

Proposition: It is Not Primarily the "Science" of Epicurus That Should Impress Us, But Rather The "Perspective" On Science, Or, If You Will, The "Limit" On Science, That Is His Major Achievement.

Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2020 at 8:16 AM

This thread is a continuation of this thought [posted by me in a conversation with Oscar](#):

Getting back to the earlier issue of incorporating new evidence / facts:

Absolutely and Epicurean is always going to look for, observe, and incorporate new facts into his application of the philosophy and how to live.

BUT what is the number one fact that must be considered?

The first and most important fact is that you are a finite being, and you are never going to have access to all of the evidence / facts that you would like to have.

So if that is the case, what do you do?

You start off with a framework of analysis that acknowledges that you are finite, while the universe is infinite, and you perfect your "operating system" - your "philosophy" - that allows you to function confidently within the sphere of facts that are open to you.

That's what Epicurus did, nothing in the intervening centuries has been discovered to change that framework, and that's why his work is valuable today in its original form, rather than being "improved" by all sorts of changes which ultimately fade into significance in the face of the practical need to live and take action in an unlimited universe in which the evidence open to us is limited. Epicurus shows us how to defeat the numbing and paralyzing and slavery-inducing effects of standard religious teaching and Academic philosophy.

And that's what I also think is so dangerous about accepting the implication that such and such a scientific theory has it all figured out, or that the "universe" is all expanding from a center, or that Yahweh is the one true god, or whatever. If you keep focus on the logical big picture that the universe is infinite in time and eternal in space, then it's easy to see that all these shortsighted theories are ultimately traps, and it's easy to dismiss them as impossible. That is a huge confidence-builder in the face of nihilism, and it's totally justified by the evidence that is available to us -- nothing in our experience (or in reliable human history) has ever come from, or gone, to nothing.

All the rest is logically deduced from that factually-irrefutable starting point, and that's the test of any valid system of logic - "Does it conform with ALL the facts?"

Relevant Principal Doctrines:

22. 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.

23. If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false.

24. If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations, as well, with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation, and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.

25. If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other, nearer, standard, when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.

Edit: I also think there is a relationship here with the "gnosis" sects/cults. Any group that claims ultimate possession of all answers through divine revelation, or some process known only to them, is pursuing the same kind of approach, whether that be through talking snakes like Alexander the oracle monger, or reliable on calculations or other "scientific methods" that are represented to claim results that cannot be verified through "hard" evidence.

When we say that we respect "science" what are we really saying? Sounds like to me what that term could only mean is that we respect the "method" of observation and searching and analysis of evidence, rather than deferring to any particular person or theory that anyone, no matter how "qualified," asserts without evidence. There's a passage in A Few Days With Athens that refers to this too.

From [Chapter 15](#):

"I apprehend the difficulties," observed Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend. Like most aspirants after knowledge, he has a vague and incorrect idea of what he is pursuing, and still more, of what may be attained. In the schools you have hitherto frequented," she continued, addressing the youth, "certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and

inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained. You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible. The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others. You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling.”

Post by “Elayne” of January 7, 2020 at 7:14 AM

As I see it, my process is to pragmatically accept as fact those things which have no evidence to the contrary, such as a fully material universe (and thus no absolute morality)

while leaving open for study those aspects which are unclear, such as cosmology. I won't reject any theories that fit available data as wrong just because of a concept I have-- but there's no theory fitting available data that has any supernatural or ideal realm in it, so Epicurus is still on

very solid ground with the observation that absolute morality is nonsense.

Post by “Don” of February 25, 2020 at 11:25 PM

I would agree that it is the Epicurean "perspective" on science that was and continues to be worthy of respect and appreciation. Epicurus taught that our senses were a fundamental way of assessing reality. I found myself thinking of this very thing the other day. One major change in the exploration of reality from ancient Greece to the present has been an ever-widening expansion of our senses. I have to believe that Epicurus would have welcomed perceptions via scientific instruments to get at accurate pictures of what is real to combat supernatural thinking. Knowing that the atoms in our bodies come from the hearts of exploded stars connects us to the cosmos inextricably. I find this kind of insight in no way conflicts with Epicureanism.

Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2020 at 5:40 AM

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

I have to believe that Epicurus would have welcomed perceptions via scientific instruments to get at accurate pictures of what is real to combat supernatural thinking.

Absolutely no question - I accept this as a certainty. It is ridiculous to think that Epicurus was or would be against new technologies for gathering of more accurate information, but that comes up on occasion as part of the contention that Epicurus was against "education."

This is an area where I think DeWitt is especially perceptive in pointing out that Epicurus was not against "education in general" but particular **types** of study that are ultimately dead ends.

Quote

You are pleased to think him uneducated. The reason is that he refused to consider any education worth the name that did not help to school us in happiness. Was he to spend his time, as you encourage Triarius and me to do, in perusing poets, who give us nothing solid and useful, but merely childish amusement? Was he to occupy himself like Plato with music and geometry, arithmetic and astronomy, which starting from false premises cannot be true, and which moreover if they were true would contribute

nothing to make our lives pleasanter and therefore better? Was he, I say, to study arts like these, and neglect the master art, so difficult and correspondingly so fruitful, the art of living?

No! Epicurus was not uneducated: the real philistines are those who ask us to go on studying till old age the subjects that we ought to be ashamed not to have learnt in boyhood.

[\(Torquatus / On Ends\)](#)