

Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 5:22 PM

One of the difficulties in quoting the texts is that cases can be made for conclusions out of alignment with the philosophy as a whole, if one is not cautious. Although I like DeWitt, I don't consider him necessarily accurate on every single issue, and I feel most confident taking the PDs, VS's, and letters as a whole than I do working from his quotes.

I could quote Epicurus on specifics about elementary particles which have clearly been shown incorrect by experimental data. If I insisted someone must adhere to that or not be considered Epicurean, I would think refusing to integrate new evidence would make me no longer Epicurean. Because I am using his basic process, I think needing to update specific details, such as about how the senses function, is in keeping with the original philosophy.

In the same way, we have new information about how the brain works that I think requires careful consideration of the details regarding the trustworthiness of individual prolepses. We clearly cannot say all intuitions are true-- no one here I think is arguing that. And now that we know humans have a documented tendency to assign agency, and we know more about dreams than Epicurus possibly could have guessed, I think it is not Epicurean if we fail to consider how this affects certain details about the prolepses.

For the justice prolepsis, and many of our deeply embedded patterns, there is not an outside standard which would contradict us. Justice has no meaning apart from prolepsis. For another example, simply the action of perceiving size along a spectrum is a thought pattern, a prolepsis. Assigning names to objects is a thought pattern. Where we see boundaries between objects-- a thought pattern. Object permanence is one. We couldn't even think at all in a way we would recognize as thinking without these thought patterns. Some prolepses are such a part of our thoughts that we literally can't encounter reality without them. We do not perceive "raw" sense data-- we automatically organize it, in species specific and sometimes individual specific ways. When I read about the prolepses, I thought Epicurus was absolutely brilliant for getting this. I knew it already, but I had access to so much research and didn't figure it out myself. It's old hat to modern researchers, but back then? It bowled me over. What an intellect!

Those are the prolepses without which we cannot function. They are fundamental and different from both feelings and senses. They are what keeps the philosophy from being entirely empirical, because they cannot be taken out of the picture.

There are other intuitions which make assertions about material fact, such as agency perception, sunk cost fallacy, proximity bias-- these prolepses had evolutionary advantages, but when held up to the light of evidence, they aren't as reliable. These are intuitions which can actually be overcome by repeated consideration of evidence. It's possible to function without them, but usually only by intentionally planning to do so.

I cannot imagine Epicurus ignoring research about hyperactive agency detection, the neurobiology of dreams, etc. It would be incompatible with the whole of his philosophy to stick with old explanations for those phenomena when we have newer evidence for other causes that fits our observations better, from a physics standpoint. To me it is nearly insulting to him to think he would not integrate the newer research.

That doesn't mean anyone has to outright ignore such experiences or that I can say "what you think is happening definitely isn't happening -- but it has to be on the table to question these reports, in light of evidence. To use science to study ourselves is Epicurean.

As to whether a pig could be a god-- IMO we can't say that isn't possible. We would have to establish a standard for rationality and virtue for another species whose minds we can only guess at. We do not propose any absolute virtues, so how would we know how to recognize them in another species?

The emphasis on natural science in his writing is much stronger than details about the gods.

"[PD12](#). A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that, without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed."

and here, when he talks about direct perception, I have read this as referring to the senses. We can't possibly refer opinion to unquestioned intuition when we know intuition is often counter to evidence. All would be "full of doubt and confusion" if we had to accept dreams on the same basis as physics.

"PD22. We must consider both the real purpose, and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion."