

Epicurean Outlooks on Skepticism

Post by "A_Gardner" of October 20, 2020 at 11:04 AM

Good morning all,

In my current philosophy course I'm having to write a paper on the subject of Philosophical Skepticism. After looking at a brief overview of Pyrrhonism and how Skepticism is used as the basis for the scientific method, I wanted to make a post asking for arguments both for and against this school of thought.

If I recall correctly, i think I've seen it here mentioned Epicurus was a Dogmatist as his teachings were concerned, so he may have argued against Skepticism, considering they were both Hellenistic schools of philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of October 20, 2020 at 11:35 AM

Yes A_Gardner, Epicurus definitely argued against skepticism, and this is a fascinating topic.

It would probably help to make the conversation better if you would elaborate on what you are specifically thinking right now in your mind as to the key issues that make up the debate. What is "skepticism" exactly? "Dogmatism" is a word with nasty connotations today, but what exactly do we mean by "dogmatism?"

In the meantime as food for thought and always good to remember, here is perhaps the most explicit statement in the surviving texts, from Lucretius Book 4. I usually start this quote with "Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing...." but by starting earlier it is easy to see that Epicurus/Lucretius both understood the issues with the senses but also affirmed that regardless of those issues, they are our key to "truth". This is the 1743 Browne edition:

"[421] Observe, when your mettled horse stands still with you in the middle of a river, and you look down upon the rapid stream of the water, the force of the current seems to drive your horse violently upwards, and hurry you swiftly against the tide; and on which side soever you cast your eyes, all things seem to be borne along, and carried against the current in the same manner.

A long portico, though it be of equal breadth from one end to the other, and reaches far, supported by pillars of equal height, yet when you stand at one end to take a view of its whole extent, it contracts itself by degrees to a narrow point at the further end; the roof touches the floor, and both sides seem to meet, til it terminates at last in the sharp figure of a dark cone.

The sun, to Mariners, seems to rise out of the sea, and there again to set and hide his light; for they see nothing but the water and the sky; but therefore you are not to conclude rashly that the senses are at all deceived.

To those who know nothing of the sea, a ship in the port seems disabled, and to strive against the waves with broken oars; for that part of the oar and of the rudder that is above the water appears straight, but all below, being refracted, seems to be turned upwards, and to be bent towards the top of the water, and to float almost upon the surface of it.

So when the winds drive the light clouds along the sky in the night, the moon and stars seem to fly against the clouds, and to be driven above them in a course quite opposite to that in which they naturally move.

And if you chance to press with your fingers under one of your eyes, the effect will be that every thing you look upon will appear double, every bright candle will burn with two flames, and all the furniture of the house will multiply and show double; every face about you, and every body, will look like two.

Next, when sleep has bound our limbs in sweet repose, and all the body lies dissolved in rest, we think ourselves awake; our members move, and in the gloomy darkness of the night we think we see the sun in broad day-light, and, though confined in bed, we wander over the heavens, the sea, the rivers, and the hills, and fancy we are walking through the plains. And sounds we seem to hear; and, though the tongue be still, we seem to speak, when the deep silence of night reigns all about us.

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) from whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what

was it that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

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."

Post by “Cassius” of October 20, 2020 at 2:14 PM

I had a minute to come back to this: I think the reason that defining the term is so important is that there's an "everyday" meaning of the word Skepticism in which it's fair to say that we all should be skeptics, and clearly Epicurus was one too. It's essential that we demand evidence for our conclusions and that we don't accept things on "faith" without evidence. In that ordinary sense of the word skepticism is totally the right approach (speaking loosely there).

But philosophical skepticism that no knowledge of any kind is possible is a very different animal, and it's my understanding that THAT is what philosophers are talking about when they are being precise, and it's pretty easy to see that that position is what Epicurus/Lucretius were aiming their argument quoted above to mean.

So we have here another situation that if we're talking to real people in the real world, "skepticism" means one thing, but to professional philosophers it means something very different, so we have to be clear what we're talking about.

Exactly the same thing goes for "dogmatism." Dogmaticism in general use has awful meanings, but if it is taken philosophically to mean that at least some things can be grasped with enough certainty to consider them "knowable" then Epicurus was certainly a dogmatist.

Post by “Joshua” of October 20, 2020 at 11:29 PM

A few years ago Elon Musk made headlines by using his platform to mainstream the proposition that we actually live in an elaborate matrix-like computer simulation. The argument is fairly straightforward—if there's only one prime 'reality', and, further, if we assume that it's possible to simulate other pseudo-realities an infinite number of times within that reality, then the probability is that we live in one of the infinite simulations rather than the *one* non-simulation.

