

Can the senses be wrong?

Post by "Garden Dweller" of October 6, 2019 at 12:48 PM

One of the foundations of Epicurus teachings is that our understanding of nature comes through our senses.

In order to find happiness, one must live in accord with laws of nature.

Our senses are the most direct connection with the natural world, far more direct than our understanding and learning about the natural world that we receive through communication with others.

Our intellect provides us with a response to what we sense in the natural world, which is pleasure, pain, or indifference.

Epicurus teaches that we should build an ethical framework on how to live by avoiding pain and seeking pleasure.

The foundation of this ethical framework is our sensory perception.

Can our senses be wrong? Could they be disturbed, modified or distorted in some way?

Some examples of ways that are senses are disturbed are intoxication or mental illness. Humans may also be affected by psychological methods (hypnosis) or by application of electrical charges to the nervous system.

Since some persons do not have robust and reliable use of their senses, does this mean that those people are not able to use Epicurean techniques to develop an ethical framework?

Should the student of Epicurus carefully guard against anything that would disturb, modify or distort one's senses and sensory observation of the natural world?

Post by "Todd" of October 6, 2019 at 4:32 PM

I'm sure others will weigh in, but here's my take.

As to whether the senses can be wrong, it's important to be precise about what we mean. The senses themselves simply register data. Our reason has to interpret that data. What we see is

shapes and colors, light and dark. Deciding that the combination of shapes and colors means there is a horse across the field involves reason. If we get closer, and realize it's not a horse, but a cow, that was an error of judgment (reason), not an error of the senses.

I'd say the examples you gave are probably not really examples of the senses reporting falsely. In my (limited and non-professional) understanding, your examples sound more like the brain conjuring up data that did NOT come from the senses. But for practical purposes maybe that's a distinction without a difference.

A person who has no use of any of their senses would basically be in a vegetative state. That person wouldn't be able to make much use of Epicurean teachings; nor would they be able to make use of any other philosophy; nor would they be able to do much of anything at all.

A person who has limited use of their senses would be able to follow Epicurean teachings, but of course it would be more difficult for them, to the extent they are lacking reliable sensory inputs - just as everything else in life would likewise be more difficult. But such a person can and should make use of whatever sensory data they have to produce as much pleasure for themselves as possible.

Also of note, Epicurus did not expect his students to build their own ethical framework. DeWitt repeatedly points out that Epicurus' teaching method was synoptic. He started with the conclusions (ethical and physical). As for a doctor, the first priority was to heal the patient. That's probably as far as many Epicureans went. The details that would allow one to construct the entire framework from the ground up were reserved for advanced students. The Canon would have been at the end, not the beginning. If I recall correctly, I think DeWitt notes that even Lucretius probably didn't have access to the book(s) discussing the Canon.

Finally, yes, Epicureans should indeed be careful to avoid harming or distorting their senses. I'd say the same for reason too though. We don't denigrate reason - it's essential for doing anything useful with sensory data. We're just careful to point out its proper place.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2019 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Garden Dweller](#)

Can our senses be wrong? Could they be disturbed, modified or distorted in some way?

Oh absolutely!

Garden Dweller this question tells me that first and foremost I would urge you to read the DeWitt book, as this is covered in great detail.

I am sure others could improve on what I am about to say but the thumbnail is that (as DeWitt points out) the senses are never strictly speaking giving us an opinion at all. The senses are giving us a direct and unfiltered perception of what they are receiving, and it is up to us to interpret that, to learn how to use it, and to judge if the perceptual data they are reporting has been distorted by conditions that intervene between us and the subject of our attention.

We can and should go into this in great detail, but i am about to be called away. The one thing in addition to DeWitt that I would mention is that it is important to review Book 4 of Lucretius in this regard.

The meat of Book 4 is discussing exactly this issue - the matter of "images" and "illusions" and how we should deal with them without letting the distortions undermine our confidence in the senses.

Here is a part I have at hand to paste starting at about line 421. Reading this it is impossible for anyone of good faith to buy the argument that Epicurus held "all senses to be true" in any way other than as explained by Dewitt: The senses are "true" in the sense of "honest witnesses" -- the report exactly what they receive, but it is in the MIND that judgment about what is perceived is made, and THAT is where the possibility of error must be addressed:

[421] Observe, when your mettled horse stands still with you in the middle of a river, and you look down upon the rapid stream of the water, the force of the current seems to drive your horse violently upwards, and hurry you swiftly against the tide; and on which side soever you cast your eyes, all things seem to be borne along, and carried against the current in the same manner.

