

The Dangers of Misdirected Increase of Knowledge

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2020 at 10:19 AM

I agree with what you are saying, Susan, but there's a part of this that I think is dangerous to let go, echoing from Lucian. I think I quoted this recently in a similar context but no one ever accused me of not being repetitive 😊

Quote

And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics; the poor uneducated 'fat-heads' might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by skepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility.

The point being that I think it's a pretty fundamental part of a basic Epicurean education to have near the top of one's mind at least an outline-level understanding of a "rule" that starts flashing red whenever we confront something that seems "over-the-line" as a lie and an impossibility.

Getting back to the title of the topic, I think it's dangerous to ever consider that any area of knowledge is off limits or to be avoided *per se*, even though for all the reasons Epicurus is stating, a prudent person does not waste more time on them than might be absolutely necessary.

Probably the category of quantum woo is right up there nowadays, at least in some circles, with the claims of traditional religion. I am not young anymore, but I suspect especially with young people going through establishment education, it's possible even that quantum woo might be even more present than straight religious arguments. So that's the reason the topic interests me - we ought to be able to articulate, even if the precise imposture of quantum woo escapes us, why it is we are confident that the whole thing is a lie and an impossibility.

I am thinking that the general description of the answer is going to involve affirming how the senses (the three legs of the canon, actually) are really what the meaning of "truth" and "reality" is all about to us, and that any impactful claims which cannot be validated using that method is in fact, for us, a "lie and an impossibility" and to be treated as such. I think also that this is closely related to the direct argument in Lucretius that he who asserts that knowledge is impossible is in a way "upside down" and has to be rejected out of hand.

That's where I think we can improve - I do not think we are there yet in expanding the meaning of that material in Lucretius, which is hinted at in other aspects of the texts, in way that is clear and meaningful.

For example, it's taking me far too long to state the issue in this post -- it ought to be reducible to something very simple and memorable, along the lines of this excerpt from Lucretius book four. Probably if I had to rank everything I have read in the Epicurean texts, this is one of the most important to me:

1743: Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards. And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before, to lead him into such a knowledge) from whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what was it that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty? You will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us? Will reason, derived from erring sense, claim the privilege to contradict it? Reason - that depends wholly upon the senses, which unless you allow to be true, all reason must be false.

Munro: Again if a man believe that nothing is known, he knows not whether this even can be known, since he admits he knows nothing. I will therefore decline to argue the case against him who places himself with head where his feet should be. And yet granting that he knows this, I would still put this question, since he has never yet seen any truth in things, whence he knows what knowing and not knowing severally are, and what it is that has produced the knowledge of the true and the false and what has proved the doubtful to differ from the certain. You will find that from the senses first has proceeded the knowledge of the true and the false and that the senses cannot be refuted. For that which is of itself to be able to refute things false by true things must from the nature of the case be proved to have the higher certainty. Well then, what must fairly be accounted of higher certainty than sense? Shall reason founded on false sense be able to contradict them, wholly founded as it is on the senses? And if they are not true, then all reason as well is rendered false.

Bailey: Again, if any one thinks that nothing is known, he knows not whether that can be known either, since he admits that he knows nothing. Against him then I will refrain from joining issue, who plants himself with his head in the place of his feet. And yet were I to grant that he knows this too, yet I would ask this one question; since he has never before seen any truth in things, whence does he know what is knowing, and not knowing each in turn, what thing has begotten the concept of the true and the false, what thing has proved that the doubtful differs from the certain? You will find that the concept of the true is begotten first from the senses, and that the senses cannot be gainsaid. For something must be found with a greater surety, which can of its own authority refute the false by the true. Next then, what must be held to be of

greater surety than sense? Will reason, sprung from false sensation, avail to speak against the senses, when it is wholly sprung from the senses? For unless they are true, all reason too becomes false.