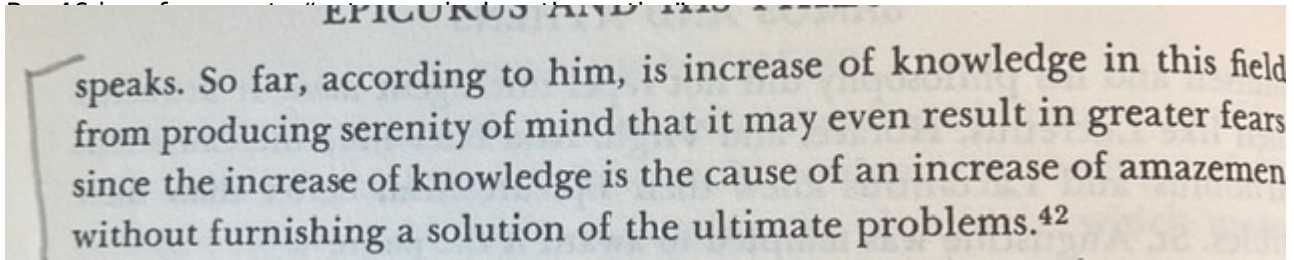
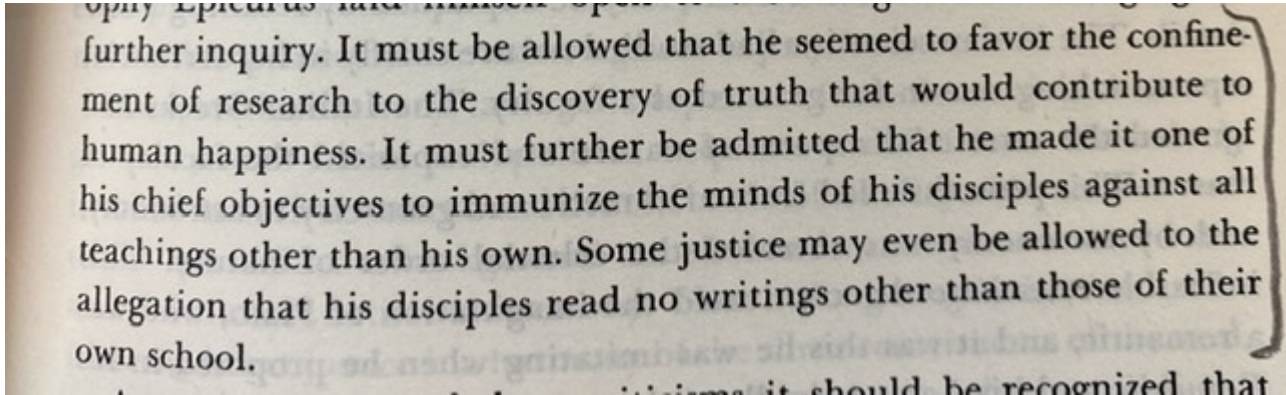


The Dangers of Misdirected Increase of Knowledge

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 9, 2020 at 10:10 AM

I have been very interested in some recent comments by members that touch upon an issue acknowledged by DeWitt in the following passages:



This really hits the nail on the head as to why so much of metaphysics, eastern and western, has caused me grief, and why I am here!

Metaphysical theories, unsubstantiated by normal human perception and observation, are widely used to delineate entire systems of ethics, codes of behaviour, and ascetic disciplines, that for the sincere adherent, are meant to inform every moment of every day. In many cases, if one does not experience any benefit from following such teachings in this life, it is said to be because salvation is only to be experienced in the next life, or many lives down the road.

In this way, one may spend an entire lifetime in devoted study and contemplation of a theology or metaphysics that may have a mountain of books written about it by very intelligent people,

yet have no practical value or means of personal verification in this lifetime. (I submit that this could also apply to the “spooky” stuff we get out of modern quantum theory.)

My feeling is that EVEN THOUGH some of the claims of quantum theory, Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Platonism, or take your pick, MIGHT be correct, it does not serve us to endlessly study these things, or to ever prefer their teachings to those that can be confirmed by personal experience. It fills us with doubt and confusion and affords us no practical benefit.

My question is, do you agree with Epicurus that some areas of knowledge should be taboo to us as a waste of time and effort, and as harmful to our health and happiness? Also, have you ever had an experience of investing a great deal of time and effort into learning something, the knowledge of which proved harmful?

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2020 at 12:05 PM

Another great point for discussion! First however:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

do you agree with Epicurus that some areas of knowledge should be taboo to us as a waste of time and effort, and as harmful to our health and happiness?

I suspect that Epicurus would want to argue that he did not go that far, at least as to the implication of the word "taboo." Here are some of initial thoughts involved in unpacking this:

(1) It's essential in Epicurean philosophy to never let there be any confusion about the ultimate goal of pleasure. Wisdom for the sake of wisdom, knowledge for the sake of knowledge is incorrect analysis. So is analyzing it from the point of view that "wisdom and knowledge are pleasurable in themselves" if we fail to include the rest of the analysis, which is that any activity can generate both pleasure and pain, and so we have to consider all the results of pursuing any particular wisdom or knowledge.

(2) People are different in what they find interesting and pleasurable. I think Susan is talking in part about some recent observations that Frances Wright took a different position on some things than did Epicurus. Frances Wright apparently took the position that she was not interested in, and could come to no conclusions about, life on other worlds or other issues possibly including infinity, eternity, and perhaps even life after death. If that's a correct reading of her, that's very different than Epicurus' conclusion, because he apparently thought that those were vital to address. I am not going to criticize Frances Wright's personal decision

on how to spend her time, but I don't think that's a correct analysis for most people, and I think her decision probably limited her impact in the end.

I have a lot more but I will have to come back in an hour or two.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2020 at 1:30 PM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

In this way, one may spend an entire lifetime in devoted study and contemplation of a theology or metaphysics that may have a mountain of books written about it by very intelligent people, yet have no practical value or means of personal verification in this lifetime.

On this point, for a long form answer which hits this home very hard, I recommend Lucian's "HERMOTIMUS" -- <https://newepicurean.com/suggested-read...ian-hermotimus/>

I consider Lucian to be thoroughly Epicurean, and this dialog is both fun to read and I think does a very good job of explaining a part of the answer the Epicurus would give to Susan's comment here.

In the dialog, Lycinus (who I think speaks for the Epicurean position) confronts Hermotimus (a student of Stoicism) about the pursuit of his studies. The dialog explores the dangers of and issues in "spending an entire lifetime in devoted study and contemplation ... yet find ... no practical value or means of personal verification.... of the result.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 9, 2020 at 2:05 PM

Thank you for the Lucian recommendation, Cassius. I look forward to reading it. Is this the same Lucian that was Seneca's nephew?

I confess to still having a soft spot for Seneca. To be honest, it was his letters that saved me from the Church! (How Ironic that I found him in a church book sale.) If he writes half so well as Seneca, I will love Lucian too.

I mention this as a fine example. I love reading Seneca. Should I not read him again because it might make me a depressed Stoic who feels a failure because she hates politics?!

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2020 at 2:47 PM

LOL ---

I don't recommend Seneca, but if you do read him, read this part, all of which, I think, was "in the guise of an Epicurean":

Quote

(Seneca's Letters - Book II Letter XLVIII)

*In answer to the letter which you wrote me while traveling, - a letter as long as the journey itself, - I shall reply later. I ought to go into retirement, and consider what sort of advice I should give you. For you yourself, who consult me, also reflected for a long time whether to do so; how much more, then, should I myself reflect, since more deliberation is necessary in settling than in propounding a problem! And this is particularly true when one thing is advantageous to you and another to me. **Am I speaking again in the guise of an Epicurean?** But the fact is, the same thing is advantageous to me which is advantageous to you; for I am not your friend unless whatever is at issue concerning you is my concern also. Friendship produces between us a partnership in all our interests. There is no such thing as good or bad fortune for the individual; we live in common. And no one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbor, if you would live for yourself. This fellowship, maintained with scrupulous care, which makes us mingle as men with our fellow-men and holds that the human race have certain rights in common, is also of great help in cherishing the more intimate fellowship which is based on friendship, concerning which I began to speak above. For he that has much in common with a fellow-man will have all things in common with a friend.*

