

Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 23, 2020 at 9:06 AM

[ADMIN EDIT BY CASSIUS: This is a new thread, split off from an ongoing conversation, to discuss the general topic the role of "reverence," "awe" and similar feelings in Epicurean Philosophy.]

[Cassius](#), no I am not talking about Greek neo-paganism at all. I'm referring to Stoic teachings on Providence, the Logos, and Nature (a sort of monistic panentheism). The sentiment expressed in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus is pretty unique to him. Other Stoics do not anthropomorphise god in this way, except poetically like Lucretius does. I'm not sure how to refer to these type of teachings.

I mention the split in the Stoic community as illustrative of the number of people (myself included) who can't swallow always being told that they are backwards, uneducated, and superstitious because they can't shake the feeling that there must be something bigger or more profound than the human mind in the universe. That's what happened there.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 9:45 AM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

for learning and for feeling affiliated with a group

Yes I have always thought that "feeling affiliated with a group" is an important enjoyable experience that we're lacking in, and need to work to cultivate.

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

because they can't shake the feeling that there must be something bigger or more profound than the human mind in the universe.

Ok that's the profound issue with lots of ramifications. It can easily lead to a "supernatural creator" argument that would be irreconcilable with Epicurean physics on the nature of the universe, and yet it is clear the Epicureans saw a feeling of "reverence" to be a very legitimate part of their philosophy. There's of course all the discussion in Lucretius about the gods, in the opening of Book 1 and in the rest of the book two, and there's that saying to the effect of "Thanks be to blessed Nature that she has made what is necessary easy to obtain, and ... what is necessary easy to obtain, and what is not easy unnecessary."

Combined in that last saying you've got an attitude that is either reverence or close to reverence, combined with a word "blessed" that describes something similar, even if all of it is completely natural and absolutely not part of a divine creator of the universe.

We have not tended to talk about this much - I kind of associate it in my mind with the category of "images," which we also don't talk about much but which I think has great potential for being explored. With images, however, the issue is more plainly non-supernatural, in that everyone understands implicitly that the senses of sight and hearing and other things imply a movement of "atoms" across space (presumably from object to our eyes) that supernatural gods aren't necessarily involved in.

With the topic of divinity though (and eternity and infinity, which have some of the same issues) it's more important to keep the lines of distinction clear. I know not everyone thinks the same way about these issues or considers them to be important, but I personally consider the category something that I hope anyone interested in it will explore and post about. I think it's related to the "sense of being affiliated" feeling that is important to a lot of people to have, and important to cultivate if we expect to develop anything more than just a small group of isolated period in a small corner of the internet.

And all this is also related to the creationism arguments about "design" and how those should be evaluated logically. The issue of how organization can arise from non-organization is closely related to whether life can emerge from non-life. Even as I type this I have several tracks of mind about it. Living beings are surely made from non-living components. But that not the same issue as whether that process of life from non-life is ongoing and continuous (I think it probably is, but I'm not 100% sure how to express that). There's also the "infinity / eternity" issue, which presumably means that there's no way to go behind the issue that the universe (as a whole) is eternal and so living things have always existed somewhere just as has the non-living. Similarly, under Epicurean theory, were the individual gods at one point "born," or has there eternally been a "race of gods" that has always existed somewhere, just like there has been a spectrum of living beings existing somewhere eternally?

I personally don't think these issues are answered or made irrelevant by "big bang" or other physics theories indicating that "the universe" had a beginning point in time. That's because personally I think Epicurus took the "logical position" that the universe cannot possibly have an end point, so whatever "big bang" we are observing is "local" rather than "universal." The

interplay between "logical position" and "local experiments and their interpretations" is very hard to sort out.

Going back to the recently quoted excerpt from the letter to Velleius, it seems clear that Epicurus did in fact seem more willing to accept a logical position in an area we today *might* find to be overreaching:

"Moreover there is the supremely potent principle of infinity, which claims the closest and most careful study; we must understand that it has in the sum of things everything has its exact match and counterpart. This property is termed by Epicurus *isonomia*, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the causes of destruction are beyond count, the causes of conservation also are bound to be infinite.

All these are issues that i do not know the answer to, but I think that those who are interested in should pursue, and I would tell anyone interested in them to let's set up a subforum to post our thoughts and explorations over time.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 23, 2020 at 10:13 AM

I'm struggling with the common conclusion that positing any sort of consciousness different from humans and animals is necessarily a defence of the supernatural. I don't see that connection. Why would a god-like being necessarily have to exist and function outside the laws of matter and physics? Why would such a consciousness necessarily be a creator God or even remotely anthropomorphic? I know this is the form we are used to seeing in paganism and Abrahamic religions, but for me, "divine" in no way equals supernatural, and does not need to.

Post by "Elayne" of October 23, 2020 at 10:40 AM

Susan, I think the key thing is that any such consciousness would be materially based. The mind is what the brain does-- so the beings most advanced in pleasure, wherever they are, are necessarily made of matter also, not disembodied.

I agree they don't necessarily have to resemble humans. What they get pleasure from could be completely different from our own pleasure. Pleasure is how we are ranking them, not any other

feature-- so when we say they are "greater", that doesn't mean that they are necessarily more intellectually or technologically advanced, or that their virtues are remotely like ours.

I have considered it's entirely possible that the most currently pleasure-filled beings in the universe might even be some species right here on our planet. Perhaps it is a species that does not consider death as problematic at all, rather than being immortal. Since pleasure is a feeling, I don't think we can put any qualifiers on it, that it has to be pleasure over certain things, to count. There's no reason, for instance, that such beings would have to know or care about humans. Which species in the universe is the most pleasure filled at any one time might even change, and that actually sounds plausible to me.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 10:47 AM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

I know this is the form we are used to seeing in paganism and Abrahamic religions, but for me, "divine" in no way equals supernatural, and does not need to.

I agree with you, but this is one of apparently many situations where Epicurean definitions may depart from common usage. In this case, if "divine" *does not* equal supernatural, we probably need to be aggressive in articulating what it *does* mean. But does this definition really help anything or is it just circular?



Post by "Elayne" of October 23, 2020 at 10:51 AM

"Bigger or more profound" than the human mind-- if that means more effective at gaining and maintaining pleasurable lives, it would be Epicurean. Although I find awe to be one of the pleasures and can imagine feeling awed in the presence of a supremely pleasure filled being, the profundity isn't in the being-- it's how I feel in the presence of something incomprehensible. That incomprehensible sensation can be pleasurable, but it's not the way I would rank the beings as gods. That would rest on their own internal feelings of pleasurableness. It's quite possible humans would meet such beings and feel no recognition or awe, if we didn't realize who we were encountering.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 10:52 AM

Along the lines of noting that "supremely good" may be circular and unhelpful, let me observe this:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

there must be something bigger or more profound than the human mind in the universe

For the same reason "supremely good" doesn't advance the ball much, the words "bigger" and "more profound" also need further definition / articulation.

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2020 at 10:53 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Although I find awe to be one of the pleasures

YES I think that is a very key point! Awe is something we find agreeable, anything we find agreeable is a pleasure, so awe still fits within the context of "pleasure as the ultimate good."

At least that's the way I think we're all using the word "awe."

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 10:59 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Awe is something we find agreeable, anything we find agreeable is a pleasure, so awe still fits within the context of "pleasure as the ultimate good."

I can imagine that someone might object and saying we're playing a word game with "pleasure" here, and that we are being inconsistent because we aren't supposed to like or approve of word games.

I think Epicurus's response would be to say that ultimately this particular observation is not an endless serious of word reductionism, but in this case "pleasure" reduces to a "feeling" which is primary and which cannot be second-guessed and must be accepted as a foundational premise for which no proof is needed.

To the extent there is any accuracy in the accusation that this is a word game, part of the response would be that "they started it" when the opposition first suggested that "logos" or words in themselves were the foundation of how we should live. Epicurus in pointing to "pleasure" as the ultimate good was just showing people the way to unwind that false contention of the Platonists and so many others, and to get back to the ultimate reality of everything that matters to us, which is not "words" but "feeling."

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 23, 2020 at 11:00 AM

Sure, works for me! But I think it would have to have that “worthy of reverence” element.

[Elayne](#), thank you for your reply. Now this one has been bugging me since I conceded on our conference call that the most perfect being would be that which experiences the most pleasure.

Well, what if that being were the proverbial “pig in sh**”? Oh dear... Great for the pig, but I feel pretty uneasy about buying a bust of a pig and going to the local pig farm to worship... Heck, I guess I would have to give up bacon for life! - Madness. 😊

So this conclusion is rather making me squirm. 😬

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 11:02 AM

I think "pigs" were an intentional "in your face" argument to take things to the logical extreme, which is, in fact, following our "word game" that "pleasure" is the ultimate good, and that there is no universal sanction for contending that one person's pleasure is "better" than another's. We all have our private views about that, and we think our own feeling of pleasure is superior, but ultimately there is no "universal" justification for that view.

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 11:04 AM

This last issue of relative estimations of pleasure deserves a lot more articulation. Elayne, when you get a chance, I want to be sure to hear your view...

Because in my view this is one of the key issues. I am ready to say that each of us is totally proper in considering OUR version of pleasure (meaning, each person's pleasure, for that person) to be exactly what each person is called by nature to pursue, under all the Epicurean rules.

At the same time, that does not lead me to the total relativism / nihilism of saying that "nothing matters" and that any choice is equally valid, because that does not follow at all.

I am thinking the logical conclusion is that we just have to get acclimated to understanding that (for example) how we spend our own lives are and should be of ultimate value to US, while at the same time acknowledging that others' lives hold that same status to them, and that we just have to come to terms that there is no Natural "single right answer" that allows us to say which of the choices is "best." Other than, of course, that the only guide that NATURE has given to us is in fact the feeling of pleasure and pain, very broadly and widely considered.

Post by “Elayne” of October 23, 2020 at 11:09 AM

Susan, yes! You are getting exactly to the heart of what people confront in themselves, in order to understand this philosophy. We have been so indoctrinated to think "worthy of reverence" must refer to some quality other than pleasure. People resist letting go of it. Indeed, it makes

them squirm.

Setting anything other than the feeling of pleasure as the measure of greatness means you have got virtue ethics mixed up in there.

The feeling of reverence is a pleasure. But our having that feeling does not necessarily coincide with the being's skill at their own pleasure. It does seem to me that we might be more likely to feel reverence for such a being if we ourselves fully endorse pleasure! There's a reason I use a pig statue for my skype photo ☐☐.

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 11:11 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Setting anything other than the feeling of pleasure as the measure of greatness means you have got virtue ethics mixed up in there.

That's another way of saying the same thing that seems to important to stress. The "definition" of pleasure that is current today is far too narrow, and because we play the game with the public definition of "pleasure" being so narrow, it is hard even to communicate the full extent of Epicurean theory until that is made clear.

Post by “Elayne” of October 23, 2020 at 11:18 AM

I'll throw in here that one of the activities stimulating the strongest pleasurable feeling of reverence in my own body is holding a newborn... the opposite of big and profound, lol. Newborns have gained little skill at deliberately achieving their own pleasure-- they are not godlike in that way. They have an innate preference for pleasure, along with some innate behaviors to get their needs met, like crying to be fed or held. But I still experience a deeply pleasurable wonderment and awe when holding them.

