What If Anything Has Changed About Human Nature In the Last 2000 Years?

Post by “Joshua” of January 3, 2024 at 11:34 PM

Here's my attempt at a somewhat nuanced answer;

The most interesting changes have been in the **Physics**. The Greek atomists turned out to be substantially correct in a lot of big ways, and charmingly wrong, as everyone was then, in a lot of small ways. They correctly surmised; 1.) that the center of the Earth was not the center of the cosmos, and that in fact the cosmos had no center. 2.) that the laws that govern celestial phenomena are the same as those we experience "down" here. The heavenly orbs actually *are* bodies, and not gods. They actually *are* made of common matter, and not a fifth aethereal essence. 3.) matter can neither be created nor destroyed.

Their most glaring omission, common to all of the ancients, was their lack of any understanding of gravity as a force. Without gravity, it is difficult to make a convincing account of the cosmos. Some modern day flat-earthers have hit upon a novel solution to this problem--they propose that the disc and its dome move upwards at a constant rate of acceleration, but even this could not have served in an infinite Epicurean cosmos. Most of the explanations of atmospheric and celestial phenomena found in Lucretius have, of course, been superseded by a better and more accurate understanding of their causes. As for the natural gods of Epicurus living in the intermundia, I find simple atheism an apt substitute. The worst possible thing you can do to a god is render it unnecessary--a god with no explanatory power is in itself one assumption too far. Just my opinion.

In **canonics** or epistemology, a huge and complex revision is worth mentioning. In 5th and 4th century Greece, philosophers were prone to using mathematical principles to 'prove' moral truths. A successor to Pythagoras argued that ten was the number of the celestial spheres, and his logic in this was that 10 is the sum of a point, a line, a surface, and a volume--1+2+3+4. Owing to the perfection of this number, it must be reflected in the heavens...but of course not. The Platonists made the study of geometry a prerequisite to the study of philosophy, and as geometry is a process of rediscovering invisible mathematical facts, so a philosophy of pure reason is a process of 'recollecting' innate knowledge of absolute moral truths--the truths we forgot when we were interred in our bodily prisons. Geometry leads us out of one cave, and philosophy another. In the film *Lincoln*, Daniel Day-Lewis quotes Euclid on the transitive property as evidence for regarding slavery as unnatural and immoral. It makes for excellent cinema, but poor moral philosophy. The point in contention was precisely whether *a* and *c* really were both equal to *b*. Those who argued against the proposition had no trouble finding their justification in what they were assured was a higher law than geometry.

Nowadays engineers use mathematics to build not only bridges, an art the Romans *had* mastered, but also skyscrapers and jet airplanes, and the last people on Earth to endorse the numerology of the Pythagoreans would be working mathematicians. No longer a hindrance to understanding nature, math has become more helpful than nearly anything else available to us.

This is the first of two cases where it could be plausibly argued that Epicurus threw the baby out with the bathwater. The problem was never geometry itself, but the false analogy made by his contemporaries between geometry and moral epistemology.

The second example is part of his **ethics**. False belief about the gods was a source of great frustration to Epicurus, and one of the many causes of false belief was epic poetry, which he thought was full of lies. It *was* full of lies, or as we would say 'fictions', and the Epicurean satirist Lucian of Samosata was merciless in his mockery of the form in *A True Story*. But the solution when it arrived (very late) was more literacy and not less; we consume fiction in books, film, and television by the truckload, but only the genuinely pathological believe *everything* they read. We are very fortunate that Lucretius did not share his purported distaste for poetry.

I'll think about the question some more! I do think it's helpful to push past the obvious and often trivial scientific errors and into some of the deeper questions. Prof. David Glidden made a comment in passing during our podcast interview that the resurgence of atomism in the renaissance and the enlightenment probably had a role in postponing research into microbiology. I'm ashamed to say I haven't followed up on that, but that is exactly the kind of critique that would hold my interest.