Happy Twentieth of May: Don't Surrender - Instead Retreat, Regroup, Advance!

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2018 at 8:06 PM

A reply to the above post at Facebook:

"Not only are the elemental particles always in motion, but the universe itself is not only eternal in time but infinite in space, so we know that there can be no central point, no overarching creating god, from which any perspective can be viewed as permanent or final. It is therefore absurd to suggest that there is any “absolute truth” or “universal reason” or realm of “ideal forms” against which our own feelings of pleasure and pain may be compared and found invalid."

While I agree that the universe is eternal and that there are no supernatural gods or supernatural elements at all, what, if anything would change if it was "proven" that the universe had a definitive starting point?

Also, if the big bang is ever proven to how the universe came into being,, do we still consider the universe eternal because it existed in a different form before it became as it is now? On my first question I mean, how much do our views change if the universe isn't eternal?

And my response:

Cassius:

There is a lot of disagreement on that ____. Just to be clear, in what follows I speak only for myself. Let's first be very clear that when we use the word "universe" I mean EVERYTHING that exists. I know that there is a modern scientific trend (which I find to be perverse, in destroying a perfectly good existing definition) to use other terms like "multiverse" to describe "everything" - but when I say universe I mean "Everything."

So having said that, my personal view is that we have to look beyond the current state of physics to the larger philosophical question that physics has not answered in the past, cannot answer today, and will not answer in the future. Physics can always look further outward, it can go in deeper and look further inward, but as we see there always seems to be another step further out, and another step further in. In the meantime, we have to live our lives, and decide what we think physics is telling us about "our" reality.

And that was the purpose of Lucretius' Javelin analogy, which doesn't provide a real "answer" to anything, but points out the problem: We are always going to be left with that undefined "next step" about which we don't have a "final" solution. And what position are we going to take about that, in the absence of absolute final knowledge of the entire universe, which is by definition an impossibility?

And that is where I think Epicurus would say - and did say - that we have to look at the world around us that IS clear to us, and look to see how it operates. Do we see random things popping into existence out of the air? Do we see birds rise out of the sea? People grow to adulthood in an hour, oranges come from apple trees?

The answer is we don't, and as we make similar observations over and over we gain confidence that there are no gods behind the curtain pulling strings, and that things don't truly happen "at random" but by natural processes.

So how does that apply? The answer to Epicurus is that we have to make our decisions based on observable facts, and in the absence of observable facts we work from analogy, and comparison, and even with an assist from "reason" (which has to be defined carefully). And from that sequence we conclude that we have never seen ANYTHING ever rise up from totally nothing, or go to totally nothing, and that we therefore take confidence that what has never happened in the past of such a dramatic nature is not going to happen in the future. Sure the frontiers of science are always expanding, and even now we can't predict earthquakes and volcanoes and lots of other things with certainty. But we have confidence at this point that even these operate by totally natural processes, and that they aren't totally at "random," and that they aren't generated from totally "nothing."

So for the above reasons I personally don't even entertain the possibility that science will ever give any indication that everything we see in the universe spontaneously arose from nothing in an instant, as if at the whim of a god, or at random. Sure there are natural processes that create and destroy suns and solar systems and galaxies, etc. But even though we can't explain and predict them with true specificity, we have confidence that they are the result of natural processes.

The suggestion that "everything" can come from "nothing" is very close to a religious assertion. It has NO evidence in anything we can actually see happening. It is THEORIZED without practical evidence in the same way that preachers speculate about heaven and hell - totally without evidence and totally without credibility.

I consider myself a "fan" and a proponent of science every bit as much as anyone, and that includes geometry and math, and I believe that Epicurus was too. I believe it is a malicious slander of anti-Epicureans to suggest that Epicurus denied the practical benefits of any science, but I believe that Epicurus drew the same line we are talking about here: that the use of ANY scientific technique to obtain practical knowledge and employ it for practical benefit is to be

applauded, and that applies to every field of science including "logic." But no tool can be allowed to mutate into something more than it really is, and no tool of the human mind is capable of exceeding the factual evidence that we can put into it.

So "the universe" is as much a logical concept as it is a set of stars and galaxies. And while all the stars and all the galaxies are constantly changing and moving and growing and dying and exploding into new ones - all of that is local. As a WHOLE, "the universe" cannot logically have had a beginning based on any of the evidence available to us, or for which we can give any reason to think may possibly ever be available to us.