

References to Epicurus' Attitude Toward The "Place of the Sciences And Liberal Arts"

Post by "Don" of July 18, 2020 at 12:48 AM

My primary concern is with my interpretation of (especially) portions the Letter to Herodotus that sounds like "We don't need to investigate phenomena to find how they actually happen. All we need is an explanation that fits with our sense experience and doesn't make us wonder at our fear the phenomena anymore." I see this (admittedly maybe an incorrect interpretation) as unsatisfying personally. I'm curious as to the workings of the universe, the large and the small. So, I'm both airing my concerns and asking for other interpretations.

I also need to read Philodemus's treatise on methods of inference. But Let's start with the Letter to Herodotus. That's what brought me to this point most recently.

To make it easier to follow the argument, I'm going to replace "solstices, settings and risings, eclipses and the like" or "risings and settings and solstices and eclipses and all kindred subjects" with the simpler "them." **The letter text is bold.** *My notes are italic.*

Letter to Herodotus (excerpt)

[79]"But when we come to subjects for special inquiry,there is nothing in the knowledge of them that contributes to our happiness (μακάριον); but those who are well-informed about such matters and yet are ignorant what the heavenly bodies really are, and what are the most important causes of phenomena, feel

quite as much fear as those who have no such special information--nay, perhaps even greater fear, when the curiosity excited by this additional knowledge cannot find a solution or understand the subordination of these phenomena to the highest causes.

The basic argument here as I see it is:

- *We have people with special knowledge of phenomena.*
- *There is nothing in knowledge of the phenomena that contributes to our happiness (μακάριον)*
- *Those who are well informed are just as fearful as those without special knowledge.*
- *Those with special knowledge may even be more fearful due to their curiosity exciting/agitating them and their inability to find a solution.*

"Hence, if we discover more than one cause that may account for them, as we did also in particular matters of detail, [80] we must not suppose that our treatment of these matters fails of accuracy, so far as it is needful to ensure our tranquillity and

happiness (ἀτάραχον καὶ μακάριον ἡμῶν).

This seems to be saying "If we come up with more than one possible cause, that's fine." I don't know what he's saying in " we must not suppose that our treatment... Fails of accuracy." It seems to be we only have to consider it accurate if it ensures our tranquility and happiness. That's enough. It doesn't matter if it accurately reflects reality.

When, therefore, we investigate the causes of them, as of all that is unknown, we must take into account the variety of ways in which analogous occurrences happen within our experience ; while as for those who do not recognize the difference between what is or comes about from a single cause and that which may be the effect of any one of several causes, overlooking the fact that the objects are only seen at a distance, and are moreover ignorant of the conditions that render, or do not render, peace of mind impossible --all such persons we must treat with contempt.

Who do we treat with contempt? Those who don't recognize what comes from single or multiple causes and are ignorant of what provides for peace of mind. Is the research into the causes of phenomena itself contemptible? Or is it the ignorance of what brings peace of mind?

If then we think that an event could happen in one or other particular way out of several, we shall be as tranquil when we recognize that it actually comes about in more ways than one as if we knew that it happens in this particular way.

*My hang up here is the "if we knew" phrase. If we *think* something happens a certain way (with no proof other than our "good enough" speculation), we can be done and don't need to investigate further. Or is this saying we can accept it could happen *this* way, we can be tranquil. Then later we find out it's another way, we're still tranquil. It doesn't affect us IF we're open to multiple explanations? But we don't go looking to solve which way is correct?*

...

[82] But mental tranquillity means being released from all these troubles and cherishing a continual remembrance of the highest and most important truths.

So, we need to continually remember the "most important truths." Is this what [Cassius](#) was talking about when he mentioned we need to keep in mind no supernatural explanations, etc., in podcast episode 27?

"Hence we must attend to present feelings and sense perceptions, whether those of mankind in general or those peculiar to the individual, and also attend to all the clear evidence available, as given by each of the standards of truth. For by studying them we shall rightly trace to its cause and banish the source of disturbance and dread, accounting for celestial phenomena and for all other things which from time

to time befall us and cause the utmost alarm to the rest of mankind.

Here Epicurus says explicitly that we "study" the feelings and sense perceptions and "clear evidence" to arrive at a "rightly-traced" cause of phenomena. Then we banish fear and dread. No supernatural causes. No superstition. But by study, can he mean research as we would understand it. I get the impression Epicurus didn't want his students studying astronomy and other subjects. Is the clear evidence just what we sense? I see the sun as that large, then it must be that large. Thunder could be produced by A, B, or C. A is good enough for me, I'm not going to investigate whether it's B or C. I shouldn't care which one as long as the one I choose makes me not fear something.

I'm still getting the impression that Epicurus was not advocating open-ended, empirical research into a topic. I'm reading this letter as his advocating:

- *looking at a particular phenomena*
- *gaining information through your senses*
- *feeling pleasure/pain in your reaction to it*
- *thinking of analogous events/situations*
- *coming up with a satisfactory "good enough" explanation that assuages your fear of that phenomena*
- *and moving on.*

If at a later date, someone says "it happens this way," you go "oh, okay" and accept that. But you don't go looking for explanations if more than one will suffice. Maybe this, maybe that. It doesn't matter as long as I accept a non-supernatural explanation but don't get hung up on the "right" answer. That doesn't appeal to me. I personally enjoy contemplating this kind of thing, reading about theories, having my brain twisted in a pretzel by quantum physics, string theory, black holes, etc. I don't fear these phenomena. So does that lack of fear matter here?

I also realize we're dealing with a 2,000 year old philosophy. Epicurus didn't envision string theory, etc. Am I putting a round Epicurean peg in a 21st century square hole?