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 11:25 AM

Don't let me derail the current direction of the discussion, but I finally took the time to find this quote, which appears relevant. Of course Nietzsche is full of all sorts of trouble and ambiguities, but his interest in Epicurus, and his strong denunciation of stoicism and standards of absolute virtue, means to me that Nietzsche's line of thinking as to REVERENCE probably has relevance to our discussion:



http://nietzsche.holtof.com/reader/friedri..._f5535481a.html

I am curious as to your reaction to this, Susan (and of course Elayne's or anyone else's too)

Post by "Elayne" of October 23, 2020 at 12:22 PM

That's definitely relevant! A couple of thoughts... first, he sticks to what a noble human is. Not a universal quality for all beings, but a species he knows about and is one of. Then he ties the definition to a feeling, specifically the feeling of reverence, which keeps it from being abstract. If accepted as a definition, it makes the word "noble" useful for communication, whereas an idealistic use results in confused communication.

To be fully pleasure filled, I think a human would need to experience pleasure about their own self. Thinking about ourselves, our actions, our personalities-- if that is painful, how can we be pleasure filled?

I am not sure every human finds reverence to be an indispensable pleasure, rather than one variation of mental pleasure-- I mean that a lack of that feeling probably doesn't universally cause pain. But I do agree it is one of my own pleasures. I'm not sure if I feel it towards myself-- but I do feel pleasure about myself. And when I notice a feature of myself that I don't like, I set

about to change it.

For myself, I might propose a modification to his definition, that a noble person is one who has chosen to form themselves into a self they take pleasure in. There's an aspect of us that reflects upon our own nature, as if we are judging ourselves to be a friend or a foe, a hero or anti-hero. If a person takes pleasure in knowing that she is patient, she might practice patience so she can enjoy both being patient and experiencing herself as patient.

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 12:34 PM

I don't want to turn this into a Nietzsche tangent, but this sentence sounds like a workable implementation of his "will to power" which superceded the will to "self-preservation." Maybe that can or should be generalized to "Will to pleasure." Regardless of Nietzsche, it will be a frequent question as to how the Epicurean view relates to "self--preservation." It is necessary to have an explanation of why "self-preservation" is not the Epicurean goal, which would include as a primary example the text that we sometimes give our lives for a friend. DeWitt is onto something I think in saying that Epicurus was holding "life" to be the ultimate value, but that's not clear enough. He's almost definitely right though that Epicurus was saying that pleasure and pain and virtue and everything else have no meaning, except to the living.

Quote

For myself, I might propose a modification to his definition, that a noble person is one who has chosen to form themselves into a self they take pleasure in.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 23, 2020 at 4:51 PM

What if we were to run with this idea of “awe”... Elayne feels awe at a new-born human life, a music lover feels awe at a new Hans Zimmer orchestral piece, Carl Sagan feels awe for the cosmos, a Southerner feels awe the first time she sees the Aurora Borealis, a young man is awed by a beautiful woman, a philosopher is awed by her first reading of The Letter to Monoecious, a physicist is awed quantum entanglement equations, I am awed by my lucid dreams.... What do all these things have in common? We are not awed by the simple sensory stimulus sans some sort of comprehension of those stimuli. It is something ABOUT the babe, or

the music, or the aurora, or the philosophical idea that result in the feeling. What is that something that is common to all these experiences?

My Aunt and Uncle are vocal atheists who hold up Carl Sagan as their exemplar of an atheist. So I was surprised when I heard him in a documentary talk about the Cosmos in a fashion that I could only call deeply spiritual. I think he had something in common with people who actually call themselves spiritual or even religious. I have ideas as to what that commonality is, but what do you think?

Re Nietzsche, I have never been in awe of myself... Is that unusual?

Post by “Elayne” of October 23, 2020 at 5:49 PM

Ah, interesting, Susan-- I actually don't think it is something in the baby, the music, or the aurora, any more than I think the pain of a hot pepper is in the pepper. Sure, capsaicin is in the pepper, but for birds it isn't painful. I think all feeling responses are properties of the subject doing the feeling, and that similar stimuli will often bring about similar feelings because we are in the same species. I don't think the Aurora Borealis, absent an observer, contains anything that would universally provoke awe.

We know some of the typical human triggers of awe. Things that are vast in size tend to do it, like mountains. I haven't read about a single common feature, but I would be interested to hear your hypothesis. Paul Pearsall wrote a whole book about Awe, which he proposed was actually a specific basic emotion.

Why we evolved awe would be an interesting evolutionary biology question-- does it serve some sort of fitness function? I bet this was an interesting talk-- the blurb describes awe as having a pro-social function, so maybe it has helped humans survive and reproduce. <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/events/the-evo...of-the-sublime/>

Post by “Elayne” of October 23, 2020 at 5:54 PM

Oh, cool, Wikipedia actually has an interesting entry... the last section says vastness could be the primary thing that triggers it. In which case it is still relative to our ability to comprehend, not inherent in whatever we are perceiving. There's a possibility it strengthens social

hierarchies. That especially interests me, because I am fascinated by the whole guru phenomenon. If someone perceives that vastness in a charismatic leader, this does tend to lead to extreme hierarchies where people give up their own judgment in favor of someone else's. Perhaps it is wise to be cautious with awe, lol. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awe>

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2020 at 6:23 PM

"Why we evolved awe would be an interesting evolutionary biology question-- does it serve some sort of fitness function? "

And related to that would be why or how we evolved pleasure and pain (?)

We'd need to incorporate that part of Lucretius that discusses how eyes were not born so we could see, etc. That passage has always been mysterious to me, along with the observation that the gods could not have created the universe because they would have had no pattern.

Post by “Don” of October 23, 2020 at 10:51 PM

Quote from Godfrey

6. In a sentence the author uses the phrase “concepts born of sensation” (followed by προληψεις [prolepseis] and a citation that I don't understand) (page 58)

I had to investigate. It appears the *Life* citations are to the verses in Diogenes Laertius, Book X, *Life (of Epicurus)*. But they don't fall exactly every time. I'm using the one posted to Perseus Digital Library. But that has to be it after checking several, so take the verse number and +/- 1 verse. Could be here using a different translation.

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2020 at 2:43 AM

[Elayne](#) and @Susan Hill - This last string of posts on reverence and awe and Neitz. Etc. is probably too good, and not requiring of confidentiality, to leave in this nonpublic thread. Ok

with you if I "prune" out these into a public thread in one of the other forums? At the same time we can continue this thread with focus on the personal observations about stoics part of the conversation. Before I do that, though, let me know by replying or liking this post.

I just looked back and I would prune from about post 9 to the current post into a new public thread, if OK with you two.

I don't think anyone but us three have posted here so far, and I thought about moving it public when I realized that I would like to be sure to get the thoughts of our other regulars on this too. I am interested in both the merits of the question plus the sort of "procedural" question of our getting a grasp of the relative significance of this topic for use in budgeting effort as we go forward.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 24, 2020 at 6:17 AM

Yes, Cassius, it is fine to move the thread.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 24, 2020 at 8:20 AM

>>Elayne:Ah, interesting, Susan-- I actually don't think it is something in the baby, the music, or the aurora, any more than I think the pain of a hot pepper is in the pepper.

No, me neither. But super-spicy foods do have something in common. They are all recognized by the human body as being a toxin inimical to human health, and so the body reacts accordingly. Now this example is complicated by the fact that some people, like my husband, really like that "stimulation", but as a doctor, I think you take my meaning.

>>E: I think all feeling responses are properties of the subject doing the feeling, and that similar stimuli will often bring about similar feelings because we are in the same species.

I take no issue with that either.

>>E:I don't think the Aurora Borealis, absent an observer, contains anything that would universally provoke awe.

Nope, not universally, if the common factor were not recognized by a particular observer. But the quality that you respond to in a baby does not disappear when you are not looking at the

baby.

>>E:We know some of the typical human triggers of awe. Things that are vast in size tend to do it, like mountains.

That would apply to two of the items in my list, the aurora and the cosmos. For many of the items, size is not a factor (e.g. music, or equations).

>>E:Paul Pearsall wrote a whole book about Awe, which he proposed was actually a specific basic emotion.

That's good. I'm glad everyone can feel it.

I want to wait a bit after Cassius moves the thread to see if there are any other responses to my question re what do all of these objects that inspire awe for many people, or even just a few, have in common. The reason I am holding back before making my own suggestion, is that I am fishing for a possible vocabulary that atheists or agnostics might use to describe this thing, one that is not laden with negative connotations for them. Obviously, there are a whole lot of words that smack of Platonism and its descendants that are much too coloured to effectively convey what I wish. So let me sit on it for a bit.

>>Why we evolved awe would be an interesting evolutionary biology question-- does it serve some sort of fitness function? I bet this was an interesting talk-- the blurb describes awe as having a pro-social function, so maybe it has helped humans survive and reproduce.
<https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/events/the-evo...of-the-sublime/>

"The talk is slated to chart the emergence of awe in the mammalian piloerection response, and review evidence of awe's universality. Following that, Keltner will consider evidence concerning how awe functions to situate the individual within social collectives, detailing studies showing how awe increases prosocial tendencies, humility, a small self, and the sense of common humanity. To conclude, the talk he will consider recent studies in partnership with the Sierra Club showing how awe benefits veterans and inner city students, in their experiences."

I don't know what the arguments are, but it is true that religious folk like to form communities. Others abhor "organized religion". Still others are motivated by an awe response to what they think of as God by becoming hermits, with the intention of devoting their whole attention to that god or feeling.

>>I am fascinated by the whole guru phenomenon. If someone perceives that vastness in a charismatic leader, this does tend to lead to extreme hierarchies where people give up their own judgment in favor of someone else's. Perhaps it is wise to be cautious with awe, lol.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awe>

Yes, people can do crazy things to try to get "closer" to that feeling!

The wiki entry is really useful. I want to paste it here and look more closely. My notes in brackets:

"Awe

Awe is an emotion comparable to wonder[1] but less joyous. On Robert Plutchik's wheel of emotions[2] awe is modelled as a combination of surprise and fear.

{As Epicureans we want to nix that fear, but we might still tremble or have our breath taken away..}

One dictionary definition is "an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful, or the like: in awe of God; in awe of great political figures." [3] Another dictionary definition is a "mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might: We felt awe when contemplating the works of Bach. The observers were in awe of the destructive power of the new weapon." [4]

{I would argue that "awe" of a weapon or a car or a new Gucci bag isn't what we are talking about in this instance.}

In general, awe is directed at objects considered to be more powerful than the subject, such as the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Grand Canyon, the vastness of the cosmos, or God. [5][6]

Definitions

Awe is difficult to define, and the meaning of the word has changed over time. Related concepts are wonder, admiration, elevation, and the sublime. In *Awe: The Delights and Dangers of Our Eleventh Emotion*, neuropsychologist and positive psychology guru Pearsall presents a phenomenological study of awe. He defines awe as **an "overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection with a startling universe that is usually far beyond the narrow band of our consciousness."** Pearsall sees awe as the 11th emotion, beyond those now scientifically accepted (i.e., love, fear, sadness, embarrassment, curiosity, pride, enjoyment, despair, guilt, and anger). [7] Most definitions allow for awe to be a positive or a negative experience, but when asked to describe events that elicit awe, most people only cite positive experiences. [8]

{My highlights are in bold.}

Etymology

This Atlanta lightning strike may have inspired awe.

The term awe stems from the Old English word *ege*, meaning "terror, dread, awe," which may have arisen from the Greek word *áchos*, meaning "pain." [9] The word *awesome* originated from the word *awe* in the late 16th century, to mean "filled with awe." [10] The word *awful* also

originated from the word awe, to replace the Old English word egeful (“dreadful”).[11]

Theories

Evolutionary theories

Awe reinforces social hierarchies

Keltner and Haidt[1] proposed an evolutionary explanation for awe. They suggested that the current emotion of awe originated from feelings of primordial awe – a hard-wired response that low-status individuals felt in the presence of more powerful, high-status individuals, which would have been adaptive by reinforcing social hierarchies. This primordial awe would have occurred only when the high-status person had characteristics of vastness (in size, fame, authority, or prestige) that required the low-status individual to engage in Piagetian accommodation (changing one’s mental representation of the world to accommodate the new experience).

