

Doubt is Unpleasant, But It's Not Your Worst Enemy

Post by "Cassius" of December 20, 2015 at 11:56 AM

[Cassius Amicus 12-20-2015 0 Comments](#)

Peace and Safety to the Epicureans of today, no matter where you might be!

Happy Twentieth!

As I get back to posting on a regular schedule after my recent trip, I've noticed several separate reasons to discuss the issue of "doubt" and how to address it. Another way of describing the same question is - "*How do we deal with issues where we don't have enough evidence to be completely sure of a single 'right' answer?*"

Make no mistake - the issue of how to deal with uncertainty is an area where Epicurean philosophy is regularly attacked. Some believe that it is deadly to be described as a "dogmatist," so they run from the fact that Diogenes Laertius recorded that Epicurus said that the wise man "will be a dogmatist [and] not a mere skeptic..."

The same issue has provided much opportunity to pick fun at Epicurean philosophy. We can trace this all the way back to Cicero, who wrote in "[On The Nature of the Gods](#)" that the Epicurean speaker "...began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus!"

Let's try to get behind this issue of "dogmatism" and "doubt," by looking at what Epicurus said and how he anticipated the criticism. After that we'll apply what we find to several current discussions.

If we still had it available, our best source on the issue of certainty and doubt would be the book Epicurus wrote on the "Canon of Truth." Cicero preserves for us (in [De Finibus](#)) that this book was regarded by the Epicureans as the "test of all our judgments," and that was held in such high esteem that it seemed to have fallen from heaven: "*Besides, it is only by firmly grasping a well-established scientific system, observing the Rule or Canon that has fallen as it were from heaven so that all men may know it—only by making that Canon the test of all our judgments, that we can hope always to stand fast in our belief, unshaken by the eloquence of any man.*"

Note carefully here: Is this description of the Canon of Truth an assurance that the answer to every question may be found within its pages? Is it even an assurance that the answer to every question may be found by following the "method" described in that book? The answer to both questions is "no."

What we need to see at the start is that Epicurus understood that men are limited in their capacity, especially in their ability to gather evidence. While we have observed and learned far more today than did our ancestors, mankind will never be able to do more than speculate about those things which are totally beyond the reach of eyes and ears and radiotelescopes.

It is foundational Epicurean deduction - from the evidence that is available to us that nothing

comes from nothing or goes to nothing - that the universe as a whole is eternal and boundless. Because it is eternal and boundless, there is no way that our observation can extend to its limit in time or space. As Lucretius' recorded in Book 1 of his poem, there are "limits and boundaries" to which mortals like ourselves must observe: *"Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark."* Some things can come into being, and some cannot, and among these deep-set boundary marks is that beings of limited life and experience can never grasp a universe that is limitless in time and space. Lucretius us telling us figuratively that Epicurus' mind addressed the issues that we can dream about when we look up at the night sky, and in the "flaming walls of the world" he is reminding us that "limits and boundaries" exist for us, if not for the universe as a whole.

We can gain much more insight into the lost volume on the Canon by studying the remains of Philodemus' "[On Methods of Inference](#)" found at Herculaneum, but short of consulting that work we can find several core ideas on certainty and doubt embedded in the Principle Doctrines (for my collection of the Bailey translation, see [here](#) 😞)

22. *We must consider both the real purpose and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.*

23. *If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false.*

24. *If you reject any single sensation and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion as to the appearance awaiting confirmation and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations as well with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.*

25. *If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other nearer standard when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.*

These four passages are very deep, but for purposes of this discussion we can make several key observations:

