. Christianity began less than two years ago. The printing press came this year, and then less than two months ago, during this whole*

50-year span of human history, the steam engine provided a new source of power. Newton explored the meaning of gravity. Last month electric lights and telephones and automobiles and airplanes became available. Only last week did we develop penicillin and television and nuclear power, and now if America's new spacecraft succeeds in reaching Venus, we will have literally reached the stars before midnight tonight. [...] Surely the opening vistas of space promise high costs and hardships, as well as high reward. So **it is not surprising that some would have us stay where we are a little longer to rest, to wait.** But [...] this [...] was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them [but] by those who moved forward - and so will space.

William Bradford, speaking in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, said that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with **answerable courage.** [...] **man, in his quest for knowledge and progress, is determined and cannot be deterred.** [...] **it is one of the great adventures of all time** [...] We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained [...] But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain? [...] **We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon** in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, **but because they are hard,** because **that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills,** because **that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win,** and the others, too. [...] The growth of our science and education will be enriched by new knowledge of our universe and environment, by new techniques of learning and mapping and observation, by new tools and computers for industry, medicine, the home as well as the school. [...] if I were to say, my fellow citizens, that we shall send to the moon, 240,000 miles away from the control station in Houston, a giant rocket more than 300 feet tall, the length of this football field, made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented, capable of standing heat and stresses several times more than have ever been experienced, fitted together with a precision better than the finest watch, carrying all the equipment needed for propulsion, guidance, control, communications, food and survival, on an untried mission, to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to earth, re-entering the atmosphere at speeds of over 25,000 miles per hour, causing heat about half that of the temperature of the sun [...] and do all this, and do it right, and do it first before this decade is out - **then we must be bold.** [...] Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, "**Because it is there.**" Well, **space is there, and we're going to climb it,** and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there. [...]"

Post by "Joshua" of September 17, 2019 at 10:55 PM

That is a powerful speech, Nate. Thank you for posting it! I think the success of the Apollo Program was a key moment for the idea of cosmopolitanism. It was a good day to be, not just an American, but a "citizen of the world".

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2019 at 10:00 AM

I haven't had a chance to watch this yet but thanks Nate! I will! Thanks!

Post by "Cassius" of September 20, 2019 at 6:57 AM

Wow there is a lot of good stuff in that speech on exactly the point you say Nate! Now there is also a lot of "politics" that I think would be beyond the scope and interest our our Epicurean studies to explore, but you are very right to cite the key points that you did. I especially like this one:

[Quote from Nate](#)

. So it is not surprising that some would have us stay where we are a little longer to rest, to wait. But [...] this [...] was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them [but] by those who moved forward - and so will space.

That seems to me to circle around the great debate we need to have in Epicurean philosophy - whether life is ONLY about resting (as some advocate) or whether action (pleasurable action) is at least as important as rest. Both "rest" and "action" can be pleasurable, so we need both, but to imply that "action" is somehow non-Epicurean is the road back into the cave.

Post by "Cassius" of September 20, 2019 at 2:12 PM

Or to ask that question another way, are not these guys who extol "Ataraxia" as the ultimate life essentially ruling out (and looking down on) the choice to be an astronaut as a career? Or really, pursuing any hobby or lifestyle or choice that entails significant risk? I think that's the

logical conclusion demanded by their train of thought, and I can't imagine that Epicurus would have agreed with that. The whole train of thought seems to me like a negligent (or more likely *intentional*) bastardization of what Epicurus taught.

Post by “Elli” of September 27, 2019 at 2:17 PM

Nice speech indeed. I would like to repeat these phrases of the speech :

"Only five years ago man learned to write and use a cart with wheels".....
[Kennedy's speech maker forgot to mention something important between the centuries/years]....."Christianity began less than two years ago".

Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2019 at 2:19 PM

That's right! It only seems like yesterday that the almighty god and supreme ruler of the universe woke up, discovered his mistaken creation, and sent his son to be crucified in a painful death to straighten it all out!!

How time flies when you are having fun!

Post by “Elli” of September 27, 2019 at 2:32 PM



The architectural columns of Hellas

Post by “Martin” of September 28, 2019 at 4:15 AM

Thanks for sharing Kennedy's inspiring speech in this fitting context, Nate.

The "seeds of nationalism" in there did not appear to be excessive after listening to it once.