{I wish to refer back to Joshua’s earlier entry on dismissing significant personal experience. I have never been in awe of a “powerful, high-status individual”, although I have respected a few. It doesn’t seem fair to dismiss a person’s statements by saying “oh, you just believe that because it is a primitive residual instinct, or because of random firings in your brain.” I think this might qualify as a straw man argument, but I’m not sure.}

Keltner and Haidt propose that this primordial awe later generalized to any stimulus that is both vast and that requires accommodation. These stimuli still include being in the presence of a more powerful other (prototypical primordial awe), but also spiritual experiences, grand vistas, natural forces/disasters, human-made works, music, or the experience of understanding a grand scientific theory. Keltner and Haidt propose that awe can have both positive and negative connotations, and that there are five additional features of awe that can color one’s experience of the emotion: threat, beauty, ability, virtue, and the supernatural.

{This seems a bit of an odd use of the word “vastness”, which usually just refers to size, but maybe that is a word, used in this way, that has not been sullied by significant religious connotations yet.}

Awe is a sexually-selected characteristic

Keltner and Haidt’s model has been critiqued by some researchers, including by psychologist Vladimir J. Konečni.[12] Konečni argued that people can experience awe, especially aesthetic awe (of which, according to him, a “sublime stimulus-in-context” is the principal cause) only when they are not in actual physical danger. Konečni postulated that the evolutionary origins of awe are from unexpected encounters with natural wonders, which would have been sexually selected for because reverence, intellectual sensitivity, emotional sensitivity, and elite membership would have been attractive characteristics in a mate, and these characteristics would also have given individuals greater access to awe-inspiring situations. Since high-status

people are more likely to be safe from danger and to have access to awe-inspiring situations, Konečni argued that high-status people should feel awe more often than low-status people. However, this hypothesis has yet to be tested and verified.

{This is highly speculative, and is not born out by our actual real-time modern experience.}

Awe increases systematic processing

A third evolutionary theory is that awe serves to draw attention away from the self and toward the environment.[8][13][14] This occurs as a way to build informational resources when in the presence of novel and complex stimuli that cannot be assimilated by current knowledge structures. In other words, awe functions to increase systematic, accommodative processing, and this would have been adaptive for survival. This hypothesis is the most recent and has received the most empirical support, as described in the section on social consequences of awe.

{This is actually quite interesting, and bears some similarity with my experience, although I am not entirely clear on how it is adaptive for survival. That would mean that we feel more awe than our early ancestors. I'm not sure about that.}

Non-evolutionary theories

Sundararajan's awe

Humanistic/forensic psychologist Louis Sundararajan[15] also critiqued Keltner and Haidt's model by arguing that being in the presence of a more powerful other elicits admiration, but does not require mental accommodation because admiration merely reinforces existing social hierarchies. Sundararajan expanded upon Keltner and Haidt's model by arguing that first, an individual must be confronted with perceived vastness. If an individual can assimilate this perceived vastness into her or his existing mental categories, s/he will not experience awe. If an individual cannot assimilate the perceived vastness, then s/he will need to accommodate to the new information (change her or his mental categories). If this is not accomplished, an individual will experience trauma, such as developing PTSD. If an individual can accommodate, s/he will experience awe and wonder. By this model, the same vast experience could lead to increased rigidity (when assimilation succeeds), increased flexibility (when assimilation fails but accommodation succeeds), or psychopathology (when both assimilation and accommodation fail). Sundararajan did not speculate on the evolutionary origins of awe.

Research

Despite the meaningfulness that feelings of awe can bring, it has rarely been scientifically studied. As Richard Lazarus (1994) wrote in his book on emotions, "Given their [awe and wonder's] importance and emotional power, it is remarkable that so little scientific attention has been paid to aesthetic experience as a source of emotion in our lives" (p. 136). Research on awe is in its infancy and has primarily focused on describing awe (e.g., physical displays of

awe and who is likely to experience awe) and the social consequences of awe (e.g., helping behavior and susceptibility to persuasion by weak messages).

Precipitants

Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007)[8] had participants write about a time they felt awe and found that nature and art/music were frequently cited as the eliciting stimulus. Although most definitions allow for awe to be positive or negative, participants described only positive precipitants to awe, and it is therefore possible that positive awe and awe+fear (i.e., horror) are distinctly different emotions.

Emotional experience

In the same set of experiments by Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007),[8] the researchers had participants write about a time they recently experienced natural beauty (awe condition) or accomplishment (pride condition). When describing the experience of natural beauty, **participants were more likely to report that they felt unaware of day-to-day concerns, felt the presence of something greater, didn't want the experience to end, felt connected with the world, and felt small or insignificant.**

It is not yet known whether awe is experienced differently in different cultures.[16]

Physical displays

Researchers have also attempted to observe the physical, non-verbal reactions to awe by asking participants to remember a time they felt awe and to express the emotion nonverbally.[17] Using this method, researchers observed that awe is often displayed through raised inner eyebrows (78%), widened eyes (61%), and open, slightly drop-jawed mouths (80%). A substantial percent of people also display awe by slightly jutting forward their head (27%) and visibly inhaling (27%), but smiling is uncommon (10%). Cross-cultural research is needed to determine whether physical displays of awe differ by culture.

Personality and awe

Some individuals may be more prone to experiencing awe. Using self- and peer-reports, researchers[13] found that regularly experiencing awe was associated with openness to experience (self and peer-ratings) and extroversion (self-ratings). Later studies[8] also found that people who regularly experience awe ("awe-prone") have lower need for cognitive closure and are more likely to describe themselves in oceanic (e.g. "I am an inhabitant of the planet Earth"), individuated, and universal terms, as opposed to more specific terms (e.g. "I have blonde hair").

Social consequences

A more recent study found that experiencing awe increased perceptions of time and led to a greater willingness to donate time, but not to donate money.[18] The greater willingness to donate time appeared to be driven by decreased impatience after experiencing awe. Experiencing awe also led participants to report greater momentary life satisfaction and stronger preferences for experiential versus material goods (e.g. prefer a massage to a watch).[18] **Awe, unlike most other positive emotions, has been shown to increase systematic processing, rather than heuristic processing, leading participants who experience awe to become less susceptible to weak arguments.**[14]

{LOL!}

Awe and aweism

Awe has recently become a topic of interest in atheist groups, in response to statements from some religious individuals who say that atheists do not experience awe, or that experiencing awe makes one spiritual or religious, rather than an atheist. For example, see Oprah's comment that she would not consider swimmer Diana Nyad an atheist because Nyad experiences awe, as well as the response to this video by interfaith activist Chris Stedman.[19]

Awe is often tied to religion, but awe can also be secular. For more examples, see the writings on being an "aweist"[20] by sociologist and atheist Phil Zuckerman, the book Religion for Atheists[21] by author Alain de Botton, and the video on how secular institutions should inspire awe by performance philosopher Jason Silva.[22]

{So lot of interesting stuff in this wiki that might help!}

>>Cassius: We'd need to incorporate that part of Lucretius that discusses how eyes were not born so we could see, etc. That passage has always been mysterious to me, along with the observation that the gods could not have created the universe because they would have had no pattern.

Interesting. Yes, I'd have a hard time fitting it into a natural selection/adaptation model. But then there are a lot of things that are hard to shoe-horn into that - like music, aesthetics in general, and philosophy. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of October 24, 2020 at 9:15 AM

i tried to do the move on my phone and it looks like I have messed things up and there are some other posts at the top I need to clean up. Will do that within an hour or two when I get to

my desk. In the meantime please feel free to continue and add to the thread - it will be relatively simple to clean up the beginning.

Post by “Elayne” of October 24, 2020 at 9:43 AM

I'm fine with moving it to public.

Susan, one thing I'd say is that the sensation of awe as connectedness with something "greater" (which is still, IMO, a type of vastness-- vastness not necessarily only meaning physical size) does not mean that there is some attribute of the thing in question which belongs to a being. Humans have awe in response to inanimate objects too, and it is not evidence that during those moments, there is some other consciousness we are contacting or intuiting. The sensation does tell us real information, but the information is about our own brains, about how we feel when we encounter certain stimuli.

What I was trying to get at with the pepper is that when different organisms feel differently, even though the capsaicin is in the pepper, there's still nothing inherently painful about it. The same for awe-- not every human feels awe at the same triggers. I don't think they are "awe-blind", as in color-blindness, unable to experience some inherent quality of the trigger. It's just that the same combinations of sensory inputs don't produce that sensation in everyone. I think that's why feelings and anticipations are in different categories from the senses, because the primary information feelings and anticipations give us is about ourselves, rather than some common inherent quality of the trigger.

This is a big deal, because if we assume that a sensation of connecting with incomprehensible vastness, whether that is a vast size or intellect or complexity or whatever quality, is evidence that a connection is happening with another consciousness-- we will get off in the weeds. It's evidence humans have the feeling of awe, not evidence that we are connecting to other beings. Obviously some combination of things triggers the feeling-- but there's no evidence another consciousness is required.

For evidence that the feeling is responding to an actual connection, we would need sense data. I have that sense data with the infants-- they are right in front of me. If this feeling was selected for to strengthen human relationships under certain environmental pressures, it would make sense, and it's plausible that our pattern recognition processes would assign that sense to inanimate objects as well. Human brains are amazing at pattern recognition, and it's a well

known thing that we often over generalize and see patterns that feel meaningful. The Virgin Mary on a piece of toast, etc. Young kids think cars can see them-- the headlights look like eyes.

Humans are neurologically set up for animism if we don't remember we need sense evidence. This is a big part of experimental design-- collecting sense data in a way as to bypass our tendency to form conclusions about patterns that may not be causal or even replicable associations.

I get the feeling you are turned off by atheists... that you think we are missing something, so that you are surprised when you see an atheist express awe. I am an atheist in the modern sense, in that I simply don't hold any supernatural beliefs, and I think Epicurus was also. The difference between me and theists who experience awe is that theists make assumptions that their pattern recognitions are telling them something well beyond what sense data can support. The feeling itself seems qualitatively the same, as far as I can tell from descriptions. I don't know why it would be surprising that atheists have these feelings-- the conclusion aspect isn't required for the feeling.

In the Epicurean sense, I do think it is more likely than not that there exist beings who experience pleasure to a markedly higher degree than do humans... but unlike Epicurus, I think we don't really know yet what factors trigger pleasure for them, considering we know nothing about their planet or their physiology. I don't know if humans would have pleasure in interacting with these beings-- I don't know if our pleasures would coincide with the pleasures of their species. It could be a situation like it is for me and Jefferson, where just because a person practices Epicurean Philosophy doesn't mean we will agree on our pleasures, and we might even dislike the other species while simultaneously agreeing they have achieved greater pleasure. I don't know if communication with them is possible. Sense data is what would answer those questions.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 25, 2020 at 5:12 AM

Elayne:

>>>it is not evidence that during those moments, there is some other consciousness we are contacting or intuiting. The sensation does tell us real information, but the information is about our own brains, about how we feel when we encounter certain stimuli.

Is it not doctrinal to Epicureanism that our senses do convey real information about the stimuli, rather than being solely a mental event, as in idealism?

E:>>>What I was trying to get at with the pepper is that when different organisms feel differently, even though the capsaicin is in the pepper, there's still nothing inherently painful about it.