- Note the phrase "*conclusions of opinion.*" While we may consider this phrase - for practical purposes - to be a synonym for "true," it would be better to consider it as "what we hold to be true" and even better to remember Pilate's question: *What is truth?* It is essential that we remember that Epicurean philosophy has previously shown us that we are not omnipotent gods who created the universe (such gods don't exist, and the universe as a whole is eternal, not "created"). Epicurus has previously shown us that the universe has no center, and it has no single absolute vantage point from which all questions can be viewed. From these prior observations, we know that there is no Platonic ("form-like") or Aristotelian ("essence-like") definition of "*truth.*" Oh yes, there is

a very great difference between "what we regard as true," and "what we regard as false," and anyone who needs to be reminded of that can place his hand on a red-hot stove to refresh his memory. But what is it that gives us the firm conclusion of opinion that an operating stove is hot, and not a place for one's hand? It is the very real experience of *pain in touching the stove, and pleasure in the relief of pulling our hand away*, that settles the question. We can debate til the cows come home the "real" nature of the experience, but it is *pain and pleasure* that ultimately settle for us the conclusions of opinion about how to live. And for those essential questions about how to live, no amount of "truth" through "logic" or "reason" can ever be sufficient.

- Note also, in the second of the two passages quoted above, the emphasis on not rejecting any sensation. Every sensation is entitled to respect, and must be considered in properly assembling a full picture of the situation. But in the end - *sometimes that full picture is going to be inconclusive*. That's what is meant by *distinguish[ing] between the conclusion of opinion as to the appearance awaiting confirmation and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling*. Throughout life we are going to confront "appearance awaiting confirmation." So long as we have insufficient evidence to reach a "conclusion of opinion" then we must - in the word preserved for us by Diogenes Laertius - "**wait**" before affirming one or another conclusion to be true: *"Opinion they also call conception or assumption, and declare it to be true and false; for it is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence, and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by evidence. Hence the introduction of the phrase, "that which awaits" confirmation, e.g. to wait and get close to the tower and then learn what it looks like at close quarters.*" And make no mistake - sometimes we must wait a lifetime, and die never knowing the answer we would like to have.
- Finally, note the warning in the third of the quoted passages. Those of us who live in a world of triumphant Stoicism and Religion (and that means all of us) really need to take this to heart. The reason for the warning lies at the heart of the gigantic error that is Stoicism, and it constantly bedevils those (such as [Cosma Raimondi](#)) who have sought to cut away the cancer of Stoic overlay garbles the message of Epicurus. What is it that Epicurus is warning us to avoid? The error of that happens to you when, ***instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other nearer standard.*** In Epicurean philosophy we know that the end of nature is to pursue pleasure in living, and even those who have drunk from the fountain of Stoicism can understand, even if they fight the conclusion, that happiness is the "end" - the "goal" - the "purpose to pursue" that Nature has set for all living things. But what constantly confuses the issue is that men are tempted to refer their questions, not to the Natural goal of pleasurable living, but to "***some other nearer standard.***" This, my friends, is the siren song of "virtue," at it is the hazard that the ancient Epicureans took upon themselves to demolish. (Diogenes of Oinoanda: *"I say both now, and always, shouting out loudly, to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the highest end of life! The virtues, which are turned upside down by other philosophers, who transfer the virtues from "the means" to "the end", are in no way the end in themselves! The virtues are not ends in themselves, but only the means to the end that Nature has set for us! This we affirm to be true in the*

strongest possible terms, and we take it as our starting point for how men should live. From here, let us suppose that someone asks a naive question. "Who do these virtues benefit?" "Or, for whose benefit should man live virtuously?" The obvious answer is, "man himself." The virtues do not make provision for the birds flying past, enabling them to fly well, nor do they assist any other animal. The virtues do not desert the man in which they have been born, and in which they live. Rather, it is for the sake of the man that the virtues exist, and it is for the sake of man that the virtues exert their actions.")If you need a refresher on how virtue is a *tool*, and not a *goal in itself*, read the section devoted to this in "[On Ends](#)" or read Frances Wright's excellent book which is largely devoted to this question - "[A Few Days In Athens](#)." But for purposes of our present discussion, what is the form of "virtue" that the false philosophers have spun to divert men from reference to Nature's goal? "Virtue" comes in many forms to many people, but in this case "virtue" is the false hope of men like Plato and Aristotle that they can attain *certainty without evidence through logic and reason alone*. Oh, the defenders of those like Plato and Aristotle are quick to point out how hard it is to really reach truth, and they will insist that it takes a lifetime of their academic training in geometry, and their mastery of the rules of syllogisms and forms and essences. But whether they say it or not, what they fully intend their students to understand is that there **is** an absolute truth out there "somewhere," and that it can be found if their students devote their lives (and more importantly, their fortunes) to studying their particular method and theories. This is false, and a prescription for a wasted life. For an excellent essay on the waste involved in this, refer to Lucian's Epicurean-inspired [HERMOTIMUS](#).

