

# Fixed or Unfixed

Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2020 at 4:09 PM

Oscar:

You are right to see a major distinction in our approaches, but I think there may be more to it rather than taking a position on how much Epicurean philosophy might have changed over the centuries in the ancient world.

For example, when Charles says this:

## [Quote from Charles](#)

However, given the history of the philosophy, it most definitely grew within the following centuries after his death, we see this with Lucretius and the elaboration of the idea of the Atomic Swerve (Clinamen),

(Caution: in this post I am talking exclusively about your question of Hiram's approach vs mine. I cite Charles only because he happened to make this comment here and it's a good example of the type question that sometimes arises. I have seen some people take the position that Lucretius was deviating from Epicurus in many major fundamental ways and that's not what Charles is asserting, but some scholars apparently do.)

I take the position that there is no good reason to think that Lucretius deviated from Epicurus at all, and that the swerve and all other detail in the poem are mostly and probably totally just detail from Epicurus' "On Nature" that we lost from not having Epicurus' own work. And given Lucretius's own statements about his "reverence" and fidelity to Epicurus, there's every reason to think that he did everything he could to remain closely on track.

Now I am not so sure that the same could be said about Philodemus, but again his texts are much more fragmentary and "reconstructed" than Lucretius, so I always give him the benefit of the doubt as well, and look first to translation / reconstruction issues before I conclude that Philodemus intentionally deviated.

In addition, I think that there is good evidence in Diogenes Laertius and Cicero that later Epicureans compromised with stoics and other attackers on at least (1) the nature of the origin of friendship and (2) whether the canon has three legs or four, which is related to the Epicurean position on logic and reason.

I believe Dewitt covers both of these, and I consider both deviations from Epicurus to have been major undermining of the philosophy and contributing to its downfall.

Now the point I want to be clear on is that no doubt there were SCIENTIFIC discoveries of "facts" that would lead to modification of the probabilities Epicurus selected, such as the size of the sun, but I see absolutely no reason to think that any new scientific discoveries to this very day undermine Epicurus' \*approach\* to science, and how to deal with questions that arise when we have less than desirable amounts of evidence.

The divergence that you see between Hiram and myself is I think largely the result of Hiram using sources which are fragmentary, not well vetted, and largely speculative, to modify positions that are well established in the core texts and by the physics. For example that CAN BE NO absolute justice, and anytime Hiram (or Catherine Wilson, or me, or anyone else) implies that all Epicurean would reach the same moral or ethical or justice positions, then we are deviating from the core of the philosophy. I am sure that I fail to be sufficiently on guard and that I occasionally slip. but I perceive that others (let's use Robert Hanrott's blog, for example) simply make no effort to keep to the core position that a certain set of political views are their own, and cannot be asserted as universal using Epicurean philosophy as justification.

So getting back to your original question as to seeing Epicurean philosophy as a "conversation among friends" --- as to the core philosophy I absolutely do not see it that way at all. Certainly there WILL be conversation among friends as to APPLICATION of the philosophy, but the core itself is relatively simple, relatively clear, and being a set of premises about the way nature works is no going to be expected to be the subject of revision. This aspect may well explain any issues that arise from Philodemus -- he may have been extemporizing on his own, or doing his best to extend Epicurean principles to new fields, but I would bet my life that in doing so he made the same point I am making here - that application varies by circumstance, and does not constitute a change in the core philosophy.

Give me evidence of a life after death or a supernatural god and I will be the first to convert to that religion -- but the foundation of the philosophy, which is not open to change, is that there is absolutely no reason to expect that to happen, and so there is no reason to "keep an open mind" toward assertions of that kind, and every reason to guard against compromise and thereby undermining the confidence that we want to have in order to live as happily as possible.

So in sum I see the difference between my approach and Hiram's as both substantive on the issue of staying true to the core (which is that there is no absolute ethics) and procedural (on the question of how to deal with unclear and fragmentary texts, which is the subject addressed in Elayne's recent post.

I am writing this fairly quickly so I may have to revise and extend if I have forgotten something obvious -- and it's really in THAT regard that I see the proper application of "conversation among friends." That's the way I see my discussions with Hiram, with whom I have worked cordially for a long time. We all make mistakes and have different viewpoints, can remain friends as long as we proceed in good faith, but that doesn't mean that after time and reflection and examination of the question that "any position we prefer" is an acceptable basis for goal of a particular group. That's where it makes sense to particularize the goal is writing so that

everyone is clear and can decide whether they are in or out on any particular project.