

Is reality real? (from Big Think)

Post by “Don” of January 10, 2022 at 12:56 PM

Thoughts?

https://youtu.be/RZdfE_7cde0

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2022 at 1:01 PM

Without even watching more than a few minutes I think I will move this into Epistemology where it is directly on point. The video section is logical but we probably need this more as a basic epistemology post.

This is definitely a topic where we need to understand Epicurus' perspective and how he dealt with these questions.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2022 at 1:12 PM

OK I listened to the whole thing, and I think it raises a lot of important questions, which is good.

But it really doesn't suggest anything concrete as to the significance of what is being discussed, which is bad.

That's where Epicurus' views of "true" and "real" and "the senses" and "skepticism" and "dogmatism" and "knowledge" are so important.

Otherwise the layman listens to a presentation like this and thinks: "OMG they are saying the world isn't real! They're saying nothing is true! From which it's easy to jump to "Awe nothing matters!" and "Let's jump off that cliff" or "step in front of train" -- those things aren't "real" anyway.

It's the role of philosophy to straighten out thinking on these issues.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2022 at 1:18 PM

A large part of this discussion relates to the issues discussed in Book 4 of Lucretius, leading up to this section:

Quote

[469] Again, if any one thinks that nothing is known, he knows not whether that can be known either, since he admits that he knows nothing. Against him then I will refrain from joining issue, who plants himself with his head in the place of his feet. And yet were I to grant that he knows this too, yet I would ask this one question; since he has never before seen any truth in things, whence does he know what is knowing, and not knowing each in turn, what thing has begotten the concept of the true and the false, what thing has proved that the doubtful differs from the certain?

[478] You will find that the concept of the true is begotten first from the senses, and that the senses cannot be gainsaid. For something must be found with a greater surety, which can of its own authority refute the false by the true. Next then, what must be held to be of greater surety than sense? Will reason, sprung from false sensation, avail to speak against the senses, when it is wholly sprung from the senses? For unless they are true, all reason too becomes false. Or will the ears be able to pass judgement on the eyes, or touch on the ears? or again will the taste in the mouth refute this touch; will the nostrils disprove it, or the eyes show it false? It is not so, I trow. For each sense has its faculty set apart, each its own power, and so it must needs be that we perceive in one way what is soft or cold or hot, and in another the diverse colors of things, and see all that goes along with color. Likewise, the taste of the mouth has its power apart; in one way smells arise, in another sounds. And so it must needs be that one sense cannot prove another false. Nor again will they be able to pass judgement on themselves, since equal trust must at all times be placed in them. Therefore, whatever they have perceived on each occasion, is true.

[500] 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.

[513] 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.

Which is not to simply respond "Yes reality is real" but to say that before you can answer that question you need to be very precise about the definition of "real," and think about how your conclusions about what "real" mean are going to impact your attitude toward your life.

Also relevant to the role of philosophy in straightening out these issues is one of the best Seneca letters, much more Epicurean than Stoic: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_of_Seneca/Book_1/Letter_48 (Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbour's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. **8.** Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy mankind. You have promised to help those in peril by sea, those in captivity, the sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. **9.** Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.)

Post by "Matt" of January 10, 2022 at 2:39 PM

I haven't had a chance to watch this yet, but this is something that I would really enjoy discussing. I'll jump on later.

Post by "Don" of January 10, 2022 at 2:49 PM

I'm honestly not sure how I feel about the content of the video 🤔; however, it seemed very appropriate for discussion here. I'll be interested to see where this thread goes.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 10, 2022 at 3:20 PM

A few snippets from the video:

"There is no all encompassing perspective that gives me all of the information about a situation."

--"transperspectivism" - "the way to seek an understanding of truth through other perspectives/traditions and incorporating them into our own"

Also it goes on to say: "Science's belief in objective truth works."

And then toward the end says "asking different questions requires different ways of processing the underlying reality" and this is in regard to understanding the human mind.

To the question: "Do we see the world accurately?" This thought came up for me: watching the scene with a man walking through an alley that has graffiti covered walls -- as we observe reality, can we separate our feelings (pleasure or aversion) and judgements of "right/wrong" or "good/bad" about an observation...can we separate this from our sensory observation of the barest of facts about the situation? So this would be analogous of "What does the video camera see?" --- and this would be a kind of objectivity that could be corroborated with other human beings. (This was not in any way addressed in the above video).

