

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

Post by "Don" of July 18, 2020 at 11:35 AM

I'm taking a look at the [Yonge translation](#) of the Letter to Herodotus and getting an interesting take on this subject (emphasis added):

Quote

"As to us, we find many explanations of the motions of the sun, of the rising and setting of the stars, of the eclipses and similar phænomena, just as well as of the more particular phænomena. And **one must not think that this method of explanation is not sufficient to procure happiness and tranquillity.** Let us content ourselves with examining how it is that similar phænomena are brought about under our own eyes, and let us apply these observations to the heavenly objects and to **everything which is not known but indirectly.**

Let us despise those people who are unable to distinguish facts susceptible of different explanations from others which can only exist and be explained in one single way.

Let us disdain those men who do not know, by means of the different images which result from distance, how to give an account of the different appearances of things; who, in a word, are ignorant what are the objects which can excite any trouble in us.

If, then, we know that such a phænomenon can be brought about in the same manner as another given phænomenon of the same character **which does not inspire us with any apprehension;** and if, on the other hand, **we know that it can take place in many different manners, we shall not be more troubled at the sight of it than if we knew the real cause of it.**

"We must also recollect that **that which principally contributes to trouble the spirit of men is the persuasion which they cherish that the stars are beings imperishable and perfectly happy, and that then one's thoughts and actions are in contradiction to the will of these superior beings; they also, being deluded by these fables, apprehend an eternity of evils, they fear the insensibility of death, as that could affect them.**

What do I say? It is not even belief, but inconsiderateness and blindness which govern them in every thing, to such a degree that, not calculating these fears, they are just as much troubled as if they had really faith in these vain phantoms.

And the real freedom from this kind of trouble consists in being emancipated from all these things, and in preserving the recollection of all the principles which we have established, especially of the most essential of them.

Accordingly, it is well to pay a scrupulous attention to existing phænomena and to the sensations, to the general sensations for general things, and to the particular sensations for particular things.

In a word, we must take note of this, the immediate evidence with which each of these judicial faculties furnishes us; for, if we attend to these points, namely, whence confusion and fear arise, we shall divine the causes correctly, and we shall deliver ourselves from those feelings, tracing back the heavenly phænomena to their causes, and also **all the others which present themselves at every step**, and inspire the common people with extreme terror.

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Here is where my rudimentary Greek is a handicap. I *so* wish I was more fluent to be able to read the original text better. I'm working on that. In the meantime, Yonge provides another perspective.

In this section, Epicurus is specifically discussing with Herodotus celestial phenomena (*many explanations of the motions of the sun, of the rising and setting of the stars, of the eclipses and similar phænomena*) HOWEVER he does also mention **everything which is not known but indirectly**. That last part is still a hang-up for me. But isn't the Epicurean atomic theory something that is "not known but indirectly"? I really need to read Philodemus on this. What is only know "indirectly" must be only ascertained through analogy with what is sensed directly, right? And once we come up with a satisfactory explanation that dispels terror, we can stop our investigation. Or do I have that wrong?

Epicurus says that what **principally contributes to trouble the spirit of men** is that men think the sun, planets, moon, stars, etc., are gods out to punish humans for actions **in contradiction to the will of these superior beings**.

So, Epicurus states that "**if we attend to these points** (i.e., material causes of these phenomena), **namely, whence confusion and fear arise** (i.e., when we attribute divine properties to the planets, etc.), **we shall divine the causes correctly** (i.e., they are only material objects composed of atoms and void)."

SO, am I reading too much into the Bailey translation? It definitely appears from my reading here that Epicurus is not necessarily talking in the general sense about researching the causes of all phenomena although he does bring up the "everything which is not known but indirectly." And is talking about "all [other phenomena] which present themselves at every step" which may "inspire the common people with extreme terror." It appears to me that Epicurus is talking about confronting all phenomena, both the directly sensed and indirectly known, with a commitment to the fundamental teaching that The Universe Is Atoms and Void. Which, for us

"moderns" - shall we say - is not a huge stretch for our minds. I'm getting stuck on the multiple explanations for phenomena within that "All is atoms and void" mindset. Do we go after the "real" cause or surmise a "good enough" cause and wait for someone else to say it's not A it's B. And as long as B is a material and not a supernatural cause, we incorporate that into our knowledge and move along. But we OURSELVES as Epicureans shouldn't go looking for THE cause if we have a "good enough" explanation?

If a scientist is troubled by their search for the "real" cause of a disease or the "real" cause of the birth of the universe or the "real" cause of the mass of a particle in the Higgs Field (I'm out of my depth here!), can they be an Epicurean if that search troubles their mind? They don't feel fear or terror from a vengeful deity, but is that anxiety/trouble incompatible with an Epicurean art to living?