Agreed.

E:>>>The same for awe-- not every human feels awe at the same triggers.

Agreed.

E:>>>I don't think they are "awe-blind", as in color-blindness, unable to experience some inherent quality of the trigger.

I think that the reason I do not have the awe response to a baby like you do, is because I do not perceive things that you do about them as a pediatrician. It is a failure on my part to appreciate the incredible beauty and complexity of, I dunno, things like fetal development, gestation, the mother-child bond, infant learning and brain development... I think there are also things that I have made a life-study of that would cue no positive feeling response or deep recognition of beauty and complexity in you. That doesn't mean it is not there.

E:>>>This is a big deal, because if we assume that a sensation of connecting with incomprehensible vastness, whether that is a vast size or intellect or complexity or whatever quality, is evidence that a connection is happening with another consciousness-- we will get off in the weeds.

I agree it is difficult. You say "a sensation of connecting with incomprehensible vastness, whether that is a vast size or intellect or complexity". Can that be restated as: "We do have experiences of connection with a vast and complex intellect, but it is very difficult to say anything about the exact nature of that consciousness, or even if that word would apply."?

E:>>>For evidence that the feeling is responding to an actual connection, we would need sense data. I have that sense data with the infants-- they are right in front of me.

My experience of what I would call the divine is similarly empirical, and seems as real to me as the keyboard under my fingers. The only difference is that I have gotten better at seeing it over time (much as Epicurus describes the process of educating a prolepsis). The only difference is that I cannot easily give you the same experience.

E:>>>If this feeling was selected for to strengthen human relationships under certain environmental pressures, it would make sense, and it's plausible that our pattern recognition processes would assign that sense to inanimate objects as well.

I think in the case of inanimate objects, awe is triggered by that same recognition of intelligence and complexity behind the object, as in the mind of an artist that has created a masterwork.

Let's look more deeply at the evolutionary angle.

It is important to note that it is entirely possible that it is actually LESS adaptive in the evolutionary sense to have access to an excess of information about "divine intelligence". Less of this information could be more useful to immediate concerns for survival. Neurologically, the brain is very much concerned with filtering out or ignoring information that is not considered useful for survival. But altered states of consciousness, from dreams, to those induced by psychedelics, or the simple feeling of awe, can *inhibit* this inhibitory function, giving us access to information that is normally filtered out. As a result, the brain becomes better able to absorb sensory information, and novel perceptions arise. That could be the "vastness" that people are speaking of when describing the object of awe or reverence. They are directly experiencing MORE of the universe - something bigger than they are normally aware of. But cultivating such an expanded state of awareness can come at a cost - the cost of having greater difficulty navigating our everyday reality effectively.

As an example of such an altered state, Dr. Andrew Gallimore studies DMT from a neurological and information science perspective. He writes that "most users describe an unshakable feeling of absolute authenticity and the undeniable presence of extreme intelligence beyond anything that could be experienced in the consensus world." Characteristic perceptions include those of "inordinate complexity and higher spatial dimensions (more than three)." Note once again, this does not imply that anything supernatural is occurring. Atoms and void are still at play, and why not?

E:>>>Human brains are amazing at pattern recognition, and it's a well known thing that we often over generalize and see patterns that feel meaningful. The Virgin Mary on a piece of toast, etc. Young kids think cars can see them-- the headlights look like eyes.

Yes. The most famous example from India is the analogy of mistaking a rope for a snake. It is a pattern recognition, but as we get closer to the rope, we register more information until we have enough to recognize the true nature of the stimulus.

E:>>>Humans are neurologically set up for animism if we don't remember we need sense evidence.

Is it your personal experience that you are set-up for animism? Is that something you feel? It is notoriously difficult to determine the nature or credibility of another person's experiences from the outside. In fact, you can't.

E:>>>I get the feeling you are turned off by atheists... that you think we are missing something,

Only insofar as atheists have implied that I am lacking in intelligence - or "missing something", as you say. We both think that the other is missing something really, but the difference is not one of lack of intelligence. It is of the same nature as my missing the awesomeness of babies. I am not attuned to it.

E:>>>so that you are surprised when you see an atheist express awe.

Not surprised. I just consciously experience more than the awe, but directly associated with it.

E:>>>I am an atheist in the modern sense, in that I simply don't hold any supernatural beliefs, and I think Epicurus was also.

Epicurus did not have supernatural beliefs, (and I argue that neither do I), but everything I have read insists he was not an atheist. There are certainly different flavours of atheism, so I am careful to not categorize your beliefs. There are even more flavours of theism than there are atheism.

E:>>>The difference between me and theists who experience awe is that theists make assumptions that their pattern recognitions are telling them something well beyond what sense data can support.

Maybe that is the crux of it. You assume the conclusions are assumptions, and not direct perception or deduction. It is notoriously difficult to determine the nature or credibility of another person's experiences from the outside.

E:>>>In the Epicurean sense, I do think it is more likely than not that there exist beings who experience pleasure to a markedly higher degree than do humans... but unlike Epicurus, I think we don't really know yet what factors trigger pleasure for them, considering we know nothing about their planet or their physiology. I don't know if humans would have pleasure in interacting with these beings-- I don't know if our pleasures would coincide with the pleasures of their species. It could be a situation like it is for me and Jefferson, where just because a person practices Epicurean Philosophy doesn't mean we will agree on our pleasures, and we might even dislike the other species while simultaneously agreeing they have achieved greater pleasure. I don't know if communication with them is possible. Sense data is what would answer those questions.

Agreed!

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2020 at 9:00 AM

There's a lot of complexity in that last exchange that I don't really have an immediate comment on. However on this part:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Epicurus did not have supernatural beliefs, (and I argue that neither do I), but everything I have read insists he was not an atheist. There are certainly different flavours of atheism, so I am careful to not categorize your beliefs. There are even more flavours of theism than there are atheism.

I guess saying "he was not an atheist" requires that we be clear that "atheism" as understood today requires a supernatural element, and that we be clear that [Epicurean gods](#) were not supernatural.

How do we find a more compact way of explaining this without always raising detailed caveats that are too unwieldy for common conversation? Because if we don't, every time we write about this then our words are too easily taken out of context so as to be dangerously confusing.

I am thinking that it helps somewhat to use the phrase "classical Epicurean" views to refer to the ancient Epicureans rather than the later Stoic mishmash of ideas, and a classical Epicurean would understand this perspective on divinity without having it constantly re-explained.

But we need a way to do this specifically in regard to religion, or even as we talk to each other we are apt to be confusing and switch back and forth between different meanings.

Post by “Elayne” of October 25, 2020 at 9:06 AM

Susan, the senses and the feelings are different, or Epicurus wouldn't have considered them separately. Although I have called it the "sense" of awe, awe is a feeling, not a true sense. A feeling does not tell us the pepper is red-- it is not that kind of data. It tells us our feeling about a situation-- it does not give us descriptive data of the kind you are describing, such as that you are contacting an "intelligence" which also perceives you.

If we start saying that feelings tell us about physical properties of things we can't see, hear, etc, then we have the door open to whatever any religious person says they "feel" is true about the universe, and we have totally left the realm of material philosophy.

Post by “Elayne” of October 25, 2020 at 9:31 AM

It becomes extremely problematic to say that experiences while taking psychedelics are somehow more accurate perceptions of reality than how our brains perceive minus psychedelics... we would have no way to distinguish between accounts people have of extraterrestrial encounters, hallucinations during schizophrenia, etc, and what we perceive ordinarily. It is the same argument people in various religions use, that they have directly experienced the Christian god specifically, and that this is evidence such a god is real.

Post by “Elayne” of October 25, 2020 at 11:46 AM

At any rate, I do not see a correlation between the "blessed beings" Epicurus described and the frequent religious intuition of connecting with a vast intelligence "behind" the inanimate parts of the universe. Epicurus goes to great trouble to assure his students that material phenomena do not require a coordinating intelligence or any type of divine intervention to happen. And we have just finished a section of Lucretius where he gives his reasoning as to why the "soul" cannot persist outside the body-- in the same way, I cannot imagine him thinking the mind or soul of a material pleasure-filled being would be somehow in contact with us. Perceiving an "image" through the prolepsis is an interesting idea, and it is a bit hard to know exactly what he means by it-- there's room for different opinions, and I don't want to hold him to mine. I do think I have reason to think he didn't propose these blessed beings were communicating with us mind to mind.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 25, 2020 at 11:51 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I am thinking that it helps somewhat to use the phrase "classical Epicurean" views to refer to the ancient Epicureans rather than the later Stoic mishmash of ideas, and a classical Epicurean would understand this perspective on divinity without having it constantly re-explained.

Yes, I think this is helpful. Thank you, Cassius.

I really want to get to the point where I can start discussing how classical Epicurean views on the gods may tie in with the telos of pleasure, and what their significance may be to humans, but if we can't accept any premise suggesting that a human can ever have any perception whatsoever of anything that could remotely be called a god, under any circumstances, then we are rejecting every element of doctrinal Epicurean theology and that conversation simply can go no further.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 25, 2020 at 12:03 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Susan, the senses and the feelings are different, or Epicurus wouldn't have considered them separately. Although I have called it the "sense" of awe, awe is a feeling, not a true sense. A feeling does not tell us the pepper is red-- it is not that kind of data. It tells us our feeling about a situation-- it does not give us descriptive data of the kind you are describing, such as that you are contacting an "intelligence" which also perceives you.

If we start saying that feelings tell us about physical properties of things we can't see, hear, etc, then we have the door open to whatever any religious person says they "feel" is true about the universe, and we have totally left the realm of material philosophy.

I'm sorry, I'm not sure where I confused the two terms. The senses and feelings are different. The senses just give us raw data, then then, provided there is a prolepsis, or memory, or experience or knowledge, or deduction, then there can be recognition of some sort. The feeling of awe follows recognition of something on some level of consciousness, possibly subconscious. I would not wish to subscribe to a theology based purely on "feeling" or faith.

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 12:03 PM

Ok we need some input from [Godfrey](#), [Don](#), and [Charles](#) , though by listing those I am not by any means looking to exclude anyone else's comment.

I am in particular thinking that there are many text references in Lucretius, one of which we touched on briefly in the podcast today, which can be read substantially along the direction Susan is going, which always strictly conforming to the limitations that Elayne is stressing.

I am particularly thinking too that we ought to systematically go through some of those texts before any of us commit to strongly to a particular conclusion about any of this.

I know that probably the majority of the instances we need to review are in Lucretius, and are in the latter parts of the book, and I don't have a command of them. Failing that, I am thinking

EPICURUS approached the topic of piety as a reformer, a materialist, and a dogmatist.

As a reformer he believed that the natural piety of mankind had suffered perversion and that his mission was to recall men to true piety.

As a materialist he rejected belief in all incorporeal existences. This resulted after his death in the discovery of a new category, "spiritual beings."

As a materialist he felt bound also to reject all divine causation, including divine movers and divine creators. He was an evolutionist, postulating the continuous birth of the unintended.

As a dogmatist, declaring the possibility of certitude in knowledge, he felt bound to furnish a rationalized account of the gods, their numbers, attributes, form, abode, and manner of life.

The new theology that resulted is astonishing. Some of the findings

All of which so far I think is absolutely accurate: Epicurus held that gods do exist, but they are not supernatural. That starting premise can't be violated in anything we conclude from here.

Then he goes further in ways that I expect Susan would approve:

EPICURUS AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

Between men and gods there is a physical, a psychological, and an ethical nexus. Both are animate creatures in an ascending scale of existence. This is the physical nexus. The idea of god is prenatal in man, a built-in notion, implanted by Nature in man as a Prolepsis or Anticipation of experience. This is the psychological nexus. Just as the happiness of men must be self-achieved, so the happiness of gods must be self-preserved. This is the ethical nexus.