@Cassius...Does Epicurean philosophy say anything about "objectivity separate from judgement"? (In the way I just explained in the above paragraph).

And if so, how would you very briefly state that?

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2022 at 3:49 PM

I watched it...before I dive in deeper I want to make one initial comment.

It's interesting how they are setting up the narrative as if our human existence is somehow not a part of the "objective" universe. Like a dualistic human consciousness and perception reality

that is artificial and deceived by our senses. I think this is a mistake....my reality is a part of the objective reality. I'm made of the same things as the rest of the objective universe so my perception of them is true. My perception may be different than another person or animal, but my perception is true and real. All data perceived by any observation is perceived through a conscious process. So portraying objective reality as a mysterious incalculable "other" seems like an attention grabber....almost like positing multiverses....there's no evidential proof, but it's fun to theorize. But too much speculation can lead down a path of superstition.

Post by "Matt" of January 10, 2022 at 3:51 PM

I have more to say on this....

Post by "Cassius" of January 10, 2022 at 3:57 PM

Book 4 of Lucretius is all about illusions and other distortions that appear to us, yet despite that confirms that the senses are all we have so that all reasoning still ultimately rests on the senses.

Add to that the previously stated earlier in the poem observations that the universe has no center, and no edge, and no beginning (or end) and you have the elements for concluding that the search for any perspective of objectivity from "outside" the universe or by a creator or from a center or a point of origin is impossible. You therefore eliminate the possibility of a standard of omniscience or a single "absolute" answer as the test of "truth."

That leaves repeatability as the ultimate test of the senses and what is real to us - what is confirmed through repeated observation is what is "real."

You have to assemble these thoughts from various places in Herodotus, Diogenes Laertius, Oinoanda (who states that the Flux exists but it is not so fast that our senses cannot make sense of it.) and various other places (Torquatus, Sextus Empiricus). From all of them together you can assemble Epicurus' viewpoint that there is a reality apart from the observer, but the senses (which are the mechanism of getting info about that reality) have to be understood so you can assemble the data into something meaningful to you.

But you yourself are a combination of matter and void in constant motion, so we accept that there are limits on the accuracy of observation and that neither we nor the thing being

observed are eternally the same.

The big issue underlying all this is not to let the realization of this truth throw you into nihilism and despondency or to thinking that your life is somehow worthless or worth less because of it. The whole contention that anything (like ideas or virtue or Jehovah) is eternally existing without change and is the proper standard of objective truth is nonsense and a sham in the first place.

I think that is the real issue that bothers people. Epicurus rejects the absolutist worldview and this disconcerts them, but he does not stop there as videos like this do. Instead Epicurus points to the correct answer on which we can build a successful life. It's really almost a religious life or death issue and that comes out in the the intensity of part Of Book 4 I quoted above. Toying with nihilism is not innocent fun. The person who tells you that nothing is knowable is not just wrong, he is a manipulative fraud with an upside down worldview (puts his head where his feet should be). That's very similar to the person who says it would be better to never have been born, or to take a "bring it on" attitude toward death, as Epicurus denounces in the letter to Menoeceus.

This is explosive stuff that Epicurus thought was worth fighting over just like determinism or false religion.

And thus the "canon of truth" was referred to as if Epicurus brought it down from heaven, due to its importance.

Post by "Matt" of January 10, 2022 at 4:21 PM

I guess my question is this...by what standard is someone saying that there are imperceptible things If they themselves have not in some way perceived them through scientific instrumentation etc. and then finally through their own senses? It's like an infinite regression, everything must be perceived by us for it to be known.

So seeing the aggregated beam of light, though I don't see every individual photon, I still see all the photons in the aggregate beam. Because I don't see all the individual photons it's somehow mysteriously inaccessible because my senses don't see all the individual parts? Yet I do see them! And the light is objectively real. I think this is a weird skewed way of perceiving reality....we are a part of it.