And on this point, my excellent Lucilius, I should like to have those subtle dialecticians of yours advise me how I ought to help a friend, or how a fellowman, rather than tell me in how many ways the word “friend” is used, and how many meanings the word “man” possesses. Lo, Wisdom and Folly are taking opposite sides. Which shall I join? Which party would you have me follow? On that side, “man” is the equivalent of “friend”; on the other side, “friend” is not the equivalent of “man.” The one wants a

friend for his own advantage; the other wants to make himself an advantage to his friend. What you have to offer me is nothing but distortion of words and splitting of syllables. It is clear that unless I can devise some very tricky premises and by false deductions tack on to them a fallacy which springs from the truth, I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it! 'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese."

Suppose now that I cannot solve this problem; see what peril hangs over my head as a result of such ignorance! What a scrape I shall be in! Without doubt I must beware, or some day I shall be catching syllables in a mousetrap, or, if I grow careless, a book may devour my cheese! Unless, perhaps, the following syllogism is shrewder still: "'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a syllable does not eat cheese. Therefore a mouse does not eat cheese." What childish nonsense! Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?

Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbor's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy men, sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.

I should deem your games of logic to be of some avail in relieving men's burdens, if you could first show me what part of these burdens they will relieve. What among these games of yours banishes lust? Or controls it? Would that I could say that they were merely of no profit! They are positively harmful. I can make it perfectly clear to you whenever you wish, that a noble spirit when involved in such subtleties is impaired and

weakened. I am ashamed to say what weapons they supply to men who are destined to go to war with fortune, and how poorly they equip them! Is this the path to the greatest good? Is philosophy to proceed by such claptrap and by quibbles which would be a disgrace and a reproach even for expounders of the law? For what else is it that you men are doing, when you deliberately ensnare the person to whom you are putting questions, than making it appear that the man has lost his case on a technical error? But just as the judge can reinstate those who have lost a suit in this way, so philosophy has reinstated these victims of quibbling to their former condition. Why do you men abandon your mighty promises, and, after having assured me in high-sounding language that you will permit the glitter of gold to dazzle my eyesight no more than the gleam of the sword, and that I shall, with mighty steadfastness, spurn both that which all men crave and that which all men fear, why do you descend to the ABC's of scholastic pedants? What is your answer? Is this the path to heaven? For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come.

Philosophy, keep your promise! Therefore, my dear Lucilius, withdraw yourself as far as possible from these exceptions and objections of so-called philosophers. Frankness, and simplicity beseem true goodness. Even if there were many years left to you, you would have had to spend them frugally in order to have enough for the necessary thing; but as it is, when your time is so scant, what madness it is to learn superfluous things! Farewell

Display More

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 9, 2020 at 3:13 PM

Beautiful. 😊 A closet Epicurean, to be sure!

“For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come.”

What an orator he must have been.

Post by “Cassius” of October 9, 2020 at 11:16 PM

Tonight I read Phaedo for the first time and posted some reaction [here](#).

It seems to me that the relation between Phaedo and the thread here is that the existence of these Platonic/Socratic arguments is a large part of the reason why some issues that are otherwise a total waste of time, and unproductive to pursue, must be pursued. If you are unlucky enough to get taught these Platonic arguments in school, or run into them in some other form in another part of life, you have to be able to respond to them, otherwise they will immobilize you (or at least, many people) with fear and uncertainty and doubt. And I just don't think it's effective in many cases to simply take the position of saying "don't worry about it" and use arguments like "the burden of proof is on the proponent" or "speculation is not a valid form of reasoning" such as someone like Frances Wright might argue. Some people in some situations might be able to get away with that, and if so then the result is the proof of their success, but in my experience personally, these arguments are everywhere, and unless they are met they lead to skepticism, nihilism, and even anti-intellectualism. They are just so corrosive that ignoring them is unlikely to work in most cases. (And Socrates even includes in Phaedo just such a warning, but he includes it presumably so that his listeners won't seek refuge in them, but will simply give in to his conclusions based on his dialectical logic!)

Post by “Martin” of October 10, 2020 at 5:01 AM

Quantum theory is not the problem but quantum woo is, i.e. nonsensical interpretations of quantum theory create problems by misleading people into wrong beliefs.

I never felt that the study of science was harmful beyond maybe to have wasted some time on studying in detail something which I will never use but that is unavoidable because as a student at university, I did not know in advance whether it will become eventually relevant.

I would like to sue the Catholic Church to give me back many hours of eager study of the Bible and other Christian texts and attending mass when I was a child and adolescent.

The harmful effect of being a Christian child was to distrust and refrain from pleasure and to socially isolate myself from peers who I considered to be mostly "sinners" by whom I did not want to get "tempted".

Luckily, I overcame this before the end of senior high school but I still feel the effect of insufficient socialization in my youth because I still need to make conscious efforts where others behave naturally without conscious effort.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 10, 2020 at 10:13 AM

Ugh. Well, Lucian's Hermetimus is pretty devastating. I have been much chastened.

In other words, it is brilliant and I am glad of the recommendation.

He seems to leave us with at least one useful test of a philosophy: are its adherents quite happy? Or, I suppose, does its practice make us happy presently, rather than in some promised future. This would seem to allow Epicureanism some merit, at least.

Maybe I can redeem some of my years of study of fruitless philosophies by appealing to a little neuroscience. Apparently, knowledge which is hardest won, sticks the best. (Sorry I can't find the study I'm referring to at the moment...) Perhaps I will be better able to recognize and appreciate more useful doctrines for having so much experience with false ones... One can hope.

You are right, Cassius, we can't avoid studying these things. The influence of "dead-end" doctrines are everywhere. We need to be able to recognize and appraise them cogently.

Martin, thank you for joining the discussion. Your years of study are very useful to us here!! It seems to me that the two main problematical findings of quantum theory are the Schrodinger equation and quantum entanglement. Are they as "nonsensical" as they are generally presented? Or do they really point to something VERY weird going on that does not fit with classical physics?

I fully identify with your regrets about your time in the Church. I wish I could get my 10 years spent there back as well.

Post by "Cassius" of October 10, 2020 at 10:48 AM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

It seems to me that the two main problematical findings of quantum theory are the Schrodinger equation and quantum entanglement. Are they as "nonsensical" as they are generally presented?

That's a good way of asking the question [Martin](#) -- where do you identify the line where "Quantum woo" starts?

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Lucian's Hermotimus is pretty devastating. I have been much chastened.

I read it for entertainment as regularly as I can - I think I will try again today. It is very witty!

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 10, 2020 at 2:42 PM

I think we should seed the Hermotimus into the Stoic forums. ☐☐

Post by "Cassius" of October 10, 2020 at 2:55 PM

It applies to a wide range, but it does have a special bite for the Stoics! 😊





Post by "Godfrey" of October 10, 2020 at 5:09 PM

This discussion got me interested in Lucian; I read A True Story last night as I've been meaning to do so for quite a while. I think I'll give Hermotimus a read today: much more enjoyable than Phaedo! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of October 10, 2020 at 6:35 PM

Much of the Lucian Material is extremely enjoyable, "A True Story" being one of them.

If I recall correctly, the ones with the most Epicurean aspects/interest are:

	Alexander the Oracle-Monger
	Zeus Tragoedus
	Sale of Creeds
	The Fisher
	A Slip of The Tongue In Salutation
	The True History
	Incaromenippus, An Aerial Expedition
	The Double Indictment
	The Parasite, A Demonstration That Sponging Is A Profession
	The Liar
	Zeus Cross-Examined
	Hermotimus, Or, The Rival Philosophies

It's not on this list but also notable is the one with the unflattering reference to the early Christians - the Passing of Perigrinus. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing_of_Peregrinus

Post by “Godfrey” of October 10, 2020 at 9:46 PM

Great; thanks for the list Cassius!

Post by “Martin” of October 11, 2020 at 12:00 PM

Answer to Susan and Cassius:

The Schroedinger equation is - within its range of validity - well supported by evidence. Quantum entanglement is well supported, too, and is already used for secure communication in the sense that any attempt to spy on the stream of information between transmitter and receiver would be detected. Billions of dollars are spent to develop quantum computers, which independent of the specific design are all based on entanglement.

Schroedinger equation and quantum entanglement really point to something VERY weird going on that does not fit with classical physics.

In general, quantum mechanics itself is rock solid with lots of experimental evidence. Future discoveries or an ingenious new theory might lead to a major overhaul but that is not likely to happen any time soon.

For many physicists, using "Shut up and calculate!" as the motto, the quantum woo starts already with any attempt of an interpretation.

I do see some value in interpretation but have no criteria at hand to tell in general how sensible interpretations are different from nonsensical ones.

When an interpretation is used to derive conclusions which are not backed by plain quantum mechanics, that interpretation is most likely nonsensical. Other than that crude indicator, the assessment is case by case.

The most common nonsensical interpretation is to attribute quantum uncertainty or other features of quantum mechanics to the influence of the consciousness of the observer.

(When playing golf with a demolition crane, the uncertainty of the trajectory of the ball is not due to the consciousness of the player but due to the clumsiness of the tool.)

Another kind of woo is when theories which so far have been untestable (i.e. they are not even hypotheses as of now) are misrepresented as factual descriptions of reality (e.g. string theory, multiverse theories). A far-reaching interpretation of such a theory is most likely nonsense to the power of 2 (e.g. an interpretation with teleportation between "parallel universes").

Post by "Cassius" of October 11, 2020 at 12:20 PM

Martin is it useful to generalize that at least one differentiator is that some theories/calculations are based **entirely** on their consistency with other theories/calculations, without **any** of those theories/calculations in the chain being verified by real-world experiment?

Or is that so general a statement as to be useless? I would think conceptually there is a dividing line between theories/calculations that have **some** verification through experiential observation vs those that do not?

Post by "Martin" of October 11, 2020 at 12:33 PM

Yes, when comparing theories themselves, that would be a dividing line but my last remark referring to theories was a diversion from the main topic interpretations of quantum theory.

The interpretations do not affect the calculation of the results. Wigner and I would get the same results when solving a quantum mechanical problem (unless I make a mistake) or when conducting an experiment with electrons but he thinks that his mind influences the electrons and I do not think so.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 12, 2020 at 9:35 AM

[Martin](#), thank you for your comments. That does help clarify some things for me. I can understand the burning desire of laymen and scientists alike to discover a way, ANY way, to create a world-view that would make sense of quantum mechanics, but anything we surmise could be so far off base, we would be fools to create an entire metaphysics or even religion out of it. I think this debate has to go to the Pyrrhonists.

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2020 at 10:19 AM

I agree with what you are saying, Susan, but there's a part of this that I think is dangerous to let go, echoing from Lucian. I think I quoted this recently in a similar context but no one ever accused me of not being repetitive 😊

Quote

And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics; the poor uneducated ‘fat-heads’ might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by skepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility.

The point being that I think it's a pretty fundamental part of a basic Epicurean education to have near the top of one's mind at least an outline-level understanding of a "rule" that starts flashing red whenever we confront something that seems "over-the-line" as a lie and an impossibility.

Getting back to the title of the topic, I think it's dangerous to ever consider that any area of knowledge is off limits or to be avoided *per se*, even though for all the reasons Epicurus is stating, a prudent person does not waste more time on them than might be absolutely necessary.

Probably the category of quantum woo is right up there nowadays, at least in some circles, with the claims of traditional religion. I am not young anymore, but I suspect especially with young people going through establishment education, it's possible even that quantum woo might be even more present than straight religious arguments. So that's the reason the topic interests me - we ought to be able to articulate, even if the precise imposture of quantum woo escapes us, why it is we are confident that the whole thing is a lie and an impossibility.

I am thinking that the general description of the answer is going to involve affirming how the senses (the three legs of the canon, actually) are really what the meaning of "truth" and "reality" is all about to us, and that any impactful claims which cannot be validated using that method is in fact, for us, a "lie and an impossibility" and to be treated as such. I think also that this is closely related to the direct argument in Lucretius that he who asserts that knowledge is impossible is in a way "upside down" and has to be rejected out of hand.

That's where I think we can improve - I do not think we are there yet in expanding the meaning of that material in Lucretius, which is hinted at in other aspects of the texts, in way that is clear and meaningful.

For example, it's taking me far too long to state the issue in this post -- it ought to be reducible to something very simple and memorable, along the lines of this excerpt from Lucretius book four. Probably if I had to rank everything I have read in the Epicurean texts, this is one of the most important to me:

1743: 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) from whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what was it that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty? 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.

Munro: Again if a man believe that nothing is known, he knows not whether this even can be known, since he admits he knows nothing. I will therefore decline to argue the case against him who places himself with head where his feet should be. And yet granting that he knows this, I would still put this question, since he has never yet seen any truth in things, whence he knows what knowing and not knowing severally are, and what it is that has produced the knowledge of the true and the false and what has proved the doubtful to differ from the certain. You will find that from the senses first has proceeded the knowledge of the true and the false and that the senses cannot be refuted. For that which is of itself to be able to refute things false by true things must from the nature of the case be proved to have the higher certainty. Well then, what must fairly be accounted of higher certainty than sense? Shall reason founded on false sense be able to contradict them, wholly founded as it is on the senses? And if they are not true, then all reason as well is rendered false.

Bailey: Again, if any one thinks that nothing is known, he knows not whether that can be known either, since he admits that he knows nothing. Against him then I will refrain from joining issue, who plants himself with his head in the place of his feet. And yet were I to grant that he knows this too, yet I would ask this one question; since he has never before seen any truth in things, whence does he know what is knowing, and not knowing each in turn, what thing has begotten the concept of the true and the false, what thing has proved that the doubtful differs from the certain? You will find that the concept of the true is begotten first from the senses, and that the senses cannot be gainsaid. For something must be found with a greater surety, which can of its own authority refute the false by the true. Next then, what must be held to be of greater surety than sense? Will reason, sprung from false sensation, avail to speak against the senses, when it is wholly sprung from the senses? For unless they are true, all reason too becomes false.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 12, 2020 at 11:17 AM

Thank you for returning to this, Cassius. I agree we do not need or want to make topics off-limits, and I understand the arguments against complete skepticism.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

- we ought to be able to articulate, even if the precise imposture of quantum woo escapes us, why it is we are confident that the whole thing is a lie and an impossibility.

I am thinking that the general description of the answer is going to involve affirming how the senses (the three legs of the canon, actually) are really what the meaning of "truth" and "reality" is all about to us, and that any impactful claims which cannot be validated using that method is in fact, for us, a "lie and an impossibility" and to be treated as such. I think also that this is closely related to the direct argument in Lucretius that he who asserts that knowledge is impossible is in a way "upside down" and has to be rejected out of hand.

I think this is where I am getting stuck, and even anxious!

I feel acutely aware of serious limitations in human senses and perceptions. We barely even know our own psyches, since so much of our mind is subconscious, and our inability to hold great quantities of information in full consciousness at one time, makes it impossible to form certain connections or calculations (like a computer with limited RAM).

As for sense perceptions being the test of truth, these perceptions are designed to measure only very limited spectrums of sensory information. Like Martin said, there is verifiably something very unlike classical physics going on in quantum mechanics. Now, Roger Penrose would say that the woo factor becomes a problem when you extrapolate anything from the quantum level to the macro level, but that we are still missing a huge piece of the puzzle in interpreting why classical physics breaks down at the quantum level. Do we not have to admit to a little agnosticism, therefore? It is like we have found in the quantum world, a smoking gun, that demonstrates that we simply do not have the big picture. Furthermore, we might not even have the computational power in our heads to see it.

What do you think? Perhaps it will just become more clear to me as I keep reading.

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2020 at 11:45 AM

OK I think all this fits under the category of "waiting" - where Epicurus is very clear, even in the passage quoted by Lucretius, that we do not take positions on things which we cannot get

sufficient information. Definitely and absolutely agree with that.

HOWEVER, there are times when we are confronted with situations, such as the claims of Quantum Woo or religion that consciousness, or gods, control the universe, and we can't simply take an "I don't know" attitude towards those claims.

As you probably know, that's the point that Lucretius makes in the part AFTER I quoted:

Quote

1743: 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.

