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

Post by “Cassius” of August 16, 2020 at 11:23 AM

We will address some of these issues in the podcast that was recorded today in a way that most should find satisfactory.

To the extent that "some" in Philos' comment refers to **me**, the point I am making is that physics does not exist alone in its own world. Epicurus confronted in his day, and we confront today, arguments that are based on "words" - "logic" - and that those arguments are of concern to many people. We are always going to be faced with questions that are essentially "You don't know because you haven't personally been there / done that / seen that / etc." It is important to understand how we respond to those questions, what is involved in "waiting," what kind of standards of "certainty" we should expect to hold ourselves to, and what is an appropriate level of skepticism to hold toward various things.

Those who are primarily immersed in scientific pursuits are not generally going to be as concerned with those contentions as those who are not. However in Epicurus' day it was considered a serious philosophic argument to contend that it was impossible to walk across a room, and even today there are all sorts of logical and ontological arguments for the existence of god and similar questions waiting to trap the unwary.

Not everyone needs help in those areas, but there are a lot of people who get concerned with arguments like those who need help in responding. For them, no amount of "physics" is going to be enough.

So when Philos says:

> Quote
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> The Epicurean physics needs to have a modern adjustment, while at the same time not losing any of the most important consequences for the ethics.

I would say that Epicurean philosophy is ultimately not about any particular and precise physics position (and in that I think we are agreed). The issue is more that Epicurean physics were derived using a particular approach to knowledge (the canonical faculties vs "rationalism") and if we don't learn the details of that method then we'll never understand the appropriate consequences for the ethics.

It is very important to observe the resistance that Epicurus displayed toward accepting contentions based on mathematics, geometry, or other aspects of logical modeling. Such conclusions can actually or apparently contradict what we observe through the senses, and that is why we are talking about these issues and need to continue to do so.

Studying the reasoning behind "the swerve," for example, will always be more useful for understanding Epicurus' thought process than it will ever be for explaining the movement of atoms.

The same goes for the infinite universe, life on other words, immutability, indivisibility, and the rest. That is why these issues cannot be dropped as if they were unimportant to talk about.

I'll close this comment by observing that in my ten years of internet involvement in Epicurus, I do see this as a recurring issue. People who approach Epicurus purely from the scientific perspective don't tend to appreciate the "logical" issues. People who approach Epicurus from a "history of philosophy" perspective or an "ethics" perspective don't tend to appreciate the physics of Epicurus and Lucretius, and they hardly spend any time at all on the letters to Herodotus or Pythocles, or on Lucretius' poem.

Both perspectives are important to understanding Epicurus, and we should not let the varying perspectives become at war with one another.