A long portico, though it be of equal breadth from one end to the other, and reaches far, supported by pillars of equal height, yet when you stand at one end to take a view of its whole extent, it contracts itself by degrees to a narrow point at the further end; the roof touches the floor, and both sides seem to meet, til it terminates at last in the sharp figure of a dark cone.

The sun, to Mariners, seems to rise out of the sea, and there again to set and hide his light; for they see nothing but the water and the sky; but therefore you are not to conclude rashly that the senses are at all deceived.

To those who know nothing of the sea, a ship in the port seems disabled, and to strive against the waves with broken oars; for that part of the oar and of the rudder that is above the water appears straight, but all below, being refracted, seems to be turned upwards, and to be bent towards the top of the water, and to float almost upon the surface of it.

So when the winds drive the light clouds along the sky in the night, the moon and stars seem to fly against the clouds, and to be driven above them in a course quite opposite to that in which they naturally move.

And if you chance to press with your fingers under one of your eyes, the effect will be that every thing you look upon will appear double, every bright candle will burn with two flames, and all the furniture of the house will multiply and show double; every face about you, and every body, will look like two.

Lastly, when sleep has bound our limbs in sweet repose, and all the body lies dissolved in rest, we think ourselves awake; our members move, and in the gloomy darkness of the night we think we see the sun in broad day-light, and, though confined in bed, we wander over the heavens, the sea, the rivers, and the hills, and fancy we are walking through the plains. And sounds we seem to hear; and, though the tongue be still, we seem to speak, when the deep silence of night reigns all about us.

Many more things of this kind we observe and wonder at, which attempt to overthrow the certainty of our senses, but to no purpose - for things of this sort generally deceive us upon account of the judgment of the mind which we apply to them, and so we conclude we see things which we really do not; for nothing is more difficult than to distinguish things clear and plain from such as are doubtful, to which the mind is ready to add its assent, as it is inclined to believe everything imparted by the senses.

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) whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what it was that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

But 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. Can the ears correct the eyes? Or the touch the ears? Or will taste confute the touch? Or shall the nose or eyes convince the rest?

This, I think, cannot be, for every sense has a separate faculty of its own, each has its distinct powers; and therefore an object, soft or hard, hot or cold, must necessarily be distinguished as soft or hard, hot or cold, by one sense separately, that is, the touch. It is the sole province of another, the sight, to perceive the colors of things, and the several properties that belong to them. The taste has a distinct office. Odors particularly affect the smell, and sound the ears. And therefore it cannot be that one sense should correct another, nor can the same sense correct itself, since an equal credit ought to be given to each; and therefore whatever the senses at any time discover to us must be certain.

And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power, to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.

Lastly, as in a building, if the principle rule of the artificer be not true, if his line be not exact, or his level bear in to the least to either side, every thing must needs be wrong and crooked, the whole fabric must be ill-shaped, declining, hanging over, leaning and irregular, so that some parts will seem ready to fall and tumble down, because the whole was at first disordered by false principles. So the reason of things must of necessity be wrong and false which is founded upon a false representation of the senses.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2019 at 4:41 PM

Todd and I were typing over each other but each citing DeWitt and the same answer -- EXCELLENT! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2019 at 4:41 PM

The key part of the DeWitt discussion of this occurs in Chapter 8. Here is an introductory paragraph on the issue Todd and I are citing:

as criteria because they are direct physical contacts between the living being and the external physical reality. They also qualify as criteria because they are irrational, are incapable of memory, and pronounce

SENSATIONS, ANTICIPATIONS, AND FEELINGS

no judgments. Sensation is incapable of memory. It can no more recall a given stimulus than a house can recall the impact of a ball thrown against its wall. The sensation merely registers a stimulus, a melody, for example; it is the memory that says, "I have heard this before"; it is the intelligence that says, "Home Sweet Home."

Unfortunately the discussion of the Sensations has become clouded because of prejudice, negligence, confusions, and ambiguities.

The prejudice consists in classifying Epicurus as an empiricist and the negligence in not putting this assumption to the full test of the evidences and in failing to define the precise meanings of all the terms employed.

The confusions are two in number. The first is between concepts of "truth" and concepts of "value." It is quite possible for a sensation to be true and yet valueless as a criterion. A square tower, for example, appears at a distance to be round; the sensation is true, relative to the distance, but false to the facts. The second confusion is between primary and accessory or derivative notions. This is to say that the ideas represented by the Twelve Elementary Principles of Physics are primary while all other ideas are derivative. The former are *ennoiai*, the latter *epinoiai*.

The chief ambiguities are also two in number. In the dictum of Epicurus that "all sensations are true" both terms are ambiguous. The English word *sensation*, like the Latin *sensus*, is employed to render various words and phrases in Greek, while the word *true*, like its Latin and Greek equivalents, may have any one of three meanings: first, absolutely true, as the statement that two and two make four is true, or second, relatively true, as the distant view of the tower is true, though false in detail, or third, real, in the sense that the sensation corresponds to a real object, such as an ox.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2019 at 4:46 PM

[Quote from Garden Dweller](#)

Should the student of Epicurus carefully guard against anything that would disturb, modify or distort one's senses and sensory observation of the natural world?

Let's not skip over this last question, either, as I think this is an EMPHATIC yes! Now I am all in favor of painkilling drugs when needed, but the senses are vital to us, and efforts to dull them in general (which is essentially what the Stoics advocate) are exactly the wrong direction. Not to mention to problems that alcohol and other mind-altering drugs can lead to. We certainly aren't talking being Puritans, but I think it is pretty clear that overindulgence in mind-altering substances can be very harmful to our overall ability to lead a life of pleasure.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2019 at 4:54 PM

Garden Dweller I also want to cover this by apologizing in advance if you read any sense of disapproval ("You should have read the DeWitt book already!!!) in my comment 😊

By no means is DeWitt the only writer worth reading, and I am acutely aware that most people who come across Epicurus today by means of recent / modern commentaries are not going to have heard of DeWitt, because it is the current fashion to omit him, treat him as if he never existed, and mention him only in a demeaning manner if at all. For example if your primary exposure to Epicurus is to read the Okeefe / Cambridge / Warren / Catherine Wilson / Voula Tsouna material you are probably never even going to know DeWitt's book exists.

DeWitt is by no means the most brilliant writer who ever lived, but if and when you do find the time to read him I think you will understand the enthusiasm that some of us have for him. DeWitt was a very competent scholar but what he brings to the table is a sweeping approach that first and foremost grounds you in what Epicurus was trying to teach without a lot of condescending commentary, or over-focus on how some particular doctrine ('absence of pain' I am looking at you) may seem "to be a lot like Stoicism" or that "Epicurus was an anti-commercialist ascetic just like we should be," and "really and truly if the Stoics and Epicureans had just listened to each other they would have been best pals," etc etc etc.

DeWitt takes the material in a logical manner and organizes it pretty much (in my view) as you would expect an ancient Epicurean would have organized it. And on issues which we find difficult today, such as "[all sensations are true](#)," or the meaning of the "greatest good" argument, DeWitt gives explanations that are sympathetic to Epicurus and come together into a consistent whole.

Many of us here got our start in Epicurus through DeWitt, and I don't think that is an accident. If you read DeWitt you see the power and logic of the entire system. If you read most of the others, you get a piecemeal approach that ends up making Epicurus look like a footnote to Stoicism or to Plato and you're generally left wondering why anyone would worry about studying Epicurus.

DeWitt may not be the sage of the ages, but in my view, and in many cases, DeWitt is the key to awakening a real interest in what Epicurus was all about and untangling the controversies. And I know no better way to get people off on the right track, and to "inoculate" them from and against the modern pseudo-Stoic and pseudo-Epicurean "heresies" than to recommend that, if possible, they start off reading DeWitt first. And if they have already started elsewhere, but still have an interest and have not been totally turned off, the best antidote is to go back and find a copy of EAHP.

Post by "Cassius" of October 6, 2019 at 5:32 PM

i just noticed this: "Our intellect provides us with a response to what we sense in the natural world, which is pleasure, pain, or indifference."

