

Prolepsis of the gods

Post by “Cassius” of June 26, 2025 at 6:58 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I've got to be honest, I don't really understand Meno's paradox and how it's helpful in the context of Epicurean philosophy.

The issue of skepticism is a huge one, and it is fundamental to the conflict between the schools.

But let me address something in particular as it may apply to all your comment in that post: Many people see Epicurus as a self-help therapist for whom it is a given that being "happy" is the goal, with the only question being what techniques to follow to achieve happiness.

I would say this is basic misunderstanding of what Epicurus is all about. Yes, understanding how to properly pursue happiness will follow in the end from Epicurus' insights, but that is not the place you have to start. As Diogenes of Oinoanda says, the question is not the "means" of happiness, but "What is happiness?" in the first place.

Plato's cave analogy is famous because it dramatizes the contention of the Platonists (and the rest) that human life is lived in the dark with only unreliable flickers of evidence that we can't trust. Such people therefore contend that we therefore ultimately need to trust in the gods and their gift of esoteric logic in order to understand the truth. These people say that we are a supernatural creation and that we ultimately need to live a life of hard-coded virtue in order to live life properly.

So the very first issue is whether we as humans are even capable of understanding anything to be true. All the other major Greek schools held that we cannot do so without some form of "logic" that transcends the senses and our natural abilities as the core of the way forward. Even today we are confronted with Abrahamism which says essentially the same thing, just more explicitly based on religion.

Just as with atomism which is needed to understand physics, Epicurus needed a framework for understanding the way humans think -- a way that we *can* legitimately determine which things are true and which are not. If you are convinced from the beginning that truth is impossible to find, you will eventually give up trying, and that is what Epicurus is finding.

Remember, Epicurus started out as a philosopher because he rejected the theories of chaos and he wanted a framework that he could believe to be true. He is primarily a philosopher, not a therapist, and while he is happy to build a therapy on top of the philosophy, Epicurus says that it would be better to believe the myths of the religions than to give in to hard core determinism, which is itself a kind of skepticism. If Epicurus had concluded that the evidence

supports that a supernatural god and heaven really did exist, Epicurus would have embraced it, because his primary concern is truth, not taking a pleasure pill. You don't know for sure that pleasure is the appropriate guide until you've taken a firm position on the basic constitution of the universe, and you can't take a firm position on the basic constitution of the universe until you have confidence that taking a firm position of any kind on any subject is possible.

The point i would stress is that the friction and conflict between the schools is real and essential to recognize. Epicurus was practical enough to see that he had to engage in that conflict if he wanted his school to be successful, to reach more people with its message, and to survive that conflict without being run out of town, as he himself had been in Mytilene.

The primary weapons used against Epicurus were skepticism and determinism, as they remain today. A theory of knowledge, of which prolepsis is an important part (but not the whole) is essential to being confident of anything, and to fighting back against those weapons that are being used against us. You can't have confidence that skepticism and determinism are wrong without a proper theory of knowledge.