

# Should Epicurean Philosophy Be Made More Accessible?

Post by "Cassius" of December 30, 2021 at 10:03 PM

I like to be clear that I don't represent or think that I have all the answers either, but there are some things I do like to strongly assert:

1. That Epicurus was attempting to be absolutely consistent from bottom to top of his philosophy. In other words, I think he did his best to make his ethics (which seems to be the focus of this current conversation) as consistent with his physics and his epistemology as possible.
2. That means that any interpretation of Epicurus' ethics which would appear to conflict with Epicurus' physics and epistemology is not likely to be a correct interpretation of what he actually taught.
3. That his physics established without room for doubt (in his system) that:
  1. There are no supernatural gods or other forces.
  2. There is no "fate" either supernatural based or through hard determinism in physics (because of the swerve)
  3. There is no life after death (there is no immortal soul; mortal cannot unite with immortal; etc) which means we only have one life to live.
  4. There is no absolute virtue or eternal "concepts" of any kind (because there is nothing eternal in the universe except the atoms, which means that there are no eternal combinations that could form a basis for anything absolute; and because there is no "center" to the universe from which there could be a single perspective by which to judge all others; because there is no supernatural god whose perspective could be deemed to be the only correct one, etc.)
4. That his epistemology establishes without room for doubt (in his system) that:
  1. The senses are the ultimate foundation for all reasoning that can be deemed to be correct.
  2. That there is ultimately no standard for "good" except pleasure and no standard for "bad" except pain.
  3. That knowledge we can have confidence in is possible in many things, even in some important things that we can't observe directly, such as items 1-4 above. However omniscience about everything we might like to speculate about is not possible and not therefore we can't hold our own conclusions up to a standard of omniscience.

So I would argue that any conclusions that we would come to about Epicurus' ethics have to be tested against those basic ideas about the universe and about how we ascertain knowledge.. If the assertion about the ethical conclusion appears to flow from these premises then that understanding of Epicurus' ethics is likely accurate to what he actually taught. If assertion

about the ethical conclusion appears to conflict with these premises, then it's unlikely to be a correct interpretation of what Epicurus taught.

Obviously this kind of analysis isn't foolproof, but I do think Epicurus did his best to tie everything into a coherent whole, so it's a good place to start, and a good way to check the assertions of the commentators. And that's one benefit of new people starting with DeWitt - he does a good job of covering both physics and epistemology and doesn't lead the reader to think that Epicurus' ethics are the only important thing about his system.

And this is why it seems to me that I observe the commentators who have the least interest in Epicurus' physics and epistemology seem to go furthest astray from a plausible reconstruction of Epicurus' ethics. That's why we've spent a lot of effort over the last two years going over Lucretius, and why as soon as we finish discussing the Torquatus material on the podcast I'd like to see us go back and cover the Letters to Herodotus and to Pythocles before we tackle the letter to Menoeceus.