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

Post by “Cassius” of January 7, 2020 at 3:39 PM

> Quote from Elayne
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> This is one of those places where either I'm different from Epicurus or he would have taken physics data he didn't have access to back then into account and said that we have at least gotten enough info to be very certain there's no supernatural and no absolute. Both of us would feel equally secure in that knowledge even if we arrived at our conclusions differently.

I think what's going on here in our different perspectives probably explains why Epicurus ended up on the "incorrect" side of the size of the sun issue. I suspect that Epicurus was well aware of what the calculations indicated, and that he did not reject the calculations out of hand, but he had to make what he saw as a practical decision to deal with the supernatural claims of the mathematicians who were using their calculations to bolster the argument that the sun and the stars were gods due to their huge size. My suspicion is that he defaulted to his general rule -- a theory must explain ALL the observed facts in order to be held to be correct, and he decided that his observations as to (1) things far away aren't sharp, and (2) bright things don't lose their size so quickly, and (3) maybe other "sensory" arguments, and that those could not be discounted. Since those appeared to be true, and he did not know that the huge distances and/or issues of viewing through the atmosphere would cause distortions, he refused to credit the CONCLUSION that the sun was huge. And he probably calculated that any embarrassment caused by later discovery that he was factually wrong would pale in comparison with the happiness of those who used his argument to discount the supernatural arguments of the Platonists.

And if that was his reasoning (I know I am doing a lot of speculating) I would say that he was right to take the position he did, and I would do the same thing in his place. That's pretty much what I am doing, I admit, even though I have a good degree of confidence that in this situation, there really can''t be a limit to the size of the universe, and that there is an explanation for why everything observed so far may seem to imply a big bang (if in fact it does).

But the real contextual issue is probably not the question of relative amounts of information -- I personally think the most important consideration is that you (and maybe even a majority of our self-selected group) really are different from the run-of-the-mill person who does not have nearly the scientific disposition or background that we have. And I think that this is where DeWitt is right that Epicurus was pursuing a "Philosophy for the Millions." He calculated that his philosophy was needed by everyone, and ESPECIALLY for the non-scientists, who he could not

expect to handle the mental challenge of all the uncertainty that constantly engaging in speculation and uncertainty causes. I do think that he was willing to say that as to these people, it was good for them to trust "authority" that they could tell had their best interests for happy living in mind, and that for these type of people "trust" in their "teachers" was the best course for them to follow -- because they could in no way duplicate or follow the speculative sciences themselves.

I think many of us are comfortable with all the uncertainty of the speculations, and we consider that it's just fun and or even cause for wonder and amazement, as you say. But I think it is true (and was true then) the the "majority" of the people in the world are just not capable or disposed or willing to engage in that kind of constant mental challenge. They want something understandable, effective, and accessible to them that will help them live happily, which after all I think we all agree is established to be the ultimate goal.

For many of us the mental challenge of keeping everything open and juggling in our minds is enjoyable, but for people like that it is terrifying. So while we would never affirmatively lie to them, if we really care about giving them a helpful philosophy of life then we present them with one that is manageable for them, just as we simplify things when we explain difficult issues to children.

Now you may think I am taking it all back but I will say this too: I do think that this approach of requiring a theory to fit ALL observable data before it is entertained as something to give credence to is the correct approach. And that is from each person's perspective, not from an absolute standard of what one or two of the greatest minds might say. If indeed we put that kind of trust in them for good reason, then maybe so, but we are not talking about Epicurus when we talk about Lawrence Krauss or any number of nameless (to the outside world) string physicists. It's just not logical to allow any individual or group of scientists, no matter how brilliant they may be, to say "you need to believe C because my theory says A and B and that adds up to C without any ability of the rest to follow the evidence and the argument. To place that kind of blind faith in a "scientist" seems to me to be no different than a tribesman placing it in a witch doctor.

So this is where I think it comes down, and where you are exactly right speaking for yourself:

> Quote
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> Both of us would feel equally secure in that knowledge even if we arrived at our conclusions differently.

I am thinking that that applies to you, and to many of us here, but it doesn't apply to the "millions." Given the numerous texts about Epicurus' sincere desire to show the way to happiness, I don't think that anyone should see Epicurus' scepticism to the claims of theoretical science, or his reasoning on the size of the sun, to undermine their confidence in him.

And that relates back to the complaint from Cicero about the Epicureans in his view being uneducated: