

Carl Sagan, the 4th dimension, episode 20 of Lucretius Today, physics

Post by "Cassius" of August 17, 2021 at 9:50 AM

I am pressed for time this morning and am no doubt going to be short in these responses. Feel free to follow up.

[Quote from camotero](#)

Something like, all the possibilities that are in line with the physics are possible until one is proved to be the right one and the others proven to be wrong? Is there a PD about this?

This would be primarily PD 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.

But the issue of choosing prematurely is also mentioned in Lucretius and also the letter to Pythocles. We discuss this in this week's podcast which I hope to get out soon. Here is letter to Pythocles:

Quote

[86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

[87] For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth. Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.

[88] Yet we must never desert the appearance of each of these phenomena, and further, as regards what is associated with it, must distinguish those things whose production in several ways is not contradicted by phenomena on earth.

[Quote from camotero](#)

What do you mean by this? I though the greatest good was life, and the objective/end (or "telos" as DeWitt puts it) is pleasure.

I think most of us (certainly me) think that DeWitt is being a little broad in saying that, and it is necessary to be very specific about what perspective is the "greatest good." Certainly neither pleasure nor pain has any meaning unless we are living. Does that mean that being alive is our greatest good? Sort of, from some perspectives of that word. But does that mean that when we are alive we spend every moment thinking about staying alive? No, we pursue pleasure and avoid pain, but in the context of staying alive. Those viewpoints can be fit into all sorts of word-play constructions so you have to be careful.

[Quote from camotero](#)

is that it may be looked by many as an objective in itself, instead of pleasure, j

I agree that NOTHING is an objective in itself other than pleasure (which assumes staying alive).

[Quote from camotero](#)

you get a feeling that this philosophy is a highly individualistic one.

There is little doubt about that, and I think most of us here agree, that in practice Epicurean philosophy IS highly individualistic. However it also incorporates that your greatest pleasures are necessarily tied to having friends, so the goal is never "individualism for the sake of individualism" but "whatever works for the pleasure of myself and my friends (family, etc)." That is hard for some people to swallow but there is no mechanism in nature for feeling the feelings of other people other than through your personal contact with them. You can conceptualize "I love all humanity and all living things" and that's perfectly valid to derive pleasure from that. But there is no Supernatural or Natural mechanism in play that compels everyone to that point of view. There is the practical consideration that if you go around being "mean" others are likely to respond and smack you in the head. But that is a purely practical consideration and has no mechanism naturally or supernaturally to enforce it. Sometimes people we think are bad don't get smacked in the head - it is only if real people take real action to avenge the "wrongs" done on them that such punishment occurs.

[Quote from camotero](#)

I'd argue that an important (arguably the most important) part of the observations that we can make out of this comparison of species is that of our ability for empathy and compassion, and the pleasure we can get out of it, which, as I understand, from what I've read, was completely missing from Epicurus's description.

I would not say at all that that is completely missing. He emphasized that friendship is the most important tool for securing safety and happiness (pleasure). That means we have to be to some degree cooperative. What appears to be "missing" to many people is that because Epicurus held that there are no Gods or idealistic mechanisms to enforce the extension of friendship to the whole world, Epicurus didn't choose to invent one like Plato and the rest did. He acknowledged how Nature functions and says that's "The Way Things Are."

[Quote from camotero](#)

I'm not sure I get what you're trying to say here. Could you please explain? I do think all experiences could be categorized as either pleasurable or painful, and I like the simplicity of that. Are you saying this is not so? I'd like to learn your point of view about this.

What I am reacting to here is that some people think that Epicurus was only talking about "Bodily" pleasure (food drink sex etc). I believe it is clear that Epicurus included EVERY activity in life, even those which we consider to be purely "mental" as experiences that generate pleasure and pain. The reason to emphasize this is that Epicureans are attacked for allegedly thinking that "their god is the belly" and that is false. Epicurus clearly stated that "mental" pleasures and pains are frequently more intense and important than "bodily" ones. (That is clearly stated in Torquatus' section in On Ends)

[Quote from camotero](#)

Unfortunately, I've done it many times; since they start from a place of idealistic competition, they focus on winning or losing the argument,

Yes and I too think it is unavoidable. Epicurus clearly did. If you live in a world of Platonists / Stoics like we do, there's going to be no way to avoid responding to their logic games.

[Quote from camotero](#)

what I meant is not that physics are not important, but rather that the specific physical explanations of Epicurus and Lucretius don't have to be right for the rest of the philosophy to be valid, especially nowadays that we have better explanations that allow us to reach these same two conclusions you mentioned.

I would just emphasize there that the ultimate conclusions are either certainly or probably still valid. I certainly think that the ultimate conclusion is that the universe operates on natural principles (not supernatural) and that there is no human life after death. Those I put in "certain" I also personally think that the other conclusions about "infinite space" and "eternal time" and "no infinite divisibility" were also very important to Epicurus, and remain highly probable at the very least, but I certainly understand that not everyone agrees with that and it's not such an important issue to resolve immediately that we can't all work together. However anyone who admits the nose of "supernatural" or "eternal soul" under the tent is in my view simply too far outside the limits to be considered an Epicurean.

[Quote from camotero](#)

Are there any examples or anecdotes about this?

There are several references in DeWitt which discuss this, but the main two text sources that talk about the deviations are:

(1) Diogenes Laertius in discussing the number of legs of the canon, and

(2) Torquatus (in On Ends) discussing how some Epicureans (himself included) think it is necessary to prove that pleasure is the goal by abstract means