

# Discussion of the Society of Epicurus' 20 Tenets of 12/21/19

Post by "Cassius" of December 25, 2019 at 4:06 PM

## **SOE1: "Objective" nature is knowable via the sensations.**

Objection To SOE1: The relevant definition of "objective" in dictionary.com is: "not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased." In this context, the most likely way a normal person will interpret the phrase "objective nature," despite the scare quotes around "objective," is that this tenet is saying that there is a reality of nature that is knowable in a way that is not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice. While that can be interpreted in a reasonable way to mean that what you are talking about are observations of a factual nature that can be confirmed by repeated experiment, even that is very ambiguous and overbroad and does not define the context of the point being made. In a philosophic list like this the implication is going to be taken that there are abstract ethical principles existing in nature apart from and independent of human observation. That position is the opposite of the position taken by the Epicurean texts. Per Epicurus the universe has no center, no organizing supernatural or outside force, and nothing exists eternally unchangeable within nature other than the elements and void. The most controversial issues in human life that Epicurus addressed is whether there are things such as "virtue" or "good" or "moral worthiness" or "supernatural gods" that exist for all people at all times and all places. This is where people like Catherine Wilson, and Hiram in many of his writings, get Epicurus wrong. Epicurus held clearly (explicitly in PD 30-40, and many other places implicitly) that there is no absolute or "objective" morality of any kind. Starting off the list with a sentence that can be read to imply that objective morality exists, or even that there is a single perspective from which any matter of any kind can be viewed as always the same over time and place, undercuts this key aspect of Epicurean thought.

## **SOE2: "Subjective" nature is knowable via the value-setting pleasure and aversion faculties, by which we know what is choice-worthy and avoidance-worthy.**

Objection To SOE2: Much of my objection to SOE1 is relevant here because dividing observations between objective and subjective on an ambiguous and broad basis simply reinforces majority existing religious / secular humanist error that there is a single "good" or proper way to live that is valid for all people at all places and all times. Further, to the extent we are now talking in a way that acknowledges that people \*necessarily\* view nature through their subjective faculties, pleasure and pain are not the only faculties by which nature is knowable - Epicurus set out the full list of the five senses, the feelings (pleasure and pain) and the anticipations. In this context the word "value" can also be ambiguous, because it can be read to imply that pleasure and pain should be used to develop abstractions ("values"?) that

then take the place of the feelings as an absolute rule. If Epicurus stood for anything in the field of ethics, it is that the faculty of feeling, which is purely contextual and changes over time and place and is never exactly the same between individuals, must always be understood to take precedence in choices and avoidance. Even the use of the terms choice-WORTHY and avoidance-WORTHY carries an implication that is non-Epicurean. There is no action or avoidance that is \*always\* to be chosen or \*always\* to be avoided regardless of context, and any description that implies that a course of action should be taken or avoided apart from the particular results that it brings is unEpicurean. The term "worthy" and "worthiness" is to my observation generally associated in most discussion with absolutist religious/secular humanist/idealist systems.

**SOE3: While sensations tell us that something IS or exists, it does not tell us WHAT it is. For THAT cognitive process, we must rely on a faculty tied to both language and memory. The faculty of anticipation helps us to recognize abstractions and things previously apprehended.**

Objection to SOE3: This formulation sounds uncomfortably close to Ayn Rand, and suffers from the same ambiguities. The issue is not that everything can be placed into an abstract Aristotelian or Kantian category that floats in the air and to which all must conform. The issue is that "what" a thing is ultimately comes down to "how it relates to us." Language and memory and the faculty of anticipations do not put us in touch with a cosmic system by which we can categorize everything to tell us "what it is" apart from our own existence. The essential point here is that since we are talking about epistemology here, the fundamental must always be kept first that we perceive nature subjectively through our individual faculties, and that there is in fact no cosmic catalog of things or ideas to which we must conform our observations.