So what is our take-away today from this excursion? Let's set it up by referring to a passage from Epicurus' [letter to Pythocles](#):

*In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm convictions. **We do not seek to wrest by force what is impossible, nor to understand all matters equally well, nor make our treatment always as clear as when we discuss human life or explain the principles of physics in general**—for instance, that the whole of being consists of bodies and intangible nature, or that the ultimate elements of things are indivisible, or any other proposition which admits only one explanation of the phenomena to be possible. But this is not the case with celestial phenomena: these at any rate admit of manifold causes for their occurrence and manifold accounts, none of them contradictory of sensation, of their nature. For in the study of nature we must not conform to empty assumptions and arbitrary laws, but follow the promptings of the facts; **for our life has no need now of unreason and false opinion; our one need is untroubled existence**. All things go on uninterruptedly, if all be explained by the method of plurality of causes in conformity with the facts, so soon as we duly understand what may be plausibly alleged respecting them. **But when we pick and choose among them, rejecting one equally consistent with the phenomena, we clearly fall away from the study of nature altogether and tumble into myth.***

Here's the nub of the error: When we have limited evidence, some people nevertheless proceed to pick and choose a favorite between competing theories. Such people plunge ahead even


though each of the competing theories are equally consistent with the limited evidence at our disposal, and even though they do not have the evidence to truly have confidence that their decision is correct. And that's the very definition of the road to ruin. Thus Epicurus reminds us that we have no need for speculation and misplaced confidence ("false opinion") - our only real need (the only need Nature set for us) is for happy living. And what again is our proof that this is Nature's goal? As [Cicero has preserved for us](#), the Epicurean observation is: "*Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. And what does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?*"

In the end, there are going to be competing theories about questions of science where we have limited evidence. There are going to be periods when we think that the word "atom" is adequate to describe the ultimate particles of the universe, and there are going to be times (and languages and places) when other words are going to be assigned to the ultimate particles. Epicurus knew this and took pains to account for it in his philosophy. He warned us that while our knowledge of atoms and other scientific issues may change, there will remain ultimate "conclusions of opinion" that we can and should have confidence about. We can and should have confidence in our conclusion that the universe as a whole is eternal, that the universe as a whole is boundless in size, that the universe as a whole was not created by an omnipotent god, and that we can hope with confidence in the reliability of Nature because there *are* "ultimate particles" which cannot be subdivided infinitely - and which therefore support our confidence in our predictions about how those particles operate. Make no mistake, there are two issues to recognize here, and both are correct: (1) There are limits to our knowledge about things on which we have little or no evidence, but also (2) We can have confidence in our conclusions about those things which are near and important to us. Both of these observations are true and they coexist happily if we understand them - they are not at war with one another and our minds need not be consumed with anxiety about them.

The passage from the letter to Pythocles was the first of several spurs to my writing this post, but there are two others I want to mention as well. The second is a page from a [blog entry on Epicurus](#) which recently came to my attention. It reads:

The following eight counsels are a basic guide to Epicurean living.

- 1) Don't fear God.
- 2) Don't worry about death.
- 3) Don't fear pain.
- 4) Live simply.
- 5) Pursue pleasure wisely.
- 6) Make friends and be a good friend.
- 7) Be honest in your business and private life.

 Avoid fame and political ambition.

I'm taking this particular entry out of context and I want to emphasize that the blog I am quoting from contains much good material. But a list like this highlights what I think is the key error to avoid, as warned against in Doctrine 25: *If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other nearer standard when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.*

Of this list, in my view point five is well expressed and captures the essence of Epicurean philosophy as we are discussing it here. Yes - "pursue pleasure wisely," and this is because: [*What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?*] But even here we have to be sure we are careful with the phrasing, and if we fail to do so we fall into the error of Doctrine 25. What does it mean to say "pursue pleasure wisely?" Is there a tension within this sentence? Does "Wisdom" amount to some other standard which tells us to pursue something other than pleasure? If so, what is that standard?

