

"Lucretius on the Size of the Sun", by T.H.M. Gellar-Goad

Post by "Joshua" of June 11, 2022 at 1:56 PM

I'll try to summarize what I recall to be the main points of the essay;

- Epicurus' primary interest in the size of the sun is to rule out the supernatural.
- A superficial reading of the passage will always be plagued with error.
- The author stresses the importance of considering the question in light of the whole philosophy.
- And that includes offering a few explanations, not just asserting one.
- Epicurus draws a distinction between how we interpret things that appear to our senses, and how those things actually are.
- The senses themselves are to Epicurus never wrong. Merely the judgment we make about sense-perception can be wrong, or not.
- The sun may be bigger or smaller than it appears, but it's not possible to know which (in the fourth century B.C) because we can never change our perspective by getting closer or going further away.
- The passages in both Pythocles and Lucretius are very noncommittal in their grammar and diction. Something like 8 subordinate clauses in five lines. So there's a resistance to speaking certainly about it. Nowhere does any Epicurean actually make a definite claim about the size of the sun.
- In the discussion on eclipses, the ancient sources seem to imply or suggest that the sun may be larger than the Earth. One of the explanations offered for eclipses is the interposition of the Earth between the sun and the moon.
- The author suggests that the sun-size issue is a didactic challenge to students and readers; like the plague at the end of Lucretius, it sets up a test to see how well you've grasped Epicurean method. The reader will come to that passage, and then feel compelled to review the other material to make sure they haven't missed something.
- The final suggestion the author makes is that the sun-size issue became a shibboleth for ancient Epicureans. That it became a way of 'sounding out' the Epicurean knowledge-base of

the interlocutor. Cassius often says that hard cases make bad law. But the argument being made here is that this hard case is useful for determining how well other people really understand this. Useful for teachers with their students, or for scholars with their scholars.

The essay does not make the following point, which I think is nevertheless important; namely, how stupid do people think Epicurus was to say that he thought the sun was the size of an orange!?

Certainly the sun is, at minimum, bigger than the biggest object that crosses it but fails to entirely eclipse it. A lifetime's accumulated experience would surely have been sufficient for Epicurus to know that the sun was bigger than a bird. Bigger than a horse, a house, a tree, a trireme--bigger than the better part of a mountain. Bigger than the moon.