**SOE4: We may infer the unseen / un-apprehended based on what has been previously seen / apprehended by any of our faculties; and we may re-adjust our views based on new evidence presented to our faculties.**

Objection to SOE4: First I objection to the use of the word "may." We in fact "must" make judgments (or decide to suspend judgment) if we are going to survive, or hope to live pleasantly. In order to live happily in the face of religion and our questions about the nature of the universe and life after death, we must infer the nature of atoms and void, which are imperceptible, from those things which are perceptible. Also we "must" adjust our views to conform to evidence, and that means both being firm and confident about those things which we have observed to be reliable in the past, while also taking into account new evidence that may come to our attention. The point that this tenet is obscuring is the issue of dogmatism and confidence in our conclusions. Not all conclusions are likely to be subject to change and it is not appropriate to take the modern majority position that in almost any question "anything is possible." For all of human existence there is no reliable evidence that anything has ever been created from nothing, and it is not appropriate to fail to separate questions such as that from

questions that are clearly beyond all human knowledge and on which we have no information whatsoever. As written SOE4 avoids that issue of when to have confidence in our opinions, which is the most important of all.

**SOE5: Our words and their meanings must be clear, and conform to the attestations that nature has presented to our faculties.**

Objection to SOE5: Of course we should be as clear as possible in using words. The issue is what is meant by clarity, and how we go about being clear. The issue that I detect in this tenet is that it carries the implication that nature has "testified" ("attested") some particular abstract truth that is the same for everyone. No, nature has not done that. Nature has simply provided us a set of faculties, including the ability to form abstractions (including words) and it is entirely up to us to convey meaning through the use of words or other methods that have been established in the past by agreement to be assignable to certain observations. Nature has not attested to anyone the meaning of "yellow." Nature has simply set up circumstances in a particular time and place that most humans visualize in a similar way under similar conditions, and to these conditions certain people have assigned the word "yellow" while certain others in other languages have assigned other totally different words. The point that Epicurus was making about clarity, and avoiding going on infinitely without reaching any conclusions, is tied totally to the fundamental that observations are contextual and that different people experience things differently. Clarity comes through examples, not by connection with some abstraction made by supernatural gods, ideal forms, etc.

**SOE6: All bodies are made of particles and void.**

Objection to SOE6: There is a component to this that was essential to Epicurus and is controversial, and that is the issue about whether the elemental particles are themselves indivisible. Epicurus appears to have held that indivisibility is essential for a number of reasons, most apparently leading to the need to point to something that is ultimately unchanging in order for the regularity we see in the universe to be grounded in nature and not in supernatural gods. I agree with him that the issue of indivisibility is critical and needs to be explicitly stated.

**SOE7: Bodies have essential properties and incidental properties.**

Objection to SOE7: This one also is probably too broad. The Epicurean physics is explicitly that there are indivisible elemental bodies which are not composed of anything smaller, AND there are "bodies" which are composed of more than one elemental particle and void. Elemental particles don't really have "essential" properties and they certainly don't have "incidental properties. Elemental bodies have shape and size and the few other characteristics that Epicurus listed, but those properties never change. It might be ok to call those fundamental properties "essential" with some definitions to explain that, but elemental particles never have "unessential" properties so talking about "essential properties" of elemental properties is

probably wrong. As I read the texts and commentaries the term "bodies" is generally used to refer to those combinations of elemental properties that eventually rise in size to become perceptible to our senses. It is at that level that "essential" and "incidental" really comes into play, at the point when you can add and subtract attributes to a thing and make decisions about what is "essential" or not. Freedom or slavery, war or peace, are definitely incidental qualities that can come and go without changing the underlying nature of the thing being discussed (such as society, individuals, groups, or whatever). But it is probably a very different question to evaluate "essential properties." We might say that water is wet and can't be made un-wet without changing its character, but who gets to say what is "Essential" and what is not? Is "essential" not a matter of human decision and definition? The word "essences" is regularly attached to Aristotelian discussions of "essences" as opposed to Plato's "ideal forms," but both "ideal forms" and "essences" are invalid concepts in Epicurean terms.

**SOE8: Nothing comes from nothing.**

Objection to SOE8: This is very close to the way it is stated in the texts and I see no reason to object to this. I will say that Lucretius attaches this to the statement "at the will of the gods" so that he is emphasizing that "nothing comes from nothing at the will of the gods." I need to go back and look at Herodotus to see if the same thing is stated there, but definitely "nothing comes from nothing" is a correct Epicurean statement.

**SOE9: All things operate within the laws of nature, which apply everywhere.**

Objection to SOE9: The concept of "laws of nature" is very troublesome today. It is my opinion that this is regularly interpreted to be the equivalent of saying "laws of nature's god" or even "laws of god" in the sense that it implies that there is some being "Nature" which has adopted a set of rules about how everything must work. I think the proper statement is that the universe operates according to the properties of the essential particles, motion, and void, and that everything that we see arises from the interactions of those three things. There really is no such thing as a "law of nature" that applies everywhere; perhaps if you can somehow stipulate that under exactly the same conditions then the elements will respond the same way, but that seems very different from saying that "the laws of nature apply everywhere."

