

On Where The Boundaries Of Proper Discussion At EpicureanFriends And In Open Forums May Exist (AKA - To What Extent Is "Direct Realism" Relevant to Epicurean Philosophy?)

Post by "Cassius" of February 12, 2022 at 1:52 PM

I originally posted about this thread in a private discussion, but I'd like to move it here for discussion under "Community Standards." The topic is essentially something like this:

"To what extent should open Epicurean discussions devote themselves to extremely technical issues that only those most deeply interested in technical philosophy or psychology would likely be interested?"

This past week over at the Epicurean Friends facebook group - where most of the participants are much more generalist and less "advanced" in Epicurean studies than our group here - I approved for discussion [the post from which I will quote here for discussion](#). I should also note that over there we have such a wide variety of readers that we "approve" posts before they go live. Here at EpicureanFriends, in contrast, we "vet" participants much more rigorously at the beginning, so once you get approved as a member and post a little about yourself we don't attempt to moderate posts before they go live.

I approved this post asking about "Direct Realism" even though I realized it was technical and even though I didn't recognize the poster. Unexpectedly, a number of people who also had never or rarely posted before got into a heated discussion about details of epistemology that I feel sure were lost on the great majority of readers. The discussion quickly turned into the type of philosophical debate I personally find distasteful, unuseful, and off-putting: a detailed comparison of how to fit Epicurus into categories set by competing modern theories with all sorts of technical jargon. I will quote a little below, but I want to stress that my post here is not a criticism of the participants (I intend to edit out their names here) but an occasion to discuss the larger issue of how to relate to people at Epicureanfriends and public forums:

Quote

I suspect that the question is quite legit but it's far deeper into modern comparisons than I find productive to go. I am not encouraging anyone to go read it but maybe the next time someone asks about "Direct Realism" we'll want this link available.

"Is Epicurus a Direct Realist?"

Author: Bridger Ehli Abstract

In his Letter to Herodotus, Epicurus presents a controversial theory of perception according to which "all perceptions are true." In this paper, I argue that Epicurus' theory of perception should be interpreted as a version of direct realism. If this interpretation is correct, then Epicurus holds that typical human perceivers have direct perceptual awareness of mind-independent objects. In the first section, I present an interpretation of Epicurus' theory of perception. I interpret Epicurus as subscribing to the view according to which our perceptions always provide us with entirely accurate information about the world. In the second section, I provide an outline of a version of direct realism. The version of direct realism I present here is strongly indebted to the work of Michael Huemer. In the third section, using the framework developed in the second section, I argue that Epicurus should be interpreted as a direct realist."

"The question of direct or naïve realism, as opposed to indirect or representational realism, arises in the philosophy of perception and of mind and the debate over the nature of conscious experience; out of the metaphysical question of whether the world we see around us is the real world itself or merely an internal perceptual copy of that world generated by our conscious experience.

Naïve realism is known as direct realism when developed to counter indirect or representative realism, also known as epistemological dualism, the philosophical position that our conscious experience is not of the real world itself but of an internal representation,"


-Wikipedia

Cassius Response:

This seems like a very interesting question, but probably over the head of most of our "generalist" readers in this group. Chaz it would be very helpful if you would provide a layman's explanation of the question. It's also probably worth commenting on whether and why this represents the position held by Epicurus, because that's not obvious to me or I suspect to most of our readers here in this group who aren't professional philosophers. In the meantime, here is a reference to "Direct Realism" from the Stanford Philosophy encyclopaedia. I can't recommend that many group members will want to spend much time researching the issue, but if certain people have an opinion on it and want to post about it and explain the topic, that would be great.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-problem/#Dir>

Response One

I have to say -as a new member - (and not being a professional philosopher) this at least to me is almost the most exiting philosophical question raised in the group lately  [Chaz Aji](#) I am not all convinced that Epicureus was a direct realist? Realist yes, but to my knowledge the only textual reference clarifying his position on illusions is the round/square tower. And that does allign him with direct realism, but more importantly it doesnt negate an indirect realism as it is a very specific example. Concerning hallucinations I guess a comment from him on visions of the Gods would have been clarifying.

