

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

Post by "Elayne" of July 19, 2020 at 8:53 AM

[Don](#) -- I am going to summarize my opinion about this issue, so I have it in one place. I might change my mind with a strong argument against this, but right now I feel pretty definite about my position.

I find the strong assertion of "this is how it is", based on reason and analogy, in the section of Lucretius we just read as incompatible with Epicurean philosophy as I understand and practice it. The philosophy is just fine, in my opinion, but this particular approach of stating hypotheses about unobserved processes in a manner as if the hypotheses are factual is a mistake.

It is inconsistent with the Canon of knowledge, that we know what is true by observation, prolepsis, and feeling. The insistence on not using reason to determine truth (vs practical use of reason to decide on wise action, based on observed truth) was one of the primary things that drew me to Epicurus.

I have for years said the atheists should not celebrate a Day of Reason. They should have a Day of Evidence.

I don't have any trouble with Epicurus saying that the possibility of multiple explanations for a single phenomenon is not a problem-- I agree. What I have trouble with is the way Lucretius is saying, to paraphrase, "it's like this, and we know it by analogy and reason." No. We do not know, because that is not how we "know" things.

I feel like Epicurus' language about these things, in the full context of his work, is more adherent to the Canon than the way Lucretius is presenting it. But anywhere that he presents a hypothesis as if it were decided fact, I disagree strenuously.

And it wouldn't have mattered if I had lived back then and not known the physics we know now-- my fears would not be relieved if someone tried to reassure me using a method of determining truth that I already knew to be faulty. If the goal is to relieve my anxiety, it would not work to use that kind of extrapolation. I wouldn't trust it, and I would remain anxious about what was really going on. I would not trust someone who made assertions without evidence about the rest of what they were telling me.

And leaving things that are unknown as so far blank spots on our map is fine with me, as it also appeared to be for Epicurus. That is completely different from the Skeptic position of saying we can't know anything at all.

Hypotheses are fine-- sometimes they lead to experiments which can test them, and sometimes they are just interesting.

Most importantly, because everything comes down to pleasure, why do I want to avoid confusing hypotheses with facts?

1) Because I would know my ideas about reality were derived from reason, not observation, and I would remain anxious and doubtful about my conclusions

2) Because misinformation can lead to unwise choices, more pain than pleasure, whereas being aware of unknown areas is fine. One can still make pragmatic decisions while remaining aware of uncertainties.

The issue of how much inquiry and science learning relates to pleasure is an individual preference. Like people who enjoy opera or the Three Stooges or both. I definitely get a lot of pleasure from science.

My argument against the supernatural gods going around interfering with humans has more to do with a complete lack of evidence, and this was also true in Epicurus' time. Observing nature helps a person notice that supernatural action does not show up, and a lot of this is from the predictability of natural processes that Lucretius has already made note of, that we never see the bizarre things happen that would be frequent if reality were not material. That is a reasoning process, to be sure, but it is tightly tied to observations and is not the same as the leaps of analogy in the section we just read. One does not need to be a physicist or neuroscience to understand that line of argument.