

Circumstantial (Indirect) and Direct Evidence / Dogmatism vs Skepticism

Post by "Cassius" of March 17, 2026 at 1:46 PM

Right - the burden of proof issue is certainly relevant to standards of proof so let's discuss that too.

In these philosophic questions does the burden of proof rest on the person asserting something that is contrary to observable evidence? Or on the person asserting what all observable evidence supports? And will we ever allow circumstantial evidence alone to be the basis of "knowledge."

In our courtroom situation, the burden of proof is on the side bringing the charge or claim, and the proof standard is higher in criminal cases than in civil cases due to how much is at stake. Importantly, *circumstantial evidence is allowed to be the basis of decision in both circumstances.* (In fact I was reading this morning about the [Utah woman found guilty this week](#) for murdering her husband with fentanyl. It appears this is an example of a murder conviction based largely or fully on circumstantial evidence. Certainly no one saw her administer the poison.)

The most important questions in life stem from whether we are created and governed supernatural forces, and whether we have supernatural souls that survive after death. It is reasonable to assert that these issues determine everything else in ethics. If there are in fact supernatural forces beyond our senses, those forces would provide benefits or penalties that overwhelm any lesser ethical judgment based purely on sensation. (In this discussion I think Epicurus would include anticipations and feelings of pleasure and pain as also being direct natural faculties equivalent in status to the five senses.)

We do not have control over how long we live. No moment that passes in which we have made choices based on wrong presumptions can ever be retrieved, and in every case our lives are over far too quickly. We only live once, so the need for finality is urgent.

Given the implications of the options and implications as to whether the universe is natural and whether we have souls that survive death., Epicurus held that "I don't know" is not a proper or sufficient answer. I would analogize his decision here to his decision to revolt against his teachers who could not reasonably explain the theory of the universe being organized out of chaos by an outside force.

As to the available evidence, there is no observable evidence of supernatural forces or life after death. We are not born having those conceptions in our minds. If someone is going to argue that we should live life based on those contentions, it is reasonable to take the position, as

Epicurus did, that those people provide very strong evidence and meet a very high burden of proof.

And what kind of proof is most important and definitive? This is what book 4 of Lucretius is devoted to, all around the section in which Lucretius discusses the problems of illusions that make proof of things difficult, but that in the end we come to the conclusion that knowledge is possible, and the standard of knowledge is met by the evidence of the sense, from which we can make conclusions based either on direct sensation or reasoning from circumstantial evidence which does come from sensation.

Quote from Lucretius 4:469

"If anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards." (Lucretius 4:469)

Epicurus saw no reason to suggest that supernatural souls or forces are "possible," and thus there is no reason to consider those issues under a standard of probability. And there are many important reasons NOT to do that.

In short I do agree that we need to be clear on who has the *burden* of proof, what level of "*proof*" is required, and be clear that we do take the position that *knowledge* is possible.

If we don't address these then we are left of the position of the person who says that nothing can be known, and we never make any progress towards deciding how to live.

Last comment: And as you also reference, we have to decide who is the factfinder. In court the factfinder is either the judge or jury. In our own lives, we have to decide whether we are going to make decisions for ourselves, defer our decisionmaking to others, or try to avoid decisionmaking completely. Epicurus never appeals to authorities other than the sensations, anticipations and feelings, and I think the strong implication of that is that he thought we have to make these decisions for ourselves.