Our perception is real, though it may not be always consistent. A coat rack in a dark room may appear to be a man, it may cause us a disturbance. We may perceive it as a man...but when the light is turned on the coat rack is revealed to be just an object. Our perception is real because regardless of what it "actually" is our reaction via our perception is real.

Our perception may be different or maybe our identification of something might be mistaken, but our perception of it is “real”...I guess but what other standard would someone judge? There are no other arbiters of what is real other than what conscious humans perceive.

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2022 at 4:52 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

There are no other arbiters of what is real other than what conscious humans perceive.

And that's where Epicurean philosophy breaks ranks with just about everyone else (almost certainly with all the other philosophies and religions of the ancient world, and probably most of them today).

Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2022 at 6:20 PM

Also i think in further response to your comment Matt that it is pretty easy for us to recognize that the revealed religions are spouting nonsense, but not so easy to recognize that this is pretty much exactly what the "Academics" are trying to do through "logic" too.

We would have a lot more allies in the Academic world if the professional philosophers weren't trying to arrogate to themselves the same status of proclaiming what 'the good' is through geometry/math/abstract logic, just like Pythagorus and Plato were doing.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2022 at 6:31 PM

Very true, it's definitely a fine line here between awe for the magnitude and behavior of the knowable/perceptible universe and fear of some mysteriously inaccessible reality that we can't perceive...but only certain academics (a new priesthood) can. I don't want this to be perceived as anti-science, but there is a “lane” that scientist need to stay in and not attempt to use scientific speculation (like multiverses and bubble universes) to lead people with sensationalism into thinking that the mysteries are incalculable and that we as ordinary people can't know

what truth is.

Post by “Matt” of January 10, 2022 at 6:34 PM

If there are ineffable realities, then they will remain ineffable...if at some point we perceive them, they were never ineffable to begin with and simply part of one unified objective reality.

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 11, 2022 at 1:48 PM

[Quote from Matt](#)

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[Quote from Cassius](#)

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therefore eliminate the possibility of a standard of omniscience or a single "absolute" answer as the test of "truth."

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The following Principle Doctrines 23, 24...seem to apply to this discussion:

Quote

If you fight against all your perceptions,
23. you will have nothing to refer to in judging those which you declare to be false. [note]

If you reject a perception outright and do not distinguish between your opinion about what will happen after, what came before, your feelings, and all the layers of imagination involved in your thoughts,
24. opinions; as a result, you will reject the very criterion of truth. And if when forming concepts from your opinions you treat as confirmed everything that will happen and what you do not witness thereafter, then you will not avoid what is false, so that you will remove all argument and all judgment about what is and is not correct.

εἰ μαχῆ πάσαις ταῖς αἰσθήσεσιν, οὐχ ἔξεις οὐδ' ἄς ἂν φῆς αὐτῶν διεψεῦσθαι πρὸς τί ποιούμενος τὴν ἀγωγὴν κρίνης.

εἰ τιν' ἐκβαλεῖς ἀπλῶς αἰσθησιν καὶ μὴ διαιρήσεις τὸ δοξαζόμενον καὶ τὸ προσμένον καὶ τὸ παρὸν ἤδη κατὰ τὴν αἰσθησιν καὶ τὰ πάθη καὶ πᾶσαν φανταστικὴν ἐπιβολὴν τῆς διανοίας, συνταράξεις καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς αἰσθήσεις τῆ ματαίῳ δόξῃ, ὥστε τὸ κριτήριον ἅπαν ἐκβαλεῖς· εἰ δὲ βεβαιώσεις καὶ τὸ προσμένον ἅπαν ἐν ταῖς δοξαστικαῖς ἐννοίαις καὶ τὸ μὴ τὴν ἐπιμαρτύρησιν <ἔχον>, οὐκ ἐκλείψεις τὸ διεψευσμένον, ὡς τετηρηκῶς ἔση πᾶσαν ἀμφισβήτησιν κατὰ πᾶσαν κρίσιν τοῦ ὀρθῶς ἢ μὴ ὀρθῶς.

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 2:10 PM

Yes exactly Kalosyni. That's the ultimate point and probably why that made it into the [principal doctrines](#). If you argue that perceptions are invalid then you have no frame of reference to conclude that anything is certain or even knowable at all.