Freedom to preserve happiness is no less necessary for gods than freedom to achieve happiness is necessary for men. The gods must be free from onerous responsibilities. Consequently there is no divine government for the universe, no divine providence for man, and no prophecy.

Strange as these doctrines may seem, they were combined with definite previews of Christianity. The idea of love between man and God would not have seemed a novelty to Epicureans. They were taught "that the gods were friends of the wise and the wise were friends of the gods." Friendship and love were one for the Greeks, though denoted by different words in Latin and English.

Neither would "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" have seemed to be an innovation. Epicureans were taught that the images of the gods float down into the receptive minds of the truly pious.

And since I have high confidence in DeWitt's research and understanding of Epicurus, I have to give these things credit as well.

From here we have to attack the details.

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 12:05 PM

Susan made her last post while I was posting mine. I'm myself going to refrain from simply "liking" each post in this chain as that would end up being meaningless as there is a lot of complexity being discussed. I am hoping Susan can help us focus on particular passages that seem especially relevant to the direction she is thinking so that we can evaluate them.

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 12:10 PM

in what I pasted above let me clarify this:

As a materialist he rejected belief in all incorporeal existences. ~~This resulted after his death in the discovery of a new category, "spiritual beings."~~

I am not sure it is as clear as it should be that DeWitt was referring to Christians / non-Epicureans who "discovered" spiritual beings. It's probably a good observation that the Christians may have been spurred to this in reacting to Epicurus, but as he seems to do he's jumping back and forth.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 25, 2020 at 12:40 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

At any rate, I do not see a correlation between the "blessed beings" Epicurus described and the frequent religious intuition of connecting with a vast intelligence "behind" the inanimate parts of the universe. Epicurus goes to great trouble to assure his students that material phenomena do not require a coordinating intelligence or any type of divine intervention to happen. And we have just finished a section of Lucretius where he gives his reasoning as to why the "soul" cannot persist outside the body-- in the same way, I cannot imagine him thinking the mind or soul of a material pleasure-filled being would be somehow in contact with us. Perceiving an "image" through the prolepsis is an interesting idea, and it is a bit hard to know exactly what he means by it-- there's room for different opinions, and I don't want to hold him to mine. I do think I have reason to think he didn't propose these blessed beings were communicating with us mind to mind.

Would it be more helpful if I replied to your objections with quotes from our approved texts?

I am not positing divine intervention in human lives, or an immortal soul.

If you like something about prolepsis then maybe that is a better avenue. I could work on that, but you suggested that we are hard-wired for animism in a way that deludes us about the existence or nature of gods, so how could you then accept any kind of prolepsis as conveying true information?

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2020 at 1:50 PM

Just to interject this again here for people reading along:

Quote

First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men’s minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many. For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods.

So in that context we have to answer this question:

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

...but you suggested that we are hard-wired for animism in a way that deludes us about the existence or nature of gods, so how could you then accept any kind of prolepsis as conveying true information?

Post by “Don” of October 25, 2020 at 2:30 PM

Quote

Strange as these doctrines may seem, they were combined with definite previews of Christianity. The idea of love between man and God would not have seemed a novelty to Epicureans. They were taught "that the gods were friends of the wise and the wise were friends of the gods." Friendship and love were one for the Greeks, though denoted by different words in Latin and English.

Okay, this is a prime example of why Dewitt drives me crazy in this book. His lack of a source for his quote of "the gods were friends of the wise and the wise were friends of the gods" does not allow us to see the context of the quote.

Plus his assertion that "Friendship and love were one for the Greeks" is self-serving to his quote about the gods and the wise being friends, which makes me dubious.

Of course, the [Greeks had a different semantic spectrum when it came to love...](#) And most everything else when compared to modern English words and idioms.

I find this a fascinating thread and plan to weigh in more, but I had to get my DeWitt frustration off my chest. (Sorry, [Cassius](#))

Post by "Godfrey" of October 25, 2020 at 3:36 PM

This is a fascinating and important topic, and a lot to digest! There's a reason that it was apparent saved for advanced study in Epicurus' day. I'll weigh in here but I've got limited time so hopefully I can make a coherent contribution.

Discussion of the gods is inseparable from discussion of prolepsis. So to start, I think an excellent definition of prolepsis is "the faculty of pattern recognition." This compares to the faculty of the senses or of the feelings. An individual prolepsis is true in the same way that an individual sensation is true: it's what is perceived, but it doesn't necessarily correctly represent the external physical condition (think of the square/round tower example).

Next, there is the particular prolepsis, in this case that of the gods (in the same way as there are particular sensations, for example). Finally, as I understand it, a particular prolepsis is not fixed but can change over time. Think of the infant's inkling of justice v that of an adult. A recognition of a pattern evolves as more information relevant to the particular pattern becomes available.

So for me, the core, and potentially unsolvable, problem is to determine what is the most primitive version of the "god prolepsis." It's certainly not a white haired, bearded man in a toga or a shape shifting animal as in some cultures. These are additional pieces of information added to one's innate prolepsis, by the individual's culture, from birth. The question is "what pre-dates this?"

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 4:26 PM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

Would it be more helpful if I replied to your objections with quotes from our approved texts?

I think I may have previously commented on this but I strongly think this is the best way to proceed. There are many questions to which the standard answers are not very satisfying, such as "What was Lucretius doing in his opening hymn to Venus in book one?" Was it totally, primarily, secondarily, or not at all a part of his "rimming the cup with honey" just to make a connection with people who followed the standard religion? I think it's important to have a position on that, even though I accept that more than one position is possible among people who are sincerely Epicurean. I don't want to suggest that's the place to start, but any passage gives us something concrete to work with rather than being totally off the cuff.

As one of the primary proponents of the position that the Epicureans meant what they said about their theology, I've never been satisfied with the treatment by the commentators (except for DeWitt, who as Don says can be maddening in his Christianity references) and I do think that this topic deserves extended exploration.

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 4:31 PM

Just so we don't forget the Star Trek analogies, I also want to interject that I have never felt that the Epicurean position of "no supernatural gods" rules out all sorts of other phenomena, whether it's "ESP" or whatever. The test of whether something is real is whether it is real - whether it is testable and verifiable. As I see it, the formula Epicurus was advocating meets the Platonic/Stoic/Etc position at the very highest level -- there is no supernatural power OVER THE UNIVERSE. In that sense it's one of those logical positions, like "the universe has no boundary" that is still controversial today (or at least controversial to people like me who don't want to just

defer to the current generation of astrophysicists). But the proof that the UNIVERSE has no gods over it, and it was not created or superintended by such a god, is not a limitation that says that there's nothing between us as humans and the [Epicurean gods](#) who have truly reached the "perfect state" that might be a logical construct as much as it is a physical reality.

I say this of course to further cement my Star Trek credentials that I am prepared to accept (and think Epicurus would too) that all sorts of things that are strange to us are possible -- but I demand PROOF of it!

Post by "Charles" of October 25, 2020 at 4:40 PM

There's a lot to digest with this thread. Though a part of me was rather disappointed that the Nietzsche discussion had ceased, an acquaintance of mine is a hardcore Nietzschean with a strong belief in property (or was it substance?) dualism. We often draw conclusions at an impasse that the will to power is remarkably similar to pleasure and desire, that power is even interchangeable with pleasure if acting to achieve it means will, and in most cases it does. Likewise his dualism is contrasted with the Epicurean concept of isonomia, he compares everything presented as two-fold ie. pain/pleasure, light/dark, life/death, educated/uneducated, etc. That there is an equal distribution of attributes to each concept, for each position has its counterpart. Though Nietzsche didn't have DeWitt to reference, the similarities between the two philosophies might shed some light on just how inspired Nietzsche was in his many quotes regarding Epicurus.

But I digress.

I need to re-read much of the thread with a clear mind. Gods definitely aren't my friend or my specialty.

Post by "Elayne" of October 25, 2020 at 5:32 PM

There is room for different interpretations of the prolepses. I personally always look at anything Epicurus says to see if I agree with it-- if he says something I think is scientifically either too far of a conjecture or already falsified by evidence we have today, it doesn't bother me to say I disagree.

IF Epicurus had proposed that prolepses could be used in isolation, minus sense evidence or at least inferences consistent with sense evidence, then I would say oops, Epicurus, on that proposal we will have to part ways.

Because he put so much weight on trusting our senses, it's hard for me to imagine he would propose belief in a prolepsis which violated sense data.

Now, we have access to centuries of neurologic and physics research he didn't have. So I know that we are pattern recognizers and that our innate pattern recognitions are over-active in some cases. Why can I say that? Because sometimes we see patterns our sense data contradicts. When there is a conflict between an intuition and what my senses tell me, the senses win. This doesn't render pattern recognition useless at all. It does put a gold standard in the decision process about what is real.

I don't know if anyone here has read *The Gift of Fear* -- it's a very interesting book about how our "fast brain" does pattern recognition of psychopaths. Subtle things like blinking rates get combined to produce uneasiness in us, and many of us are prone to override that fear because we "can't put our finger" on what's scaring us. So maybe we go off with Ted Bundy.

I think these fast pattern recognitions are important. I don't ignore them. I wouldn't be alone in a room with someone who gave me that feeling. But to convict such a person in court-- I need sense evidence.

So as far as awe goes-- I do not think there's any sense data to support the idea that feeling awe upon looking at tall mountains is because there's a vast complex intelligence involved, which I'm connecting with, no matter how much it feels like that's the case-- and to propose that the mountains somehow point to the existence of such an intelligence is contrary to both Epicurus' understanding of physics and modern physics. The evidence of my senses wins.

When we see a tree, it is not because the tree consciously sends images of itself or because some intelligence of the tree is connecting with us. When I read Epicurus on images of the gods, it sounds more like he's describing that kind of thing rather than a contact of minds.

I do also happen to think even the image proposal is the least plausible explanation, now that we know more than he did about neuroscience... and for less plausible hypotheses, sense evidence is needed-- and we have none. So I admit I diverge from him, but I also think the idea of our minds connecting with [Epicurean gods](#)' minds is farther than what he said... and that it would conflict with his ideas about the material nature of the mind being unable to survive outside the body.

Post by “Elayne” of October 25, 2020 at 5:49 PM

For me, on the prolepses-- I think they give us extremely valuable and accurate information about ourselves, about our species, about how our brains work, and that is reality. I do not think we could know these things about ourselves any other way, because the prolepses are experiential. So I don't have any quarrel with counting prolepses in the Canon, as long as we also do not stray from evidence of our senses.

I think our recognition of a spectrum type pattern of "most to least" tells us there are some creatures somewhere on the farthest end of pleasure. It's not reasoning so much as this innate pattern. I know of no evidence that would counter that expectation of pleasurable beings. So I can go a long way with Epicurus on that line of thinking.

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2020 at 6:45 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Because he put so much weight on trusting our senses, it's hard for me to imagine he would propose belief in a prolepsis which violated sense data.

I think this is an essential part of the picture we can't lose sight of. The three legs of the canon are supposed to function together, and while the data received from all is entitled to respect, the opinions/conclusions we accept as "true" have to be tested and conformed to all three. Now sometimes we aren't going to have as much, or as credible, data from some as we have from the others, and so we're constantly concerned about when to "wait" and when to consider an opinion as sufficiently confirmed to act on it or consider it to be confident.

