

To What Extent, If Any, Does Modern Physics Invalidate Epicurean Philosophy?

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2020 at 2:20 PM

Cassius responded:

Alan I don't have too much trouble with that analysis, but I can imagine a strong possibility that Epicurus would go further than that. When you say "To be clear, that is not to say that we are 100% confident that there is no afterlife. Such a declaration could only be based on sound deduction, which I do not know that we have..." I think there are a couple of issues there. First is the issue of being "100% confident." What does that even mean (I ask rhetorically)? I think Epicurus might say that being "100% confident" might be a false standard, if what is implied here is some kind of god-like omniscient certainty which we would previously rule out as an impossibility in an atomistic universe.

Also, I am not sure that Epicurus would admit that the no-afterlife conclusion could not be based on sound deduction. Is "being there" or "observing it with our own eyes" absolutely required for a deduction to be considered sound? Again I think the answer is "no," with the deduction being based on the conclusions that only the ultimate particles are eternal, and all else is subject to dissolution, which would again be a combination and interplay of observations about the scene and deductions about the unseen.

We are probably skirting the issue of "dogmatism" here and what Epicurus meant when he apparently wrote about how knowledge of certain things is possible, while also maintaining a practical view that some things of tremendous importance to us (life after death, perhaps life on other worlds) will never be open to our direct observation. Are we forever foreclosed from being confident about things that we cannot see? I think Epicurus would say that at least in some situations (life after death; existence of supernatural gods) we can in fact be confident. Now we individually may have a sliding scale of our own confidence in many of the other conclusions, but I personally have no problem accepting with confidence his arguments that there is essentially no "limit" to the size of the universe, and I am also confident that given an advanced enough spaceship to make the travel time manageable, we will to a certainty find life on other worlds. And following further what they apparently described as isonomia, that nature never makes only a single thing of a kind, and that there is a sort of distribution of things in the universe, I personally am also quite confident that we will find that there are living beings which are technologically further advanced than we are, and that it is also very likely that some of them have essentially perfected a means of sustaining themselves from death for a duration that may not have a future limit.

So those are examples where I personally find Epicurean philosophy compelling on many additional details. I don't have any intention of running a cult so I have no right or intention of

stating where the line is between who is an Epicurean and who is not, but I do think the things we are discussing, and where we are already in large agreement, are near the core of what it ought to mean to consider oneself to be an Epicurean. And for me, these things go far beyond the more practical homespun advice on things like "natural and necessary" which are very useful, but not core philosophical ideas. (Of course that's another separate topic too, but the key point would be that in an atomistic universe no universal standard is possible and choices must be evaluated contextually, while the observation that "natural and necessary" is a helpful guideline is a secondary idea in that it is just a specific application of the key point to a particular context.)