

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

Post by "Cassius" of July 18, 2020 at 2:19 PM

My sense from reading this is that you are eventually going to come out in the right place in all this once you satisfy yourself by rereading the texts and then go back to the basic fundamentals, which include that the observations that there no "absolute truths" in the universe that apply to everyone everywhere, and you focus on the practical aspects of using the canonical faculties to do the best that you can with any given situation, and especially on what the conclusion is about the "ultimate end" - which is the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain within the context of what is possible to each entity.

I think DeWitt rightly stresses how much Epicurus was devoted to practicality, and how also he was developing a general philosophy that applies to everyone regardless of their capabilities and circumstances, and that as a result he is giving broad guidelines about the nature of things rather than specific advice to specific people (since that differs so much according to circumstance).

Formulations like this would bother me greatly too if I thought they accurately reflected Epicurus:

## [Quote from Don](#)

Do we go after the "real" cause or surmise a "good enough" cause and wait for someone else to say

But I reject the idea that this is what Epicurus was saying, for the same reason I reject the "absence of pain" interpretation of Epicurus: the goal of life is PLEASURE, which means as much pleasure as possible and is reasonable to us under our circumstances -- we should NEVER simply go for "anesthesia" and waste our lives avoiding pain as the ultimate goal. The reason that science would advance more under an Epicurean regime than any other, in my view, is that science is the lever by which we use our minds to achieve pleasures and avoid pains in ways that would never be possible without that lever.

So in other words, I think your motivation to see Epicurus as a champion of science and opponent of ignorance is the same reason I see Epicurus as a champion of pleasure and a crusader against pain, without there being any real tension between the two sets of goals.

## [Quote from Don](#)

And once we come up with a satisfactory explanation that dispels terror, we can stop our investigation. Or do I have that wrong?

That's why an Epicurean would never be satisfied with anesthesia, or accepting a "least common denominator" approximation of an explanation in scientific matters when a better one is possible. The reason - to restate it - is that the goal of life is the pursuit of pleasure, and we will never achieve the pleasure that is possible to us if we accept a "good enough to avoid pain" strategy toward living.

To wheel back and cover a specific point, my interpretation of the difference between astronomical issues and issues about atoms appeared to Epicurus to be another issue in practicality: with the stars, we simply have no way to get "up close and personal" to really get our hands on what is going on.

With atoms, on the other hand, we CAN get up close and personal with the bodies that are formed from the atoms, and even though we can't see or touch the atoms themselves, we can (to use an example from the Lucretius covered in Episode 17) see enough around us to conclude that EVERYTHING we can see and touch is divisible, thus we are justified in concluding that atoms never grow large enough for us to touch ourselves, and thus we conclude that there is a limit to their size.

The standard question that seems to me that follows after that is always going to be "Well what about atoms on the other side of the moon, or other places you can't see? How do you know that there aren't super-huge atoms there?" And there I think we have to turn to the arguments in "on Methods of inference" or other fragments that are left to us. I don't recall that the material there is particularly as clear as I would like it to be either, but in referring to the [DeLacy commentary](#) (which I recommend probably before even reading the text itself) I think the main issue becomes choosing between inferences based on human senses/anticipations/feelings vs inferences based on dialectical/logical/syllogisms. I gather Epicurus interpreted the conflict as posing a choice between (1) we do the best we can with our human faculties, and (2) we defer to an inhuman form of "logic" which is not tied to reality but which is ultimately mystical even in the way that Plato and Aristotle advocated it.

And I think the final answer therefore involves coming to terms with our limitations as human beings and our willingness to be like all other animals, and to work within the confines of our abilities without being cowed into the submission of priests and other manipulators who are willing to lie to us that they have access to a superior knowledge to which we, due to our lesser status, do not have access. That's a lie, and we avoid it by understanding that in the nature of things no one has such knowledge, nor is it proper for us to think that it can exist.