But the reason I single out that quote is that I definitely agree that where we have clear evidence from one leg of the canon that **actually contradicts** the evidence from another leg, we definitely should not consider such a state to be worthy of considering it to be confirmed. There will be perhaps lots of instances where we have some evidence from some legs that isn't strong enough to be confident of on its own, combined with *no* evidence from the other legs. Then we have to treat the situation in its own context and decide whether we have enough at that point or need to "wait." But where we have some affirmatively contradictory evidence from one of the legs, I presume that at least in most cases that means that we definitely don't have

enough evidence to consider the matter settled.

All of which leads to an ad-hoc reasoning process that doesn't allow for magical bright lines, but I think that's just the kind of "reality" that an atomistic universe implies, so it's probably the right position.

EDIT: I suppose we have to go even further and say that there might be *some* evidence that contradicts the rest, like in some kind of sensation trick where we are blindfolded and have to speculate without sight (I am sure some of you can easily come up with an example). But even in those cases, the contradictory evidence is generally temporary, and can be ultimately corrected when we take the blindfold off, or get more data. So I would think in most all cases we can still say that we wouldn't accept a conclusion where there is contradictory evidence that isn't limited in time or scope or in some other way we have evidence of its limitation, by which we can explain the contradiction.

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 6:47 PM

Just thinking in terms of how to advance the thread, I am not sure that I am really comfortable that we have a precise enough definition of where we want to go. Do we need to further explain what we mean by "reverence" and "awe" such that might take those words out of the realm of relatively ordinary emotions (of pleasure) or are we focusing on "the nature of the gods" and the texts which refer to receiving and benefiting from the images of them?

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 6:52 PM

Everybody knows that we have a copy of the Velleius section here, right? <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/index.php?...re-of-the-gods/>

We might almost want to number each of these lines and talk about them individually. The section I referred to earlier as fascinating to me is this paragraph below, which has been extensively commented on with the conclusion that it really does say that the endless train of images does stream TOWARD the gods, which would appear to us to make no sense, but which must have an explanation. Either the writer or transmitters are wrong about the direction of the stream, or there is something we are missing about which this might give us a clue:

Quote

Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, ***because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods***, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

I don't want to commit that I think the text is correct and the stream does go TOWARD them. I just think this is an example of how we need to try to start at the very foundation of what "images" are all about so we can try to reconstruct what they most probably have thought. I always think that trying to reconstruct what they were saying is the essential first step in understanding them, even if we end up disagreeing with the final result.

In this case, it seems the theory entailed that images are always streaming constantly off everything, and that would include both the gods and us and everything in between. So it is certainly possible that the Epicureans were considering the atoms streaming away from us in the big picture, however it seems more likely and more consistent with the other references that the images (atoms) we're talking about were originating with the gods.

And I'll say as I think I said in the podcast we recorded today, that I don't think that our modern understanding of light waves and sound waves really by necessity invalidates their general conclusions. There's a lot of complexity to consider before reaching that conclusion. It's easy for me to imagine as I spin my head around that indeed "something" is headed my direction from all directions all the time, and thus presumably headed outward from me as well.

Post by “Don” of October 25, 2020 at 8:01 PM

I have additional thoughts but I wanted to share a time when I can say unequivocally that I experienced awe:

On a family trip to California, we had spent the early afternoon at the giant redwoods south of Yosemite Valley. We drove north and went through one of the tunnels and pulled off to take in the view. Little did I know this was the famous [Tunnel View](#). My first view of Yosemite Valley literally took my breath away! I literally - and I mean this - the view was so awesome (in its original sense) and expansive that I didn't feel I could get enough air into my lungs. There was

just so much space to take in, I was so tiny in relation to this expanse. All I could do was stare, slack-jawed.

That remains an archetypal, visceral experience of awe for me. It was a precognitive experience. I had no words at the time describe. I remember saying at the time, "Now, I know what breathtaking actually means!"

[Edit: In rereading that, "pre-rational" might be better than precognitive. It was a direct sensory - proleptic? - experience that bypassed my ability at first to put it into words.]

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2020 at 8:13 PM

Wow great pictures! I suppose we could compose a list of similar views, and also consider whether to include all of the many amazing space photographs (I presume yes). The feeling is clearly real, and can be spurred by non-living things.

Post by "Don" of October 25, 2020 at 8:23 PM

Well said. The feeling - I might say reaction - of awe is real.

Post by "Elayne" of October 25, 2020 at 9:09 PM

I love the feeling of awe. Although some describe it as containing an element of fear, that is not the case for me, and I suspect that may be partly related to my lack of belief in the supernatural.

Here's a short description of some research on animism in adults. I knew about animism as a predictable developmental phase in children because of my work, but I was also aware through observation that many adults retain at least some vestiges. The way it manifests can be as subtle as just a sensation that there is a presence "out there." John Wathey talks about this in his book about the illusion of god's presence.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-gi...-bicycles-alive>

As far as knowledge requiring 3 legs not in conflict... the feelings give us a different type of information than senses, so I am not sure they could ever conflict with sense knowledge.

On the prolepses, when we are talking about something like "justice", that is purely pattern recognition to begin with and can't come into conflict with the senses, because there is no outside standard. There's no "justice particle" to observe, different from particles of a material god which could be observed.

Other pattern recognitions can sometimes conflict with evidence, such as misattribution of causality, and in that case the senses (data) overrule the faulty pattern recognition. That's again different from justice. I would say that for me, if the data doesn't fit an innate pattern assignment, it's the pattern that's in error. Epicurus doesn't address this type of prolepsis/sense conflict exactly, does he? But I don't think he shows quite the strength of confidence in prolepses-- he doesn't say anything like "if you don't trust your prolepses, you can't trust anything." This makes me think that in a standoff, he would trust the senses more.

Post by “Don” of October 25, 2020 at 9:53 PM

So where do I personally think this all leads... Or where it comes from?

The more I think about prolepses, the more I'm convinced they have to be inborn and then evolve as we mature. The [newborn and toddler sense of right](#) and wrong grows into our Prolepsis of Justice. So where does our Prolepsis of the Gods or maybe of Divinity come from? Take a look at the rapt look on some babies and toddlers faces when they take part in some research studies where they pay attention to puppets. [Take a look at this toddler experiencing snow for the first time](#). Babies and toddlers obviously have the capacity [to experience awe](#) to be in wonder. Look at the baby's eyes in that last video link! That sense of wonder, I believe, can grow into a Prolepsis of the Divine.

Post by “Elayne” of October 25, 2020 at 11:03 PM

This is an interesting article about many facets of religious (here equated with the supernatural) belief and our neurology-- discusses our HADD, hypersensitive agency detection, which had evolutionary advantages even if factually inaccurate. That's what I'm talking about with vestigial animism, the HADD. The rudimentary basis for religion.

Midway through, there's a bit about humans using god concepts to back up their moralities. Which we need to take care to avoid in EP. We have recognized that pleasure is our goal, and that is how we would recognize a god, if we could communicate-- their skill at pleasure. No matter how powerful, vast, or complex a being is, if it isn't pleasure filled, by our criteria it isn't a god.

I would refrain from doing the converse-- from saying if a powerful, complex being chooses pleasure, that their choice gives us our rationale. We don't need a god to choose pleasure in order to choose it ourselves. We ourselves have created our definition of what we will call gods, if we encounter them. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190529-do-humans-have-a-religion-instinct>

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190529-do-humans-have-a-religion-instinct>

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 6:11 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

As far as knowledge requiring 3 legs not in conflict... the feelings give us a different type of information than senses, so I am not sure they could ever conflict with sense knowledge.

Right -- that would be comparable to the point that the eyes don't contradict the nose, etc. The way I stated the issue there needs to be reworked.

Post by “Don” of October 26, 2020 at 7:56 AM

Several references have been made to images - eidola - that Epicurus says we perceive as emanating from objects that impact our senses and mental perception. I've reinterpreted this as light - for sight at least - bouncing from the object to our eyes. Light is constantly bouncing off objects and striking our eyes. If something produces sound or odors, those too will spread out and if we're in the way we encounter a sound or smell.

Now the idea of our minds perceiving concepts or encountering eidola independent of physical senses gets a little trickier. Although, look at those babies again "sensing" whether something is fair, or right or wrong. They're obviously "sensing" something coming from that experience. Although it's their sight that is allowing them to assess the situation, sight is not being used to determine the justice of the situation. This is one reason I'm inclined to think the mental Perceptions and Prolepses either work hand in hand or are the same thing by different names. The Mental Perceptions sense the "pattern" (to co-opt a phrase from [Elayne](#)) but the Prolepsis puts it into a category or paradigm.

I think this has parallels to the Prolepsis of the Divine... But I'm still working on that! 😊

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 8:11 AM

[The bbc article I tried to paste in comment above](#)-- idk why it didn't show up.

Don, evolutionary biologists think our innate sense of justice is symmetry. Tit for tat. Babies go through a phase where they love to hand items back and forth-- endlessly, lol.

It's different from innate empathy where they don't like to see harm, but it winds up connecting for many... not all. The prolepsis of justice for some adults includes empathy and for others, it remains more of a straight symmetry situation.

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 8:52 AM

I know one thing that is going through my mind, is that we're really at the very tip of the beginning of discussing these issues. Most of the commentators simply don't take the issues seriously and they dismiss them immediately after raising, if they even raise them at all. We've got to be patient and methodical in retracing all the steps.

As for Don's reference to seeing images as light, yes I think that is a normal reaction. However in the case of smells, at least, I think it's probably pretty clear that the Epicureans held there to be atoms drifting from the object to our nose, and in that case I presume we still think they were correct.

In the case of hearing and sight, however, I am not so sure even what the current science is. I presume that we think sound is the transmissions of vibrations in the intervening atoms between us and the drum, so there's not really any atom from the drum hitting us.

Likewise, with light, is there any atom from the drum impacting our eyes? I'm really not sure what light is and that our current definitions exclude the view that there are particles of some kind (better word than atoms) from the object that come to our eyes.

And I am not really sure whether the issue of whether there are actually particles traveling through space is a bright line difference that would lead to different conclusions.

But as a basic observation, I am recalling that the texts seem to imply or actually state that images arise because particles travel from the surface of the drum to our eyes. Again there's a lot to explore there as I am not sure that there ends up being a big difference whether we think of the thing traveling as "particles" or "waves" or whatever.

Then there's the whole issue of "action at a distance" which probably gets wrapped up into this, and it is my understanding that there's no solid interpretation of that.

If I recall too there's an explicit discussion of magnetism and how that would work which would be relevant to this too.

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 8:56 AM

If someone wants to make a suggestion as to how we organize the discussion of these several different issues/threads, feel free. 😊 Failing any brilliant suggestions otherwise, I suggest we plow ahead here. Maybe at some point we "pin" a post that consists mostly of links to the various parts of the discussion. - or perhaps a paragraph describing the general reason for the topic, and then within the paragraph we link the terms to the proper threads. This isn't a "wiki" here but that's not a detriment I don't think - we want discussion, not just tons of links, we just need to discussion to be findable and manageable.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 26, 2020 at 12:19 PM

The conversation has diverged into too many directions now than could be pulled together in anything short of a book. I won't attempt to write that book. (Nor would I presume that anyone would wish to read such a thing.)

I would just like to attempt the approach that Cassius endorses of focusing on "The Master's" teachings. But in so doing, I want to avoid the purely exegetical approach where we are only interpreting texts as divorced from real experience, and without personal relevance. In Greco-Roman philosophy, theory is never considered an end in itself. It is decidedly put in the service of practice.

