

On "Sober reasoning"

Post by "Hiram" of August 23, 2019 at 4:11 PM

So my neighbor Fran, who has for years considered himself an Epicurean after reading my book, now says he considers himself "agnostic"--that he is OK with "not knowing" (presumably, about God).

He has said this to me after having experienced with mushrooms, and having enjoyed subsequent ecstatic states of mind after his experience, which opened his mind to a whole new reality. I did not try to change his mind, simply have been listening, and he is a friend first and foremost regardless of his views.

It seems to me now that he has equated Epicureanism as a form of atheism (although I think he knows it isn't), and I wonder if he sees Epicureanism as an "ism", a dogmatic and somewhat closed-minded philosophy insofar as it is separate from his recent experiences and he seems to have difficulty reconciling them with E-ism.

I wonder also if this association between philosophy and "sober reasoning" (as per the L Menoecus) means (to some people, at least) that Epicureanism makes irrational / ecstatic experiences difficult to assimilate. I always thought that, in its embrace of FEELING, E-ism actually promoted these experiences.

Either way, it seems like pious or religious experiences (even natural ones, like the ones induced by mushrooms) can be powerful enough to swerve someone into a new path. I think the times we live in require new, coherently Epicurean explanations of mysticism that are based on the study of nature. The ancient ones (where divine photons from outer space interfere with our mind) are not, in my view, convincing. There is need, I think, for a new set of theories of mysticism.

Post by "Cassius" of August 23, 2019 at 7:55 PM

Hiam it sounds to me like he never took an interest in Epicurean physics(?) Once someone understands the "Nothing comes from nothing" argument I do not see how they can backside into considering the idea of anything supernatural.

And I would not think that hallucinogenic experiences would tempt anyone in that direction unless they never took the physics arguments seriously.

Is this someone who is primarily buying the ethics but not physics or epistemology?

Post by “Joshua” of August 24, 2019 at 12:20 AM

I'm not quite sure how to proceed here. The trouble with any 'theory of mysticism' is that mysticism seems to take over at precisely the moment where language falls apart.

I left the threshold of Buddhism because Buddhists can't bring themselves to speak clearly about rebirth and reincarnation. I have a great deal of sympathy for Thomas Jefferson here;

Quote

Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and no man ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. It is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.

On the other hand I've read deeply in mystical literature, and I am far from regretful of it. I have found by experience that Thoreau is as far as I can go in that direction while keeping on the right side of "bullshit".

I can be elevated, even comforted, by the metaphor of the poet; but talk of miracles, and I fall promptly on my face.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 24, 2019 at 1:52 AM

My embryonic take on this is that there are bizarre and "mystical" experiences that people may have which can be explained using Epicurean physics in a similar fashion to the way Epicurus explained thunder and lightning and the like.

We have made incredible advances in science since Epicurus's time. In areas like weather, sensations, dreams, gravity, etc, the Greeks seem quite primitive to us. I'm suggesting that there are many areas where our knowledge is as primitive as the Greeks, one of which is "mysticism". The proper approach, to me, is to address individual mysteries with Epicurus's methodology aided by modern science. We now have advanced biology and physics; quarks, strangeness and charm, dark matter....

Discarding the unexplained as hogwash is no better than attributing it to the supernatural. Epicurus was quite good at offering multiple explanations for phenomena, while meeting his standards of intellectual rigor and avoiding dogma. And he knew when to quit, removing fear of the unexplained and moving on.

Post by “Cassius” of August 24, 2019 at 4:38 AM

[Joshua](#) Do you have a good link for that Jefferson quote?

[Godfrey](#) That reminds me that Lucretius' extensive discussion of images and dreams might be relevant to him.

Post by “Joshua” of August 24, 2019 at 9:30 AM

[Cassius](#) Here's that¹

[Godfrey](#) I have taken the easy way out, haven't I.

The place to begin here is in separating the *content* of the claim from the *sensation* of the claimant. I am far from denying the mystical experience *as a sensation*. If you experienced something incredible while you were on acid, my explanation will be simple; that's the sensation the brain experiences while on acid. The sensation is genuine. But the "vision", far from imparting something intelligible, merely reveals the physical nature of the mind (or 'soul', if we prefer). Consciousness emerges from the neurochemistry of the brain. All we had to do to alter the mind, was to alter the neurochemistry.

When neurologists scan the brains of accomplished Buddhist monks in meditation, they see interesting things. Unusual patterns of activity, suggesting that these practitioners are able to exploit neuroplasticity² so that compassion is their native response rather than fear, contempt, ego, etc.

This is good news for the practice of philosophy as a contemplative tradition, But it isn't evidence in support of other Buddhist claims, like karma and rebirth, the six realms, or nirvana.

I hope that clarifies my position somewhat. I have to go work now!

-josh

¹<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-10-02-0167>

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive...passion/397706/>

Post by “Godfrey” of August 24, 2019 at 1:08 PM

[Cassius](#) Lucretius seems extremely relevant!

[Joshua](#) I wasn't trying to imply that you were slacking, more just thinking it through for myself. 👍 You make a good point about separating the interpretation from the sensation. Having done that, we can address the sensation with science, the Canon, reason to the extent that it removes our mental disturbances.

There will always be mystery: it's part of what makes life interesting! As Epicureans we just approach them differently than people with a more dogmatic or Platonic bent.

Post by “Hiram” of August 25, 2019 at 12:03 AM

I don't know how well he knows the physics but he's a librarian and very well read.

When I think of theory of contemplation I am thinking mainly of this quote by Sam Harris:

<https://samharris.org/killing-the-buddha/>

A Contemplative Science

What the world most needs at this moment is a means of convincing human beings to embrace the whole of the species as their moral community. For this we need to develop an utterly nonsectarian way of talking about the full spectrum of human experience and human aspiration. We need a discourse on ethics and spirituality that is every bit as unconstrained by dogma and cultural prejudice as the discourse of science is. What we need, in fact, is a [contemplative](#) science, a modern approach to exploring the furthest reaches of psychological well-being.

Post by “Cassius” of August 25, 2019 at 9:17 AM

[Quote from Hiram](#)

I don't know how well he knows the physics but he's a librarian and very well read.

Probably that means he is like many people, so I won't direct this comment at him, but to the many that I observe who act like the physics is absolutely irrelevant. They miss entirely why it is important, and so they never understand what they are missing, and why it supports (and in fact is the essential base for) the ethics. Pretty much the same thing as the epistemology - it is a required base, and if you don't understand the theory of knowledge you'll never have confidence in your conclusions.

As we think about structured paths for helping bring people along in Epicurean philosophy, we ought to find a way to stress that this is essential, and discourage people from going further til they understand the base. Because if they don't understand the base they will inevitably backslide, or mutate into something else, never really understanding Epicurus at all.