Isaac Asimov's Essay "The Relativity of Wrong" (Including Criticism of Socrates And Considering Proper Standards of Correctness)

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 30, 2024 at 9:51 AM

Great essay! I particular appreciated his treatment of the Earth as an "oblate spheroid" and not a perfect sphere, due to rotational momentum leading to an "equatorial bulge". In the teaching of contemporary science, we champion *Heliocentrism* and the *Spherical Earth* theory, but those are incomplete; both theories, though functional, fail to address the nuance of variety.

Even though Epicurus (unlike his opponents) didn't explicitly adopt classical *heliocentrism*, and even though Lucretius **criticized** the *Spherical Earth* theory (though it was functionally demonstrated by Erastothenes centuries earlier), Epicurus' insightful conclusions that "**there can be no center to infinity**" and that "**worlds might be spherical, obloid, or some other shape**" turn out to be **perfectly coherent** with the nuance of contemporary science. Indeed, there can be no perfect, *rotating* spheres in space, only obloids (due to rotational momentum); indeed, the Sun is not the center of the universe (because the universe is infinite).

The Epicurean approach provided the flexibility and insight to accomodate contemporary discoveries; it seems that Asimov mirrors that. He provides other examples that reflect Epicurean observations. In refuting Socrates, Asimov writes “**No one knows *nothing*. In a matter of days, babies learn to recognize their mothers**.” (36)

I maintain that an example of this insightful flexibility can also be demonstrated in Epicurus' treatment of the size of the Sun. He ultimately concludes that he could not determine, with certainty, the size of the sun. I believe *we take the fact that we know that the Sun is massively-huge for granted*, because we know that it is a G-type yellow, main sequence star. But for all of those millennia, if the Sun were an Earth-sized white-dwarf, we wouldn't have known. If life were sustainable around a neutron star (*I'm not sure if it is, but for the sake of argument, let's say it is*), then some forms of life in the universe orbit around stars that are smaller than New York City. The proposition that "stars are massively large" is incomplete. Our star *happens* to be **much** larger than our world, though we did not appreciate just *how* **much** larger until relatively recently.

I do have to disagree with Asimov on one point, that "*These are all twentieth-century discoveries, you see*." He clearly overlooks the insight of Epicurus!