I, for one, am interested in seriously taking up the formulas of the creator of this tradition. If we need to take up any new meanings for these formulas that the creator could not have anticipated (due to lack of scientific knowledge, for example), that is acceptable, and can be seen as an evolution of the original doctrine. However, the new meaning must correspond to the deep intentions of this philosopher. [Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pg 6-7] Otherwise it is no longer, in this case, Epicureanism as Epicurus intended it to be.

Epicurus is very clear that the attitude towards the gods is pivotal to his philosophy, as I hope to demonstrate. Here are some of the important elements of that Epicurean Theology. All quotations are from our DeWitt book.

pg. 250: "Epicureans were taught that the images of the gods float down into the receptive minds of the truly pious."

The implication is that the impious will not receive such images. There must be a certain degree of receptivity.

pg. 255: "So far as vision is concerned, Epicurus denied that the gods were visible to the physical eye, though he did think them visible to the mind when operating as a supersensory organ of vision."

Therefore, the normal senses such as sight, are not the way by which the gods are perceived, but by "a supersensory organ of vision".

pg. 255: "Prolepsis or Anticipation was the prime and primal evidence of the existence of gods."

This gives the prolepsis greater weight than the other senses as means of perception in matters of the divine.

pg. 262: Epicurus believed "he had discovered 'true philosophy,' originating in the teaching of Nature herself."

This reinforces the validity of the prolepsis as a source of true knowledge, not only reason.

pg. 257: From Sextus Empiricus: "according to Epicurus man derived his idea of godhead from the visions of sleep, the assumption being that these correspond to external realities. This evidence is confirmed by the testimony of Lucretius." The function of such dreams "is to act as a stimulus to the innate Prolepsis of a godhead, which up to a point is merely potential, and thus render it actual."

Therefore, Epicurus saw some visions obtained during sleep as conveying real information about the godhead.

pg. 260: "Since virtue is a prerequisite of happiness, it follows that the gods, as enjoying happiness, must possess virtue. Moreover, since an irrational creatures cannot possess virtue, it follows that the gods must possess reason, and that too in the highest degree."

Therefore, we are not adjured to feel pious reverence towards pigs, or any other creature that feels pleasure in the absence of reason. The gods are highly rational and virtuous.

pg. 264: "An interminable shape made up of identical images arise from the inexhaustible supply of atoms and flows to the gods."... "the corresponding efflux, as usual, being taken for granted."

It seems to me that this implies that we have "images" flowing from the gods to the observer, and also from the observer to the gods, but it is not clear. The two-way information flow could describe a form of communication. Note the exchange of information does not imply any intervention of gods, which we reject.

pg. 271: "of the very greatest importance is the significance of infinity and in the highest degree deserving of intense and diligent contemplation."

This is purely conjecture, but perhaps it is this type of contemplation that could make one more sensitive to "images from the gods".

Pg 279: "The covering principle in such matters is the beneficent effect of reverence upon the worshipper. A dictum of Epicurus on the point has been quoted previously, Vatican Saying 32: "Reverence for the wise man is a great blessing for the one that feels the reverence." ... To reverence is ascribed in particular to a guiding power of supreme experience. This guidance is toward a correct concept of the divine.

Reverence towards the divine is what leads us to a correct understating of the divine. This is described as a great and desirable blessing.

pg. 281: "[The wise man] regards with wonder the nature of the gods and their disposition [tranquility], and endeavours to draw near to it and yearns, as it were, to touch it and to be in its company, and he also calls wise men the friend of the gods and the gods the friends of the wise."

This implies that it is possible to “draw near” to the divine, and to have a relationship with it akin to friendship.

pg. 283: “[The gods] are not incapable of loving; ‘they are partial towards those like themselves’; they are ‘friends of the wise.’ There is a psychological nexus between men and them...”

There is a connection here between man and the divine. It is not one of intervention, but there can be no loving, friendly relationship where there is no contact whatsoever.

I believe these teachings from Epicurus demonstrate that there is a place for not only spiritual beliefs in Epicureanism, but also a spiritual practice. This is only one book I have quoted from – there is so much more that could be said!

Seeing these kinds of teachings in Epicureanism is what really lit my fire and got me excited about discovering how a theology/spirituality would function alongside an ethics that was *not* based in notions of sin and repentance, or samsara and maya, or duty and detachment, but rather in a telos of pleasure. So as the first step, I started to discuss the ways in which the personal experience of most people in human history could reflect the pointers that Epicurus gave us: feelings of reverence and awe, the visions of the dream-state or other altered states of consciousness, the innate prolepsis/instinct towards belief and reverence for the divine., etc. These things are real. But if we adopt an epistemology that fundamentally rejects all of these experiences as valid or valuable, and completely rejects them as a means of knowledge of the divine or of connection with the divine, then we are rejecting a very significant proportion of Epicurean doctrine, not to mention human experience. It leaves no room for further exploration, let alone personal spiritual development.

I suspect I have found myself alone here in these ambitions, which is awkward. So I really think it would be appropriate for me to wrap it up now and stop forcing my agenda.

The rest is exegesis, if there is an interest.

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 12:50 PM

Quote

I suspect I have found myself alone here in these ambitions, which is awkward. So I really think it would be appropriate for me to wrap it up now and stop forcing my agenda.

Susan thank you for taking the time to write all that! I do not think your statement I quoted is correct. As far as I can tell your quotations from Dewitt are 100% accurate, and though I have less confidence in Sextus Empiricus I think the strong weight of the quotes go in the direction you are headed.

I am less comfortable with "communication" but even that is subject to the ambiguities involved - did the Epicureans really consider Epicurus to be a god? If so, there were certainly humans who communicated with Epicurus, and also those who came after Epicurus has died have an awful lot of info about him as a person.

I see our project as entailing much division of labor and many different specialties, so I for one welcome this.

Post by "Cassius" of October 26, 2020 at 4:28 PM

OK I have a few minutes to come back to this.

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

These things are real. But if we adopt an epistemology that fundamentally rejects all of these experiences as valid or valuable, and completely rejects them as a means of knowledge of the divine or of connection with the divine, then we are rejecting a very significant proportion of Epicurean doctrine, not to mention human experience. It leaves no room for further exploration, let alone personal spiritual development.

I do not read anyone as saying that we should, or the texts say to, reject any data from any of the three legs of Epicurus' canon. I see everything as a question of verifiability combined with questions that relate to "inference" as discussed in Philodemus. If I read Elayne correctly she is pointing out that there is a tendency to see organization where it does not exist, but that to me simply raises the issue that we need to be especially careful to make sure that our conclusions are well supported.

But there are very deep questions and that is just a superficial comment. It is easy for us to jump to conclusions about what each other are saying. The best way to avoid miscommunication is to be very clear.

I suggest we keep going on the details of the texts, and perhaps even after we have identified enough specific texts and issues, we schedule a special skype call to discuss it.

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 5:22 PM

One of the difficulties in quoting the texts is that cases can be made for conclusions out of alignment with the philosophy as a whole, if one is not cautious. Although I like DeWitt, I don't consider him necessarily accurate on every single issue, and I feel most confident taking the PDs, VS's, and letters as a whole than I do working from his quotes.

I could quote Epicurus on specifics about elementary particles which have clearly been shown incorrect by experimental data. If I insisted someone must adhere to that or not be considered Epicurean, I would think refusing to integrate new evidence would make me no longer Epicurean. Because I am using his basic process, I think needing to update specific details, such as about how the senses function, is in keeping with the original philosophy.

In the same way, we have new information about how the brain works that I think requires careful consideration of the details regarding the trustworthiness of individual prolepses. We clearly cannot say all intuitions are true-- no one here I think is arguing that. And now that we know humans have a documented tendency to assign agency, and we know more about dreams than Epicurus possibly could have guessed, I think it is not Epicurean if we fail to consider how this affects certain details about the prolepses.

For the justice prolepsis, and many of our deeply embedded patterns, there is not an outside standard which would contradict us. Justice has no meaning apart from prolepsis. For another example, simply the action of perceiving size along a spectrum is a thought pattern, a prolepsis. Assigning names to objects is a thought pattern. Where we see boundaries between objects-- a thought pattern. Object permanence is one. We couldn't even think at all in a way we would recognize as thinking without these thought patterns. Some prolepses are such a part of our thoughts that we literally can't encounter reality without them. We do not perceive "raw" sense data-- we automatically organize it, in species specific and sometimes individual specific ways. When I read about the prolepses, I thought Epicurus was absolutely brilliant for getting this. I knew it already, but I had access to so much research and didn't figure it out myself. It's old hat to modern researchers, but back then? It bowled me over. What an intellect!

Those are the prolepses without which we cannot function. They are fundamental and different from both feelings and senses. They are what keeps the philosophy from being entirely empirical, because they cannot be taken out of the picture.

There are other intuitions which make assertions about material fact, such as agency perception, sunk cost fallacy, proximity bias-- these prolepses had evolutionary advantages, but

when held up to the light of evidence, they aren't as reliable. These are intuitions which can actually be overcome by repeated consideration of evidence. It's possible to function without them, but usually only by intentionally planning to do so.

I cannot imagine Epicurus ignoring research about hyperactive agency detection, the neurobiology of dreams, etc. It would be incompatible with the whole of his philosophy to stick with old explanations for those phenomena when we have newer evidence for other causes that fits our observations better, from a physics standpoint. To me it is nearly insulting to him to think he would not integrate the newer research.

That doesn't mean anyone has to outright ignore such experiences or that I can say "what you think is happening definitely isn't happening -- but it has to be on the table to question these reports, in light of evidence. To use science to study ourselves is Epicurean.

As to whether a pig could be a god-- IMO we can't say that isn't possible. We would have to establish a standard for rationality and virtue for another species whose minds we can only guess at. We do not propose any absolute virtues, so how would we know how to recognize them in another species?

The emphasis on natural science in his writing is much stronger than details about the gods.

"[PD12](#). A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe, but suspects the truth of some mythical story. So that, without natural science, it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed."

and here, when he talks about direct perception, I have read this as referring to the senses. We can't possibly refer opinion to unquestioned intuition when we know intuition is often counter to evidence. All would be "full of doubt and confusion" if we had to accept dreams on the same basis as physics.

"PD22. 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."

Post by "Cassius" of October 26, 2020 at 5:29 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

As to whether a pig could be a god-- IMO we can't say that isn't possible. We would have to establish a standard for rationality and virtue for another species whose minds we can only guess at. We do not propose any absolute virtues, so how would we know how to recognize them in another species?

Here I agree and would say that we still need to be more accurate as to our standard for what is a "god." Did Epicurus himself qualify? If so, how? I don't think we are sure whether that assertion was intended to be figurative or "literal" or what, so there's a lot of room for discussion of what we mean by these words. Where is the dividing line, if there is a dividing line?

Post by “Don” of October 26, 2020 at 5:46 PM

Quote from Susan Hill

I suspect I have found myself alone here in these ambitions, which is awkward. So I really think it would be appropriate for me to wrap it up now and stop forcing my agenda.

I wouldn't say that you're alone. Epicurus obviously saw the gods as important as evidenced by the [Principal Doctrines](#), the letter to Menoikeus, etc. I think it behooves us to understand why. He took part in the community religious practices of his day. Why, if they were all based on empty opinions? How does this influence our practice as Epicureans? I find the topic quite worthy of investigation. I'm not sure we will come to the same conclusion, Susan, but I'm curious to see where this path leads.

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 5:59 PM

Don, one thing I always remember is that it was against the law upon pain of death to refuse to participate in worship and rituals. No doubt in those rituals, things were said which completely went against Epicurus' description of the gods, because the prevailing religions went against his framing. We don't have his explanations for his choice, but I would guess he didn't feel like

being put to death over it. I'd happily chant with supernaturalists if someone said they'd kill me if I didn't.

