

Can the senses be wrong?

Post by "Todd" of October 6, 2019 at 4:32 PM

I'm sure others will weigh in, but here's my take.

As to whether the senses can be wrong, it's important to be precise about what we mean. The senses themselves simply register data. Our reason has to interpret that data. What we see is shapes and colors, light and dark. Deciding that the combination of shapes and colors means there is a horse across the field involves reason. If we get closer, and realize it's not a horse, but a cow, that was an error of judgment (reason), not an error of the senses.

I'd say the examples you gave are probably not really examples of the senses reporting falsely. In my (limited and non-professional) understanding, your examples sound more like the brain conjuring up data that did NOT come from the senses. But for practical purposes maybe that's a distinction without a difference.

A person who has no use of any of their senses would basically be in a vegetative state. That person wouldn't be able to make much use of Epicurean teachings; nor would they be able to make use of any other philosophy; nor would they be able to do much of anything at all.

A person who has limited use of their senses would be able to follow Epicurean teachings, but of course it would be more difficult for them, to the extent they are lacking reliable sensory inputs - just as everything else in life would likewise be more difficult. But such a person can and should make use of whatever sensory data they have to produce as much pleasure for themselves as possible.

Also of note, Epicurus did not expect his students to build their own ethical framework. DeWitt repeatedly points out that Epicurus' teaching method was synoptic. He started with the conclusions (ethical and physical). As for a doctor, the first priority was to heal the patient. That's probably as far as many Epicureans went. The details that would allow one to construct the entire framework from the ground up were reserved for advanced students. The Canon would have been at the end, not the beginning. If I recall correctly, I think DeWitt notes that even Lucretius probably didn't have access to the book(s) discussing the Canon.

Finally, yes, Epicureans should indeed be careful to avoid harming or distorting their senses. I'd say the same for reason too though. We don't denigrate reason - it's essential for doing anything useful with sensory data. We're just careful to point out its proper place.