

Question From Chapter 1 on "Altruism"

Post by "Cassius" of July 5, 2020 at 11:44 AM

[Quote from camotero](#)

This makes me feel uncomfortable on a very deep level. Perhaps it is because I have accepted for a long time as true the concept that universal well-being is achievable.

Camotero:

In making today's recording of the Lucretius today podcast we came across something that I think is similar to this. Here is a passage from [where we currently are in Book 2](#):

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Besides, consider well mankind, the scaly fry of silent fish that swim the flood, the verdant trees, wild beasts, the various kinds of birds, such as flock about the banks of pleasant streams, the fountains and the lakes and those who frequent the thick covers of the woods; consider all these in their several kinds, and you will find them all consist of forms different among themselves. 'Tis by nothing else the tender young knows its own Dam, and thus the Dam distinguishes her young, thus we see each creature knows its own kind, no less than men, and so unite together. ***For often before the gilded temples of the gods a young heifer falls a slain victim beside the alter flaming with incense, and breathes from her heart a reeking stream of blood. The Dam, robbed of her young, beats over the fields and leaves the marks of her divided hoofs upon the pressed grass, and searches every place with careful eyes to find her the young she lost; then stops and fills the branched woods with her complaints, and often returns back to her stall, distracted with the love of her dear young - no more the tender willows, or the herbs freshened with dew, nor can the running streams within the full banks divert her mind, or turn away her care, nor can a thousand other heifers, as they play wantonly over the grass, take off her eye, or ease the pain she feels - so plain it is that she searches for her own, for what she knows full well.*** And thus the tender kids find by their bleat their horned Dams, and so the sporting lambs know their own flocks, and, as by Nature taught, each hastest to the full dug of its own Dam.

In our discussion of this heart-string-tugging passage, I brought up the issue of ethical treatment of animals / animal welfare or whatever you'd like to call it that motivates some people toward vegetarianism.

In my own mind, I find it hard to separate the thought of animals confined in factory farming, or animals confined in "shelters" waiting to be euthanized, from the plight of humans or society in general, as you're talking about. If I allowed myself to think constantly about factory farming of animals, or animals "shelters" with their euthanasia chambers, or elderly people "warehoused" in nursing homes in various forms of stupor, I simply would not be able to function at all.

Now some people might object that these are different categories of problems, but I don't see them at all differently from the same kind of socially desirable results that you're talking about. And the examples I have mentioned are just the living - what about the uncounted millions of people who have died under terrible circumstances in the past? Do they deserve less thought because they died yesterday or an hour ago, versus those who died a year or a decade or a century ago?

And some are going to say something like "Well, we only do WHAT WE CAN..." as if that provides a bright-line philosophical answer to where to stop worrying or being concerned. I don't agree that "what we can" answers anything whatsoever.

So somewhere we have to come to terms with where to draw the lines with our concerns, or else give up the idea that we ourselves "should" live our own lives in any way whatsoever.

I think that's what Epicurus is forcing us to confront, and I think it's right that we confront the issue, or else we dealing as you say with a dream-like situation that has no connection with reality. So we have to get to the bottom of the question of where and when we draw the line as to where to be concerned, and where to stop being concerned, with other living things.

I think you've correctly focused on the problem as "idealism" but we've all got a lot of work to do about how to understand where the lines should be drawn, and why.

Maybe this section from Lucretius, which we also touched on today, gives a hint, and the hint has something to do with the limits of those things that "touch" us:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

For Touch, the Touch (blessed be the Gods above!) is a Sense of the Body, either when something from without enters through the pores, or something from within hurts us, as it forces its way out, or pleases, as the effect of venery tickles as it passes through, or when the seeds, by striking against each other, raise a tumult in the body, and in that agitation confound the Sense; and this you may soon experience, if you strike yourself in any part with a blow of your hand. It is necessary, therefore, that the Principles of Things should consist of figures very different in themselves, since they affect the Senses in so different a manner.

Of course that's a super-broad comment and as we also discussed, "touch" probably here does not really mean "touch" as in the sense "I touch this with my fingers" but something much more broad, as Munro thinks in his notes on this section:

testanda vota.] 434 this point is put with emphasis to shew the vast importance of touch; for as nothing can *tangere et tangi sine corpore*, so nothing can *sine tactu sentire*: all the senses are but different forms of touch: he then enumerates the different ways in which the body can feel; either something enters from without, and gives pleasure or pain; or something takes place in the body, and gives pleasure or pain; or thirdly the atoms in the body itself, before quiescent, are troubled by some collision and so disturb the body's feeling, as for instance when you strike any part of the body. 438 *Aut* from the attraction probably