I think that is probably correct as written but it is extremely important to remember that there are only two feelings ultimately, pleasure and pain.

Post by "Todd" of October 6, 2019 at 5:57 PM

Quote

Our intellect provides us with a response to what we sense in the natural world, which is pleasure, pain, or indifference.

Cassius, thanks for reminding me. I noticed that statement too, and forgot to mention it.

What caught my attention is the use of "intellect". I'm unsure precisely what GD means by that, but when I hear "intellect", I tend to mentally translate as "reason". If that is the intended meaning, I would strongly disagree. In any case, I'm suspicious of having anything intermediary "providing" the pleasure or pain response.

I think of the feelings (pleasure or pain) as direct responses to sensory data. Of course, there must be a physical mechanism involved. In biological terms, it's probably something related to dopamine - but I don't think anyone would equate dopamine production (or whatever) with the intellect.

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2019 at 6:12 PM

Yes Todd your reasoning was exactly why I said that it was "probably correct as written." The issue as to how to classify emotions into the pleasure / pain model is not necessarily easy, and surely "indifference" is a concept that we recognize as useful. But I suppose that maybe part of Epicurus' reasoning is that by nature words like "indifference" are concepts / abstractions, and that ultimately all feelings, to the extent a feeling is perceived, can be traced back to some direct perception of feeling approval/pleasure or disapproval/displeasure.

Post by “Garden Dweller” of October 6, 2019 at 8:00 PM

I wrote the word intellect but I think the concept I was trying to describe is better stated as "subconscious".

There is a certain amount of processing going on in the mind before the handoff to the rational, conscious self. I wonder if pleasure and pain are differentiated at the subconscious or conscious level.

The examples you provided are of the type "optical illusion" while I am asking about disturbances within the mind. Perhaps the response is the same.

I am not a scholar and occasionally find it difficult to express a concept, so I appreciate the precision with which philosophers use language.

Post by “Todd” of October 6, 2019 at 8:24 PM

If you want to change "intellect" to "subconscious", then my objection is withdrawn :-).

However, I'm still going to point out that "subconscious" is still not the word I would choose. (That word is "irrational", which I shamelessly appropriate from DeWitt.) But I see the direction you're trying to go, so forgive me if I'm being pedantic.

Feelings are conscious (we are aware of them - usually, I suppose), but they don't proceed from reason, they are more automatic than that - hence, "irrational". Perhaps you could say feelings are generated unconsciously, but we perceive them with the conscious (?) - I'll defer to others as to whether this is accurate.

I gave the optical illusion example just to begin with a simple illustration of how Epicureans delineate the senses from reason. But the rest of my response was directed at the examples you gave - intoxication, mental illness, hypnotism, etc.

Most of us here aren't scholars either. Just geeks, possibly. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 6, 2019 at 9:20 PM

I proudly proclaim geek status (computer-geek, mostly) and I am unwashed of any but two undergraduate courses in philosophy, in college, **many** years ago!

Post by “Don” of August 9, 2020 at 7:54 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Quote

[Garden Dweller](#) : Should the student of Epicurus carefully guard against anything that would disturb, modify or distort one's senses and sensory observation of the natural world?

Let's not skip over this last question, either, as I think this is an EMPHATIC yes! Now I am all in favor of painkilling drugs when needed, but the senses are vital to us, and efforts to dull them in general (which is essentially what the Stoics advocate) are exactly the wrong direction. Not to mention to problems that alcohol and other mind-altering drugs can lead to. We certainly aren't talking being Puritans, but I think it is pretty clear that overindulgence in mind-altering substances can be very harmful to our overall ability to lead a life of pleasure.

I think we have to be careful here. As [Cassius](#) says we're not Puritans. [DL Lives X.119](#) says that "Even when drunk, the wise one will not talk nonsense or act silly." (my own translation of "οὐδὲ μὴν ληρήσειν ἐν μέθῃ"). This was from Epicurus's Symposium. So I think it's important to remember there is no Epicurean prohibition against drinking "strong drink" as far as we know, but, like all actions, one assesses the resulting pleasure and pain involved in moderate drinking vs overindulgence. And Epicurus reminds us to not act foolish.