Its an important question, the seperation between direct and indirect, as it positions epicurius against the idea of the hinterwelt that [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) so much was against. I have though a problem of seeing how anyone can argue for direct realism in an absolute sense as it seems to always reasonably be a question of degree. A direct realist wouød presumably also say that you have to be conscious to experience. As such I find Heideggers critique of the lack of acknowledgement of the immediacy of experience in western philosophy to be relevant. So even a direct realist seems to me to acknowledge that it is the consciousness that experiences and that thus the representation we experience is happening in the mind. Of course there is a difference in the level of immediacy between direct and indirect realism but it seems tonme due to the epistemological aspects that it is not such an absolute dichotomy as it is presented as. To my knowledge a definite seperation between these positions where not yet developed by the time of Epicurus, and thus if the dichotomy is false and a result of modern discussion (I mean that in absolute sense there is no definitive line between the positions due to the necessaty of consciousness, not that the ositiona of direct or indirect are false or irrelevant). My point being that if it impicitly is a point of degree it is not clear that it is even possible or constructive to be sure where Epicur stood. I myself would have to qualify my position of wether Im a direct or indirect realist based on the more exact definition of how involved "the mind" (which diffuseness of term I find the main problem in positioning) have to be to be indirect. If the nervoussystem would be part of the physical structure of the mind then surely no direct realist would claim visual experiences that are not hallucinatuons are not produced by/in the mind. But to not digress, i simply wonder if there is a good reference tjat would further indicate what Epicureus thought about it, and wether it is actually possible to fit him into a definatè group of thought on this matter?

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ANOTHER RESPONSE THREAD:

Quote

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2398-on-where-the-boundaries-of-proper-discussion-at-epicureanfriends-and-in-open-for/>

I actually don't see how such a thing is possible post-Kant.

Original Poster:

Kant? I must respectfully ask, are you aware that many very smart and respected philosophers have defended realism continuously since Kant? See G. E. Moore's in Defense of Common Sense, Wittgenstein's On Certainty, Colin McGinn's A Priori Argument for Realism, R. Hickerson an Indirect Defense of Direct Realism, the compilation work that shows many modern philosophers defend both types of realism: Recent Work on Naive Realism by James Genone, Michael Huemer's Skepticism and the Veil of Perception, and on and on.

In fact the most common view of philosophers in general is realism. "The PhilPapers Survey was a survey of professional philosophers and others on their philosophical views, carried out in November 2009. The Survey was taken by 3226 respondents, including 1803 philosophy faculty members and/or PhDs and 829 philosophy graduate students. External world: idealism, skepticism, or non-skeptical realism? Accept or lean toward: non-skeptical realism 2305 / 3226 (71.5%) Other 356 / 3226 (11.0%) Accept or lean toward: skepticism 310 / 3226 (9.6%) Accept or lean toward: idealism 255 / 3226 (7.9%)"

So, Kant did not sway the world forever to embrace idealism and reject realism, or make it, as you imply, impossible to defend realism, nothing of the sort.

It's also worth mentioning that Kant's idealism is nothing new. See Yogacara philosophy, Adi Shankar, and many, many others from the past two thousand years. You'll also find that they all had their fierce critics, and none successfully made realism untenable. See Chandrakirti's savage critique of Yogacara idealism for example, or Ramanuja on Shankara's idealism and so on. In fact, Kant himself was successfully refuted a mere four years after he wrote his Critique of Pure Reason some 300 years ago, so the very idea that he hasn't been refuted countless times since then, or that he somehow made realism impossible is quite remarkable. See Mendelssohn's Refutation of Kant's Critique of the Ontological Proof, Rogelio Rovira.

