Making Epicurean Canonics Understandable

Post by “Elayne” of November 1, 2020 at 8:56 AM

Some miscellaneous thoughts...

Don, as far as atoms or molecules and their shapes-- Epicurus was talking about indivisible particles, which would be what we now call elementary particles. He reasoned that they would have to be innumerable, and that isn't what things appear to be at present. There's no strong reason why elementary particles would have to be innumerable, and right now it looks like there are a fairly small number of types. I do think he was incredibly insightful, and I would have been fine with these ideas as _hypotheses_ rather than as conclusions.

On the multiple explanations-- that is also ok but I don't see mention of the possibility of explanations that have not been thought of yet.

The multiple answers part reminds me of medicine today. When we write our "Assessment and Plan" section of medical notes, the assessment contains a "differential diagnosis"-- the possible diagnoses that would fit the patient's symptoms, ranked in order of likelihood according to best fit. There's always the awareness that there could be something else not listed. And then there's a plan for how to pin things down, what tests we are going to do. Some of the tests clearly rule out certain possible diagnoses... other times we are just improving the reliability of our working diagnosis.

I don't know if there is a word for the group of possible conclusions in physics, a sort of differential diagnosis of matter.

At least one of the conclusions Epicurus thought could have no possible other explanation is longer considered accurate-- the concept of "void." As far as I can tell, physicists today consider a "pure vacuum", even between atoms or particles, to be an idea, not something that actually exists. Another is the conclusion that the universe had no beginning-- that is unclear, but there's no reason IMO that material reality with a beginning re-introduces the possibility of supernatural gods. As Martin has said, for our current purposes, the universe has been around long enough that it might as well have had no beginning.

It seems like a waste of time to me to get upset about research findings which suggest some of our fundamental understandings about the nature of reality need to be overturned. This happens every so often, and I think it is wisest to be willing to abandon _any_ conclusion no matter how much we care about it, or at least hold a particular conclusion more loosely when it is challenged. Sometimes experimental data throws all our models in disarray-- we don't know what it means, whether the data had issues or our models have issues, but there's no reason to

insist on which way it is pending further investigation.

Epicurus thought anxiety was produced by the unknown, but I will say from my clinical experience that it is more often produced by not having learned to be comfortable with the unknown. The cure for an anxious patient who can't let go of the need to be sure is not, it turns out, further evidence or hard evidence-- that doesn't work. It makes them more anxious, which is counter-intuitive. The treatment is learning that uncertainty doesn't kill them, and that they can go on enjoying life even if they don't know everything. We would not have known this solution, which is counter to what Epicurus thought, if we had not done research. I've helped patients with this in person enough times to be convinced of it with my own senses.

For example, parents who want to reassure an anxious child that there are no monsters will intuitively make a show of shining a light in the closets and under the bed to prove nothing is there. For anxious children, this backfires in them requiring more and more elaborate reassurance, often taking hours. When young, some will respond to "monster spray" on the pillow, but this doesn't work for the truly anxious. There is no level of proof they will accept. What does work? Saying "I see you are afraid of monsters these days. I remember when I used to be afraid of that. Can you draw me a picture?" and just proceed as if their fear isn't anything to worry about-- it is normal.

Even though Epicurus thought that at a certain point, there was no pleasure reason to keep investigating phenomena, I am not sure I agree with that, besides just the pleasure of science. Much of what we have learned so far about physics has been used to develop real world applications. How do we know yet what we might be able to do with more information which might help solve problems and create more pleasure than pain? Yes, physics research led to nuclear weapons, but it also led to advances in medicine. We would have been able to relieve Epicurus' kidney stones today using technology from applied physics.

In medicine, we have a saying "don't marry your diagnosis too soon", which reminds me of what Epicurus said about not reaching premature conclusions.