This is one of those that makes sense to read together to try to figure out the ultimate points. Clearly one basic point is that the perceptions of the senses are the ultimate evidence that any

knowledge has to be based on. As to 24 he seems then to be hammering home the point that we know that multiple perceptions can end up pointing in different directions, and so we always have to keep a bright line distinction in our mind that some things we have enough evidence to be certain about, but some we aren't, and we can't confuse the two together.

And that gets back to the references on how we distinguish something as true:

Quote

From Dlogenes Laertius: "for all reason is dependent upon sensations; nor can one sensation refute another, for we attend to them all alike. Again, the fact of apperception confirms the truth of the sensations.

That's Bailey and I see he uses the word "apperception" which might in fact might be a terrible word choice. We need [Don](#) here but it's my understanding from reading commentators is that "apperception" is a more modern word (see [here](#)) and that the better interpretation of this statement is simply that the senses guarantee themselves. In other words you guarantee the truth of the conclusion that the oar is not bent by removing it from the water and looking again, or the truth of the fact that the tower is square and not round by walking closer to the tower and looking at it up close, with the result that the truth of the senses is established by USING them, over and over, and then checking to see if the result is the same or different. For example, YONGE, which says that it is "the reality and evidence of sensation that confirms the certainty of the senses.":

us equally. Again, the reason cannot pronounce on the senses ; for we have already said that all reasoning has the senses for its foundation. Reality and the evidence of sensation establish the certainty of the senses ; for the impressions of sight and hearing are just as real, just as evident, as pain.

Mensch:

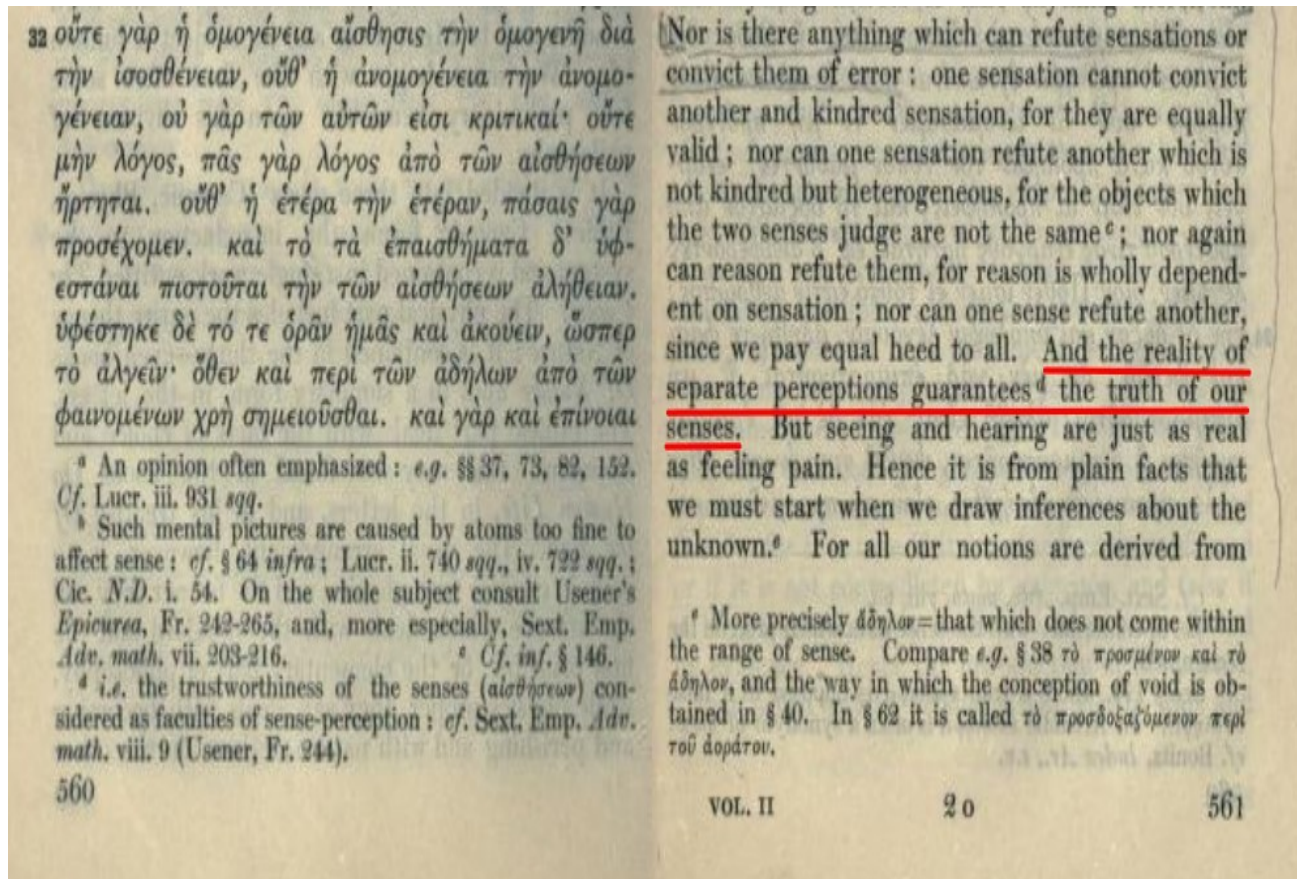
all reason is derived from sensation. Nor is any one of the senses superior to another, since we pay heed to them all. And the fact that our perceptions exist guarantees the truth of our sensations; for seeing and hearing are as real to us as feeling pain." Hence, it is from phenomena that we must draw inferences about nonevident realities. For all our thoughts are derived from sensation, either by