Original Poster:

Indeed, and if you read my response you will see that many of the referenced works are on direct (aka naive) realism (Huemer's book is on direct realism, though that's not clear from the title). Further, Kant was an idealist (though a minority dispute this, but this leads only to him being incoherent), and hence the line being between idealism and realism, generally, is reasonable.

EDIT: It is hard to include every post so I am leaving out some intermediate steps.

ORIGINAL POSTER:

I clearly entirely misjudged this group. I thought this was an Epicurean group, but it seems that no one actually supports the teachings of Epicurus at all, but rather are out to refute them. I didn't come here to argue for Epicurean philosophy against people on an Epicurean philosophy page. That just makes no sense at all. I wish you all good luck in finding the good life, and I caution against rejecting the very teachings meant to guide you there, on a forum dedicated to those exact teachings. Epicurus epistemology is very relevant to his goals and teachings and are not to be cast aside. So much is this position considered correct that E. E. Hughes penned a work in which she called the epistemology of Epicurus the very foundation of Epicurean thought. With that said, I'm going to walk away from this, and thank you all.

ANOTHER POSTER:

I consider myself a member of extended 'layman' group - on this forum.

Direct Realism, being a concept directly related to the perception, has been the subject I had been dwelling in since I got my consciousness developed...

The perception of the world, the world in which we live in, is the most important concept which the human beings experience. It's a base of our behavior.

The perception of the world is directly responsible for all our reactions. However, the perception, in a given point is a combination of information received by our senses, and their knowledge acquired about the subject - what affects how it is processed.

I we can imagine a situation in which individuals see the same facts, and items in the world surrounding them, in a completely different way. Everything depends on the information fed to them previously and their ability to process this information. So, the perception is the function of information received and information processed combined with the information which has been provided beforehand. There was a very interesting experiment involving newborn kittens. They were divided into two groups. One of them was placed in an environment where any visual elements were horizontal and the other was placed in the environment where all the visual elements were vertical. They were functioning in these separate environments for a while getting used to it, growing to know only this environment. At a certain point, all of them were placed in the opposite environments. The ones which grew in the vertical world were placed in horizontal environment and vice versa. The resulting observation showed, that all the kittens appeared completely blind to the elements which were contrary to the ones which they grew up with. The 'horizontals' didn't see the vertical elements, and vice

versa, the 'verticals' didn't see the horizontal elements. One may say that kittens are slightly different than humans, but are we, as mammals so different?. We have the same apparatus for reception and a similar one for compiling information - maybe a little bit more advanced. We can of course draw the analogy about peoples behavior - people who are associated with different political groups - but I'm not going to get into that subject at this point. So, let's get back to them basic examples. At the time of conquistadors when the indigenous people were presented with the mirrors, they had difficulty recognizing anything in the reflection. My point is: that the image World we treat as 'real' is the direct result of our 'perception'. But even in the most 'clinical' trial, the perception of one individual will differ (and may differ substantially) from the perception of another.

I hope I stayed on the subject.

END OF QUOTE

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There is more to the exchange but at present I won't take the time to post it.

The reason I am posting this now is, as stated above, to test my reaction to the question and to at least part of the debate against the reaction of others here on this forum.

It strikes me that this question was probably far too detailed for a general audience, and my initial attempt to bring it down to layman level was not at all successful.

My general reaction was that the entire thread was probably only marginally productive for those who posted in it, plus a complete turnoff for the majority of general readers.

Do you agree, or disagree? If this post had come into this forum, I would have moved it immediately to the epistemology forum, and I doubt it would have created much of a stir in our current user group. I think one of the benefits of this forum is that people can come here and search for information on obscure topics, and now they will find that we have something on "Direct Realism."

But on the other hand I can't imagine that a discussion like this is something that we should ever seek to have in a forum where we are talking to newer people, or to generalists, who are looking to apply Epicurus in a practical manner to their own lives.

Nor do I expect that anytime soon people in this group would be involved in going on an offensive in the academic world about who or who does not deserve to be described as a "Direct Realist."

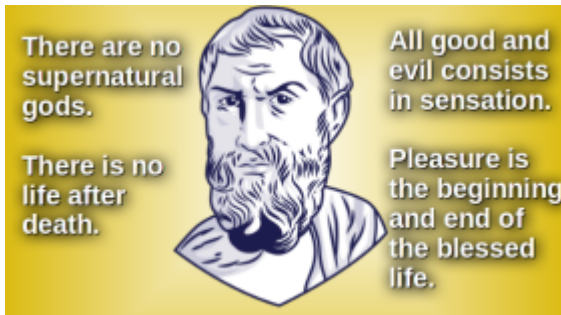
Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2022 at 1:59 PM

And here's the major point on which I would like to see this discussion continue. I think we are always going to see a lot of "rotation" among active posters at a forum like this. People will come and go as their curiosity is struck and then satisfied.

I think the key to longer-term involvement, and what I want to encourage, is that basically everyone who comes here and decides that they agree with most of the basics should understand that it would be desirable (if they conclude Epicurus is right) to cultivate their own circles of friends with similar viewpoints in their local lives. That means that basically everyone should see that they aren't here just to absorb facts, or even to cultivate wisdom, but to then see that they need to apply the principles to improve their lives, and that means by cultivating their own local circles of Epicurean-friendly people. That can mean here on this forum, or on other online places, but also in their local nations, states, or communities. I think most of us would agree that we aren't really doing justice to Epicurus' ideas unless we see that it's important to implement them. And while we can be and hopefully will remain "online friends" we also need to look for similar relationships in the real world.

And so back to the original question in the post, I think it's important for us to be practical about where the boundaries really are on what we should expect to be able to discuss with people who aren't disposed to do a lot of technical research, and that probably includes most of us.

I put this graphic on the home page as a way of emphasizing a few key ideas that I think are at the every least among the "minimum":



But where the list is beyond that even I personally think is an open question.

At any rate I think this sets up the thread, in case any are interested in commenting on it.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 12, 2022 at 4:15 PM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2398-on-where-the-boundaries-of-proper-discussion-at-epicureanfriends-and-in-open-for/>

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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looks outside

See masks and the ongoing pandemic

goes inside again

No, but seriously: I agree, and that's something which still troubles me. But I also fear that during the current pandemic, there isn't really any way to open up new Epicurean groups... still, that's an interesting topic (and one on which there's a lot in this forum, if I'm not mistaken).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

think one of the benefits of this forum is that people can come here and search for information on obscure topics, and now they will find that we have something on "Direct Realism."

Absolutely. To be honest, the beauty of such a forum is that I can select topics which interest me. I don't follow your discussions about certain "narrow" topics, as I simply haven't arrived there yet, but I love to participate in broader discussions of concepts. That's normal, that's the nature of the forum.

And, regarding that new members might be dissuaded by some narrow concepts- I'm not sure I can fully agree. yes, that's entirely possible, but I took myself a bit of time before joining this forum, and during this time a lot of stuff happened. So even if there's an entry about some very narrow topic, this forum isn't just about such topics, but about many others, more interesting to beginners such as me, as well. That's, as far as I understand, absolutely ok. I'm still amazed that "you", participants who know A LOT more about Epicurus, answer to questions and topics of people such as myself, and I'm very grateful for that. I honestly don't know why you do that- it seems extremely boring to me to talk about stuff you already know-, but I'm glad that you do it. Thanks!

Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2022 at 5:17 PM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

. I honestly dont know why you do that- it seems extremely boring to me to talk about stuff you already know-, but I'm glad that you do it.

It depends to a very great degree on who one is talking too, and whether they seem interested and in good faith and appreciative, and whether something is being accomplished by it. Those things (and probably similar that I forget) make all the difference!