**SOE10: All that exists, exists within nature. There is no super-natural or unnatural "realm"; it would not have a way of existing outside of nature. Nature is reality.**

Objection to SOE10: I think this one is essentially a correct statement of the Epicurean position.

**SOE11: The end that our own nature seeks is pleasure. It is also in our nature to avoid pain.**

Objection to SOE11: "Nature" in general has no "end." The inanimate/nonliving part of nature has no relation to pleasure. The animate/living part of nature is guided by pleasure and repelled by pain. "Our own nature" -- does that mean we as individuals? If so yes, but that applies to all living things too.

**SOE12: There are three acceptable interpretations of the [Epicurean gods](#): the realist interpretation, the idealist interpretation, and the atheist interpretation.**

Objection to SOE12: What does "acceptable" mean? Acceptable so as to be a member of Society of Epicurus? Acceptable so as to not be considered an enemy of Epicurus? These categories listed here have no generally accepted definitions so would require explanation. I cannot imagine that any interpretation that implies that Epicurus was intentionally being less than honest with his statements on gods would be acceptable to a "Society of Epicurus." And Epicurus' statements were very specific -- he used the term "gods" to refer to naturally-occurring, non-supernatural, non-omnipotent beings which he held do exist somewhere in the universe, but not here on Earth, and having no concerns about us whatsoever, but about which we are able to either perceive or conceive aspects of pleasurable living that can serve as worthwhile things for us to contemplate and emulate. Obviously much has been lost and is unclear but no interpretation that does not accept that Epicurus meant what he said should be acceptable (in my opinion) to a society modeling itself after Epicurus.

**SOE13: The goal of religion is the experience of pure, effortless pleasure.**

Objection to SOE13: This statement seems to me to have no foundation in the Epicurean texts whatsoever. Are you saying "should be" rather than "is"? In that case the goal of a "proper" religion would be to promote pleasure and avoid pain, just as the purpose of every tool would ultimately be the same. But unless I am mistaken you are certainly not meaning to imply that this "is" the goal of every current world religion.

**SOE14: [Death is nothing to us](#) because when we are, death is not and when death is, we are not. Since there is no sentience in death, it is never experienced by us.**

Objection to SOE14: As stated I think this is a pretty accurate summary of the Epicurean position, especially the first sentence. The second sentence is also true, but we do experience death by observing it occur in other living things, and this would probably be the appropriate point to discuss something else that is extremely important: that the "issue of death" is hugely important to us (Epicurus was referring to "the state of being dead" not the many other issues surrounding death). Many many other texts tell us to live aggressively, not waste our time, think about death in the future, etc. with the point being that it is critical to remember that we are going to die so that we are properly motivated not to waste our time.

**SOE15: Under normal circumstances, we are in control of our mental dispositions.**

Objection to SOE15: The "under normal circumstances" probably is so ambiguous that it negates any benefit from this tenet. The Epicurean point in my understanding is that we should work to remain in control of our mental dispositions (like we work to control everything else) so that we maximize pleasure and minimize pain. By mentioning mental dispositions without really stating anything significant about them, the implication is that you are endorsing some kind of Stoic mind control that leads to suppression of emotions. Presumably you would only want to

suggest that painful emotions should be kept under control, but even that would likely be a non-Epicurean interpretation, since it is recorded in Diogenes Laertius that Epicurus said that the wise man feels his emotions more deeply than others, and this is no hindrance to his wisdom.

**SOE16: Choices and avoidances are carried out successfully (that is, producing pleasure as the final product) if we measure**

**advantages/pleasures versus disadvantages/pains over the long term. This means that we may sometimes defer pleasure in order to avoid greater pains, or choose temporary disadvantage, but only and always for the sake of a greater advantage or pleasure later.**

Objection to SOE16: I strongly object to the implication that there is a weighty Epicurean preference for "the long term" in general, over the short term in general. As stated in the Letter to Menoecus the wise man chooses of that which is best, not which is most plentiful. In Epicurean pleasure terms this is going to back to the point that "time" is not at all the only, or the most important, way to measure pleasure. Epicurus did not provide specific methods of measuring pleasure, presumably because Nature did not establish a uniform rule for doing so. We can say that we want to "maximize" pleasure or pursue the "most" pleasure, and minimize pain and pursue the least pain, but those words do not tell us anything about time or intensity or any other specific universal way to minimize pleasure. Is it "worth it" to climb to the top of Mt Everest if you die at the summit? There is no Epicurean universal answer to that question - it is an individual choice. In that case, you only get to make that choice once (if you die at the summit) so you better be right! But there is no Epicurean way to say that the person is "wrong" who chooses to make the climb knowing he will never return.