The argument that Cassius mentions above from Lucretius seems to apply equally here; if it were true that we existed in a simulation, then our knowledge could have no foundation. It's just a simulation experiencing itself as a simulation. And if our knowledge had no foundation, there would be nothing to justify the initial two premises of Musk's argument, rendering it self-defeating.

One does have to start somewhere. Epicurus starts with the senses. It's true that we have to accept that the information relayed by the senses is valid dogmatically. To start with the material, as reported by the senses, is to start with the obvious.

That answer might not be very satisfying, but unless you start somewhere, you don't get anywhere.

Quote

To refute the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist all that you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head: if he ducks he's a liar. His logic may be airtight but his argument, far from revealing the delusions of living experience, only exposes the limitations of logic.

—Edward Abbey

Post by “Cassius” of October 21, 2020 at 9:25 AM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

The argument is fairly straightforward—if there's only one prime 'reality', and, further, if we assume that it's possible to simulate other pseudo-realities an infinite number of times within that reality, then the probability is that we live in one of the infinite simulations rather than the one non-simulation.

Probably if there were an Epicurean school somewhere, high on the curriculum would be a course on "spotting logical fallacies" so that when we get confronted with a series of "Ifs" like this we have plenty of practice in spotting exactly where the reasonable possibilities stop and the unreasonable possibilities begin.

In fact even in writing that sentence I suspect that it is phrased wrong -- the issue is probably not well expressed as "reasonable" vs "unreasonable" because today there is no necessary implication that "reasonable" has anything to do with reality.

Probably unpacking these problems has something to do with stressing and making clear to everyone that "reason alone" in the sense of syllogistic logic is a dramatically wrong place to start in analyzing these issues. It is possible to postulate all sorts of things that do not exist in reality, and then build tremendously detailed systems on these postulates, all of which have absolutely nothing to do with reality and no command for our respect whatsoever.

Finding ways to dramatize that observation, and then drilling that into people, would probably be first-grade material for the opening day of Epicurean Class at Epicurus College!

Post by “A_Gardner” of October 21, 2020 at 2:27 PM

Thank you for your responses so far, and I'll be sure to come back when I am able to further refine my question regarding the Epicurean arguments against the Skeptics. [Cassius](#)

When I initially typed it out the other day, I was still embroiled in writing the paper for my philosophy class, where I was to defend the assertions of the Pyrrhonists, that although we can gain enough knowledge in order to act upon our environment, we can never truly know anything for certain. This was at least espoused by later Pyrrhonists in my research, as I'm sure you had those that took it to the logical extreme and became unable to make any decisions if you go down such a rabbit hole! 😊

That being said, having interest in both science and philosophy, it seems that some ideas of Skepticism in general have not only survived, but became the basis of the scientific method, and it seems that throughout history, fragments of Pyrrhonism have gone hand in hand with Materialism, which historically speaking if they identified as Materialist, they would often trace some of their ideas back Epicurean teachings.

Post by “Cassius” of October 21, 2020 at 3:57 PM

There is no doubt that there has been a lot of connection between people who are loosely defined as small-s skeptics and those who are Epicureans. The issue I think is that the Pyrrhonists are guilty of trying to have their cake and eat it too - they are willing to accept that they are able to gain sufficient data to act, but they deny (or imply) that the data sufficient to act constitutes "knowledge." This is one of the many areas where it is essential to be clear about the meaning of the words. The Pyrrhonists seem to want to assert that unless one has omniscience and effective omnipotence, then their opinion about what is "known" cannot ever reach a level where it should be considered as truly "known" under their view of the meaning of that word.

I interpret Epicurus as considering that to be a word game worthy of dismissal out of hand, and worse than that, as an affirmative obstacle to ever having the kind of confidence that is required to live life as happily as is possible for someone who understands the realities of the world. The reality of the world is that supernatural gods and omniscience do not exist, and it is foolhardy and a lie to assert that only such a being with those qualities is entitled to consider their opinions to be "known." Epicurus' epistemology is geared toward identifying a standard of certainty that is appropriate for reality, and for our reality as human beings.

There is a lot of this material in DeWitt, A_Gardner, that would be worth reading, because DeWitt asserts (I think correctly) that Epicurus put his finger on this as one of the worst possible philosophies to have., along with hard determinism, as they both guarantee that a person will be plagued with unnecessary doubts as to whether it is even possible to have confidence that

happy living is ever possible. There are plenty of obstacles in the world that truly stand in the way of happiness without inventing word games by which confidence in being happy is by definition impossible.