But I would argue it is clear that the bottom line is that the truth of the concepts we form is squarely dependent upon the observations of our senses, and that's why it is nonsensical and circular to argue that anticipations ARE concepts (as Bailey seems to do).

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 2:35 PM

I think this is where I got the idea that the best meaning is "repeated" or "separate" perceptions: [this is Hicks in the Loeb edition](#). "And the reality of separate perceptions guarantees the truth of our senses."

I better wait for [Don](#) to weigh in before thinking too much about Bailey's version drives my blood pressure too high!



Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 2:39 PM

This is part of the relevant discussion from Torquatus:

Quote

He judged that the logic of your school possesses no efficacy either for the amelioration of life or for the facilitation of debate. He laid the greatest stress on natural science. That branch of knowledge enables us to realize clearly the force of words and the

natural conditions of speech and the theory of consistent and contradictory expressions ; and when we have learned the constitution of the universe we are relieved of superstition, are emancipated from the dread of death, are not agitated through ignorance of phenomena, from which ignorance, more than any thing else, terrible panics often arise ; finally, our characters will also be improved when we have learned what it is that nature craves. Then again if we grasp a firm knowledge of phenomena, and uphold that canon, which almost fell from heaven into human ken, that test to which we are to bring all our judgments concerning things, we shall never succumb to any man's eloquence and abandon our opinions.

[64] Moreover, unless the constitution of the world is thoroughly understood, we shall by no means be able to justify the verdicts of our senses. Further, our mental perceptions all arise from our sensations; and if these are all to be true, as the system of Epicurus proves to us, then only will cognition and perception become possible. Now those who invalidate sensations and say that perception is altogether impossible, cannot even clear the way for this very argument of theirs when they have thrust the senses aside. Moreover, when cognition and knowledge have been invalidated, every principle concerning the conduct of life and the performance of its business becomes invalidated. So from natural science we borrow courage to withstand the fear of death, and firmness to face superstitious dread, and tranquillity of mind, through the removal of ignorance concerning the mysteries of the world, and self-control, arising from the elucidation of the nature of the passions and their different classes, and as I shewed just now, our leader again has established the canon and criterion of knowledge and thus has imparted to us a method for marking off falsehood from truth.

Post by "Don" of January 11, 2022 at 3:33 PM

I'm seeing a definition of apperception as:

the mental process by which a person makes "sense of an idea by assimilating it to the body of ideas he or she already possesses."

LSJ just glosses the word as "perceptions"

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἐπαίσθημα](#)

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2022 at 3:48 PM

Yes I am thinking there is a strong possibility that the Greek wording focuses on perceptions, as LSJ indicate, and that it is Bailey who makes it into something implying the involvement of concepts and ideas, much as he translates anticipations / prolepsis as "concepts"