So with that as the primary point, let me address:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

I feel acutely aware of serious limitations in human senses and perceptions.

Absolutely, and I am acutely aware of those limitations too. On the other hand, limited as they are, the human senses and perceptions are **all we have** on which to (ultimately) base our opinions and our decisions. if we reason based on anything else we are totally arbitrary and lost.

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

but that we are still missing a huge piece of the puzzle in interpreting why classical physics breaks down at the quantum level

Yes we are missing that huge piece, and on other hugely important questions we are missing the piece about whether we have any form of consciousness after death, and we are missing the piece in which we verify life on other bodies outside earth, etc. Unfortunately we often have to take positions on important questions with limited information, when those questions are directly impacting on our mental or physical wellbeing.

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Do we not have to admit to a little agnosticism, therefore?

I probably prefer the term "waiting" 😊

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 12, 2020 at 12:21 PM

Ok, that sounds pretty good! Great quote from Lucretius! Thank you, Cassius. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 12, 2020 at 1:12 PM

I can hear some people saying "It's not necessary to take a position on whether there is life on other worlds, or on whether there are supernatural gods, or on the best response to quantum woo."

I think that is a legitimate objection, but only for some people in some circumstances. If your circumstances are such that there is no reason for your mental or physical wellbeing to take a position on those issues, then I would agree. But I think over the course of history, and still today, there are many circumstances in which it is necessary for very practical reasons, even in some cases against your will, to "take positions" on issues like that. And in suggesting that, I am not even really referring to "peace of mind" or "cognitive dissonance" issues.

So if someone is in a situation where they can afford to shrug and say "I don't know and I don't care" then I am 100% in favor of taking that approach. I don't think I am in that situation

personally, however, and I think there are a lot of people in the world who can profit from Epicurean philosophy who are not. Distinguishing between those situations is an interesting challenge in itself.

For example, remember how Lucian said that the Epicurean who almost got himself killed had acted foolishly in that situation. Yet on the other hand, Lucian is clearly cheering on the idea of Epicureans challenging the manipulations of Alexander -- that's what Lucian is doing **himself** in writing the article to expose Alexander's pretensions. So there is room for both approaches depending on context, but where opposition **is** possible, my sympathies are clearly with Lucian, and I think we should do what we can for ourselves and for our friends to expose the frauds and impositions

Post by “Don” of October 13, 2020 at 7:57 AM

Speaking of Lucian: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0910n6s>

Just discovered and listened to Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics and this episode extolling the importance of Lucian. She doesn't mention his Epicureanism but it's obviously a fan of Lucian. Enjoyable light-hearted romp through classical history.

Post by “Cassius” of October 13, 2020 at 8:12 AM

Thanks for the link Don! I see a lot of debate about whether Lucian was an Epicurean or not, and i am sure a case can be made that like most people, he had some Epicurean characteristics and some non-Epicurean characteristics. But I would also say that a lot of the people who don't think he was Epicurean approach the subject from a superficial view of what Epicurus was about. Lucian repeatedly sides with Epicurus when he arrays the philosophers against each other, and even when he isn't clear that he is taking anyone's side (as in Hermotimus) if you think about the epistemology or the view of the gods that he is arguing, then I think it's easy to see that he's at least substantially Epicurean in his perspective.

In fact, it would be kind of interesting to try to line up significant positions that Lucian takes which are clearly NOT Epicurean. I can't put a high priority on that kind of project but if anyone reads this and later sees parts of Lucian that don't seem Epicurean to them, that would be as good topic for a thread - [we have a subforum dedicated to Lucian that would be good for that.](#)

Post by “Don” of October 13, 2020 at 8:27 AM

She also mentions Star Trek in that podcast episode, too, so I thought of you, [Cassius](#) 😊

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 13, 2020 at 8:48 AM

Omg that program is brilliant, Don! Thank you so much for the link! Now I need to listen to the rest of the episodes AND buy the complete works of Lucian. Lol.

Post by “Cassius” of October 13, 2020 at 10:14 AM

She is - and her audience is too - very animated! I am glad she devoted a lot of time to Peregrinus. That was very entertaining.