The answer of course is not to idolize "wisdom," as do the Stoics, but to refer back to the Epicurean core observation: *And what does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?* There is no tension in the conclusion that we should pursue pleasure wisely. Even at those times when we avoid pleasure and we choose pain, we do so because the end result will be greater pleasure, and not because there is some standard that overrules and replaces pleasurable living as our ultimate goal. *"No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?"* ([On Ends](#))

Given the ultimate truth of the observation cited as number 5 in the list - ultimate because the pursuit of pleasure is the foundation of life set by Nature - *every one of the other seven observations - stated as written - will on occasion be insufficient or flatly wrong!* They are not stated in the way they are stated in the Epicurean literature, and let's look at how and why:

1) *Don't fear God.* - Don't fear god? Don't fear *god*? What is a "god?" What is our appropriate attitude toward higher beings? These are critical issues of fact which are addressed by Epicurus, and those issues are far more important than telling us not to "fear god." To many of us, this summary sounds like something right out of Sunday School - because of course we are told, "Why should we fear god? *God is love.*" No, it's true that Epicurus taught that we need not "fear god," but that's not the place an Epicurean starts or ends the analysis. For the details, check Principal Doctrine One and the letter to Menoecus.

2) *Don't worry about death.* - Don't worry about death? Don't worry about *death*? Again, this summary obscures the deeper issues. Of course there's no need to fear anything about the state of being dead, because we feel nothing after we cease to live. But just as it is true that "[death is nothing to us](#)" it is also true that life is everything to us because only while we are living are we able to experience pleasure. And it is quite legitimate - in fact the height of wisdom - to be careful about the way you live your life so that your happiness can extend as long as possible. If thinking about precautions to take against death constitutes "worrying about death," then darn right you should "worry about death." Check the full text of Principal Doctrine Two, which says nothing about "not worrying about death."

3) *Don't fear pain.* - Don't fear pain? Again, what we here is a much-too-simplified rendition, this

time of Doctrines three and four. Without digressing too far into what those two doctrines are really addressing, we can once again repeat the core truth: *"What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"* It is certainly true that there are limits to pain, and it is important for us to keep those limits in mind. But pain itself is CERTAINLY something to be avoided when possible, as Nature tells us, and pain is to be chosen only when it leads to pleasure or helps us to avoid worse pain. Telling us not to "fear" pain sounds like a Stoic telling us to be courageous in the face of some evil force. The truth is that pain is real, and it is to be avoided when possible. If you don't "fear" what will happen if you get too close to that hot stove, then you quite simply aren't thinking rationally, and your only hope is that the burning you get will shock you to your senses.

4) *Live simply.* - Oh the sadness of the need to continue to deal with this, because it is one of the most common misunderstandings that arises from studying Epicurus from a Stoic perspective. For those who find it hard to understand the danger of Stoicism and "virtue," and who think that there are absolute paths to happiness (such as "living simply"), the answer is this: Never, ever forget [VS63](#): *There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.*

6) *Make friends and be a good friend.* - Yes, true - but only with those who are willing to be your friends. Many are not willing to be your friend, and for those situations we need to remember that Epicurus warned us in several passages, including: [VS28](#). *Those who are overly eager to make friends are not to be approved; nor yet should you approve those who avoid friendship, for risks must be run for its sake.* [PD32](#). *Those animals which are incapable of making binding agreements with one another not to inflict nor suffer harm are without either justice or injustice; and likewise for those peoples who either could not or would not form binding agreements not to inflict nor suffer harm.*

7) *Be honest in your business and private life.* - Always be honest? Always be honest even with those who seek to harm you? That is pure Ciceronian "On Duties" mixed with Stoicism. There is no such absolute command to "honesty" in dealings with all people in Epicurean philosophy. Once again, refer to [PD32](#): *Those animals which are incapable of making binding agreements with one another not to inflict nor suffer harm are without either justice or injustice; and likewise for those peoples who either could not or would not form binding agreements not to inflict nor suffer harm.* And if you're stuck in Stoicism and keep wondering if there are any "categorical imperatives in morality," remember: [PD33](#). *There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm.* Nature's goal is pleasurable living, and artificial rules like "always be honest" can never take the place of Nature's goal, no matter how much we think we are smarter than Nature, or that we would have done a better job if the universe had been set up "our" way. Would you like a lesson on that? Check Nietzsche on Stoicism's "[fraud of words](#)."