**SOE17: To live pleasantly, we must have confident expectation that we will be able to secure the chief goods: those things that are natural and necessary for life, happiness, and health. Therefore, whatever we do to secure safety, friendship, autarchy, provision of food and drink and clothing, and other basic needs, is naturally good.**

Objection to SOE18: "Chief goods" is not a term that Epicurus employed and implies that there is an outside ranking of pleasure which does not exist. The natural and necessary observations are helpful for analysis because it helps us consider the result, but WE weigh the result and make our own determinations of how much pleasure and pain is worthwhile - nature does not do that for us and there is no uniform rule established by nature. All of the things you have listed (especially / even autarchy and friendship) are tools that are generally useful in the pursuit of pleasure, but for every single one of these there are going to be times when we forgo or avoid these in our own pursuit of pleasure. Even food and water are to be avoided when fasting is necessary for survival or better health; air to be avoided when holding one's breath to escape danger is necessary; etc. And so it is explicitly wrong to imply that such things are "naturally good" in each and every circumstance. The only thing that Epicurus said is

**\*\*always\*\*** desirable is pleasure itself, which is the result of activities that are themselves always contextual and sometimes to be chosen and sometimes to be avoided.

**SOE18: Autarchy furnishes greater possibilities of pleasure than slavery, dependence, or relying on luck; The unplanned life is not worth living, and we must make what is in our future better than what was in our past.**

Objection to SOE18: This formulation screams out for a "generally" qualification, for the reasons stated above. Yes these observations are generally seen to be likely to produce the most pleasurable results, but Epicurus was very clear in presenting his philosophy as contextual, and the elevation of social choices like autarchy or independence (which implies a kind of radical individualism to many people) is likely to lead to confusion on the broader point. The Epicureans were careful even to evaluate "friendship" in terms of the pleasure it brings, and not as an end in itself.

**SOE19: Friendship is necessary for securing happiness. It is advantageous to promote Epicurean philosophy in order to widen our circle of Epicurean friends.**

Objection to SOE19: As just stated in relation to 18, it is perilous to imply that "friendship" as an abstraction is necessary for happiness. The Epicurean texts are clear that everything is contextual, even friendship, and this statement is not contextual - no individual example of "friendship" or any particular "friend" is stated in the Epicurean texts to be across-the-board necessary. The second sentence in this tenet seems to me to clearly be true, but it is a much more narrow statement than the first sentence.

**SOE20: Human relations should be based on mutual benefit.**

Objection to SOE20: This one pretty well sums up what I see as the major problem with the analysis behind most of the objections above, because it has "humanism" written all over it. Epicurus did not write in terms of "human relations" but in terms of humans pursuing pleasure individually and in groups. The last ten [PD10](#)'s make absolutely clear that while "justice" is an agreement not to harm or be harmed, it is also absolutely clear that there is no way to enumerate such agreements in absolute terms, and it is also clear that such agreements are to be broken immediately when they become disadvantageous to either party's pursuit of pleasurable living. The clear point of these final PD's is that there IS NO Epicurean "Golden rule" that we must always treat others as we would want to be treated ourselves because each decision is going to be based on the circumstances of the individuals involved: there are no ideal virtues, no supernatural morals, no across-the-board rules for which there is any authority to say that we should always follow them. In this formulation, "mutual benefit" is not only hopelessly vague, but the "mutual" part has absolutely no foundation whatsoever and in fact the clear thrust of many other doctrines is the opposite. [PD10](#) emphasizes that depravity has no

absolute definition; that everything must be judged by its result, and the only standard that nature has set is that we find pleasure desirable and pain undesirable. This is the same issue where Catherine Wilson is hopelessly off base when she injects her own social preferences into Epicurean philosophy. In referring to her I give her credit in the recent podcast interview that she admits that she is outside Epicurean orthodoxy in doing so, but the matter isn't just being "outside" orthodoxy -- it turns Epicurean philosophy on its head for ANYONE at ANY TIME to suggest that their own moral or ethical preferences are anything but personal to them.