

Epicurean Isonomy In The Context Of Statements By Balbus As To Gradations In Life In Book 2 of "On the Nature of the Gods"

Post by "Cassius" of August 8, 2025 at 7:58 PM

In regard to the sorites issue, I would say that this section of [Chapter 15](#) of Frances Wright's "A Few Days In Athens" is and addresses the same issue:

Quote

"What is in a substance cannot be separate from it. And is not all matter a compound of qualities? Hardness, extension, form, color, motion, rest — take away all these, and where is matter? To conceive of mind independent of matter, is as if we should conceive of color independent of a substance colored: What is form, if not a body of a particular shape? What is thought, if not something which thinks? Destroy the substance, and you destroy its properties; and so equally — destroy the properties, and you destroy the substance. To suppose the possibility of retaining the one, without the other, is an evident absurdity."

"The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum," returned the youth, "but I never considered the error as extending to mind and life, any more than to vice and virtue."

I would say that Epicurus' question as reported by Cicero in [Part 3 of Tusculan Disputations](#) is making a similar point:

Quote

Why, Epicurus, do we use any evasions, and not allow in our own words the same feeling to be pleasure, which you are used to boast of with such assurance? Are these your words or not? This is what you say in that book which contains all the doctrine of your school; for I will perform, on this occasion, the office of a translator, lest any one should imagine that I am inventing anything. Thus you speak: "Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good; for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I

mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men, what would be the remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words? I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me, that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above."

I would presume that what this means is that abstractions such as "color" or "good" do not have an independent existence apart from the things that we are describing as colored or good. Nor do "happiness" or "pleasure" as concepts have any independent meaning apart from individual instances of real people experiencing real feelings.

On the other hand, words such as "color" and "good" are useful, and so everyone - including Epicurus - uses them. When we use them, it is important to understand that concepts have usefulness given by assignment of the human mind, but that these concepts are not created by supernatural forces or the reflection of ideal forms, and those who assert that these concepts have independent existence are wrong and asserting ideas that have dangerous implications.

If concepts do not original from gods or ideal forms, then we still have to answer the question of how to identify them and use them properly.

It's not generally considered to be necessary to see every cow that ever existed in order to form a useful concept of a cow.

These issues are going to bleed over into all sorts of other questions about when to form opinions as to concepts. We've discussed many times that Epicurus never saw or touched an atom and yet was convinced that they exist. That's the "down" direction, but the same analysis is going to be at work in the "up" direction, and I would expect Epicurus to be willing to reach conclusions about things that he cannot see or touch in the "up" direction just as he was in the "down" direction. The conclusions are going to need to be based on rational extrapolation from evidence, and not pure imagination ("it exists because I can imagine it") but rational extrapolations are not going to be limited to those things that have already been observed.