Avoid fame and political ambition. - "Avoiding" fame and political ambition is actually a pretty good summary, since the word "avoid" is commonly understood to have exceptions. But there is a strong misconception that Epicurus advised passivism and living as a hermit, and this formulation plays right into that error. There are many ways to explain this, but I'll rest today with this advice: If you think that "living unknown" is an absolute command, go look up the

context in which the phrase is found in the texts. Look for the background on how Epicurus explained it. Go ahead. *You won't find a recorded context or the explanation!* That phrase has either been pulled out of context - or for all we know fabricated. We have zero - none whatsoever - explanation for the way Epicurus himself applied it - if indeed he used that exact phrase at all.

The third and last observation that prompted this post was a [post at the Epicurean Philosophy Facebook page](#) on a passage from Epicurus which features a Greek word that seems to have no direct modern translation. The word is: "τρικύλιστος" [trikilistos] and there have been varying interpretations among the academics about its meaning. (For an essay on the question by Norman Dewitt, see the same thread at the Facebook group.) The discussion is relevant here because the context in which Elli P. raised it is very similar to what we are discussing here. We have limited information about a word - something that we'd like to know about - so what do we do since we don't have Epicurus here to ask? The answer is that we do exactly what Elli did in that post - we analyze the evidence that we do have, and then we look to see where that leaves us. In this case, Elli - who is a native Greek speaker - arrives at a different conclusion than did DeWitt, who may have been a great scholar, but who also was a Canadian and not a native Greek speaker. DeWitt cites a number of good observations for his conclusion, but we should not ignore the fact that those who speak modern Greek will have insights into the language that are not available to those who are not native speakers. We are left with competing opinions of fact about the precise word, which we need to judge in the total context of our overall knowledge of Epicurean philosophy. What is primarily important, and which we know with confidence from many passages, is that Epicurus taught the importance of friendship, and that we will go to great lengths to maintain it because we experience the greatest happiness with our friends. Whether we find ourselves in circumstances in which we can pursue pleasure relatively unhindered, or whether we are in circumstances (even a wheelchair) where we have hindrances, the ultimate fact remains that life is about pursuing pleasure intelligently. We can confidently keep an open mind about the meaning of the archaic word because we are certain that - regardless of what it referred to 2000 years ago - we understand that the meaning relates to the importance of pursuing pleasure through friendship.

And so to bring this to a close, let me recall the title of the post: "Doubt Is Unpleasant, But It's Not The Worst Enemy." Doubt is like many other unpleasant experiences in life - as much as we may try, it cannot always be avoided. We will never know all the secrets of the infinite and eternal universe, but we can place that lack of knowledge in the back of our minds and proceed with life because we can have confidence in our basic role in that universe: *Nature has created us to pursue happy living.*

Nature has not created us with a *guarantee* of happy living, and nature has not created us with a *guarantee* that we will have perfect knowledge of everything. These are facts which we can never forget.

So what is far worse than doubt? Refer back to PD 25: *If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, **you turn to some other nearer standard when you are making a choice or an avoidance**, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.*

What's worse than doubt is letting yourself be diverted by "virtue" or by false standards of "truth" that have never existed and can never exist. Doubt may be unpleasant, but it's part of

life, and it can be placed in context. It's far worse to lose site of your goal, or never even try to achieve it, in the name of "virtue" or false standards of certainty. At all costs avoid the fate of Brutus, who at the end of his life was left to lament: "***O wretched Virtue, thou wert but a name, and yet I worshiped thee as real indeed...***"