I'm not going to go so far as to say his whole teaching about the gods was for self protection--some have suggested it, but that doesn't seem as plausible.

I think all this is definitely worth discussing in detail.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 26, 2020 at 6:52 PM

From what I've read there's some complexity regarding the prolepses in that Epicurus had a very empirical view of them, but later Epicureans expanded them to be more in line with how we understand them. There were arguments as to the place of active mental focusing versus prolepses: were these prolepses or did they occur separately?

It could be of interest to study these and other developments within the school, keeping in mind the developments in the societies in which the various generation of Epicureans lived and worked. There are some articles in <https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/filebase/> that might information beyond DeWitt in this regard.

Post by “Don” of October 26, 2020 at 7:04 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Don, one thing I always remember is that it was against the law upon pain of death to refuse to participate in worship and rituals. No doubt in those rituals, things were said which completely went against Epicurus' description of the gods, because the prevailing religions went against his framing. We don't have his explanations for his choice, but I would guess he didn't feel like being put to death over it. I'd happily chant with supernaturalists if someone said they'd kill me if I didn't.

I'm not going to go so far as to say his whole teaching about the gods was for self

protection-- some have suggested it, but that doesn't seem as plausible.

I think all this is definitely worth discussing in detail.

I have source amnesia but I remember reading somewhere that while Epicurus and his followers took part in the rituals and public ceremonies (in part, I'm sure to not be executed), they used them as opportunities to contemplate the "true" nature of the gods as they understood them. So, yeah, sure, I'm pouring a libation to "Zeus" but I'm considering the libation a celebration of my ability to conceive of the gods correctly, to emulate their happiness, to... Etc. The gods don't care about my libation and are most likely unaware of it nor does it have any power... But I can gain benefit from using this as an opportunity to meditate upon - to think deeply about - the nature of the gods.

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 7:43 PM

This is a trite example, but I remember when I was growing up and trying to learn to play tennis that people would constantly make the suggestion that i should get a much practice as possible playing with older and better players, because that's how you learn to improve yourself.

Many of the suggestions of Epicurus about contemplating eternity and infinity and the gods seem to me sort of the same kind of thing - that we make our lives better by regularly visualizing "better" examples of what we would like to be ourselves.

But remember, I am the one who holds open the door to the possibility of ancient astronauts and the whole "Star Trek" kind of universe as *possibilities*, and in fact *probabilities* in some form or fashion, but always only of speculative / aspirational value without some direct reason to consider them of personal relevance to me in a particular situation.

Even saying that, I don't discount that what we are discussing can have a very important role in life. I am with Nietzsche in thinking that nihilism and similar kinds of radical "nothing makes any difference" attitudes requires a strong antidote. I don't follow his view that "eternal return" is particularly helpful with that, but if the cultivation of feelings of reverence and awe toward "life" or whatever we conclude makes the most sense, then that would be an important tool to keep in the quiver.

Seems to me that there are several references (for example better to believe in the myths of religion than in hard determinism) that would support the probability that everybody doesn't have the constitution of a Socrates or a Plato to want to go around sparring with words every

day, and that type of personality is going to be attracted to different parts of the Epicurean philosophy than are others. I don't think it would ever be permissible to stoop to out and out "noble myths" that are patently false, but there is enough logical foundation (isonomia, eternality, infinity) plus enough raw direct "sensation" (the feelings we are talking about) to provide an important part of an Epicurean culture.

And I do think they were headed toward an Epicurean "culture," or at least that would have been a natural evolution of the school. Honor the founders on the 20th and regular occasions, look upon Epicurus as a father figure who we can almost think of as "godlike," and surround yourself with a community of friends who regularly talk about unanswerable questions about an infinite and eternal universe with no life after death, and you've got a formula for a day-to-day culture in which contemplation of "divinity" would be a natural part.

Edit: I don't want to stop on that note. I never want to underestimate the intelligence of the ancient Epicureans. I really have no clue where the "limit" is of what is possible in terms of what goes on in the universe, so I don't want to sound like every aspect of what I am saying amounts to a pragmatic argument that "it's useful even if it isn't true." I really don't know what "it" is in this context, and I think a close reading of the texts will lead in some very interesting directions.

Post by “Cassius” of October 26, 2020 at 7:53 PM

Ha - even after I finished that last post I have one more thing to add.

It is not lost on me at all that in my opinion the force that destroyed Epicurean philosophy and the rest of the ancient world was "organized religion." Organized religion is clearly a potent and destructive force in the world, and it can't be just ignored, because apparently it does address a deep-seated aspect of human psychology that raises questions in this area in which most people will not accept "I don't know" as an answer. I don't think "agnosticism" can ever be self-sustaining for that reason. I suspect Epicurus thought that probably the majority of people will always require some kind of position to be taken in this department, and no matter how much we might wish otherwise that is likely always to be the case. As a result some kind of organized response is probably required lest Epicurean communities get steamrolled by the opposition. That may sound like another "pragmatic" argument, but if it seems that there's some kind of innate programming that disposes us to address these questions, then it would be irresponsible or foolhardy to fail to address that if you're working toward setting up a cultural reform movement like the Epicureans were in many ways doing.

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 9:35 PM

Cassius, one of the most frustrating things about constructed meaning for me was always that it was so flimsy... I could never make existentialism work if I knew I was "making my own meaning", because having to make it meant it wasn't real in some way.

Theologies about supernatural gods do the same thing to people. They get dumped unprepared into a world suddenly devoid of meaning. People who study neuroscience are among the highest percentage atheist groups, because they learn how we fool ourselves. Physicists are similar.

The sturdiest protection against disillusionment and fear of meaninglessness is always, IMO, reality. If meaning had to be found in something objective or had to be constructed, we would be hopeless-- nihilism would be the only choice.

But we have feeling. Which we don't construct-- it's aside from reason, irrational, impossible to invalidate. For me, feelings are what make nihilism fail-- nihilism has nothing to argue against the pleasurable feeling of life mattering, of people we love mattering to us, because we aren't appealing to reason anyway. Nihilism can do nothing but slink off to the corner and pout, lol.

If we try to base meaning in something without evidence, a sort of "god of the gaps"-- gaps which are steadily shrinking-- we put ourselves at risk.

The goal and guide of pleasure stands with or without gods, even material gods. Because of that, I am not bothered by whether or not they exist and am ok with leaving unknown things open... but I am a poet and have a high degree of what Keats called negative capability.

I think the material gods idea is interesting, and for some people it may be useful to think of them as examples. About the sensation of contact, I would say that if it doesn't cause an individual more harm than good, that's a personal decision whether to question it or not-- but I see a significant risk for many, upon exposure to neuroscience research.

Coming down on the side that they are definitely out there floating images to prepared minds, exactly as Epicurus thought, given how much more we know now, will send all the scientists running away. This image floating thing is now implausible, as much as dreams giving factual information. But straight up denial of the possibility that there are blissful extraterrestrials

somewhere in the universe and that eventually we might communicate is also unscientific.

I know Epicurus didn't like leaving things open... but he wasn't faced with the knowledge we are faced with. I think honoring him and the philosophy has to include accepting that we can't always reconcile his desire for dogma with the data.

Post by “Elayne” of October 26, 2020 at 9:43 PM

One more thought-- a philosophy that puts so much emphasis on observation of nature could never be expected to keep the exact details of how things work the same. Change in those details is embedded in the origin of the project.

This is not neo-Epicurean, because that would mean things like deciding virtue is absolute, without evidence, or that Epicurus wasn't really talking about pleasure, etc. Nothing about re-examining the prolepses is neo, because we are probing nature, as Epicurus did. It reminds me of Lucretius talking about him fearlessly penetrating what nature hides. If we think that need for fearless probing of nature, including our own brains, was a one and done deal, we'd be wrong.

Post by “Don” of October 26, 2020 at 11:17 PM

In returning to the original texts concerning the gods:

First, I found Dewitt's quote of the gods being friends of sages:

Philodemus, *On the Life of the Gods*, Vol. Herc. 1, VI col. 1: ... to the gods, and he admires their nature and their condition and tries to approach them and, so to speak, yearns to touch them and to be together with them; and he calls Sages "friends of the gods" and the gods "friends of Sages."

But also, here are some Fragments and their sources from [Attalus's website](#):

[U385]

Atticus, by way of Eusebius of Caesarea, Preparation for the Gospel, XV 5 p. 800A: {And as to our deriving any benefit from them while they remain in heaven,} ... in this way, even according to Epicurus, men get help from the gods, "They say, for instance, that the better emanations from them become the causes of great blessings to those who partake of them..."

[U386]

Philodemus, On Piety, Vol. Herc. 2, II.76.1 [p. 106 Gomperz] {Obbink I.27.754}: ... he says that as being both the greatest thing, and that which as it were excels in sovereignty, it possesses everything: for every wise man holds pure and holy beliefs about the divine and has understood that this nature is great and august. And it is particularly at festivals that he, progressing to an understand of it, through having its name the whole time on his lips, embraces with conviction more seriously

Philodemus, On Music, Vol. Herc. 1, I c.4,6: Now, these very important things may still be said at the present: that the divine does not need any honor; for us, nevertheless, it's natural to honor it, above all, with pious convictions, even through the rites of national tradition, each according to his proper part.

Philodemus, On the Life of the Gods, Vol. Herc. 1, VI col. 1: ... to the gods, and he admires their nature and their condition and tries to approach them and, so to speak, yearns to touch them and to be together with them; and he calls Sages "friends of the gods" and the gods "friends of Sages."

[U387]

Philodemus, On Piety, Vol. Herc. 2, II.108.9 [p. 126 Gomperz] {Obbink I.31.880}: Again, he says, "let us sacrifice to the gods piously and well, as is appropriate, and let us do everything well according to the laws. But let us do so not disturbing them at all with our opinions on the topic of those who are best and most majestic; again, we say that it is even right to do this on the basis of the opinion which I was discussing. For in this way, by Zeus, it is possible for a mortal nature to live like Zeus, as it appears."

Here are some other quotes on the gods from Epicurus:

VS 33. The body cries out to not be hungry, not be thirsty, not be cold. Anyone who has these things, and who is confident of continuing to have them, can rival the gods for happiness. [note] σαρκὸς φωνὴ τὸ μὴ πεινῆν, τὸ μὴ διψῆν, τὸ μὴ ῥιγοῦν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔχων τις καὶ ἐλπίζων ἔξειν [hope or expect to have] κἂν <δὲ [dative of Zeus]> ὑπὲρ εὐδαιμονίας μαχέσαιο. [contend/compete]

Principle Doctrine 1. Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει οὔτε ἄλλω παρέχει, ὥστε οὔτε ὀργαῖς οὔτε χάρισι συνέχεται: ἐν ἀσθενεῖ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον. [ἐν ἄλλοις δέ φησι τοὺς θεοὺς λόγῳ θεωρητοῦς, οὓς μὲν κατ' ἀριθμὸν ὑφεστῶτας, οὓς δὲ καθ' ὁμοίειαν ἐκ τῆς συνεχοῦς ἐπιρρύσεως τῶν ὁμοίων εἰδώλων ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἀποτετελεσμένῳ ἀνθρωποειδῶς.]

Perseus Project translation: 1. A blessed and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being ; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness [Elsewhere he says that the gods are discernible by reason alone, some being numerically distinct, while others result uniformly from the continuous influx of similar images directed to the same spot and in human form.]

The word translated as "discernible by reason" is θεωρητοῦς which carries the connotation of "(of the mind) I contemplate, consider; (abstract) I speculate, theorize."

VS 65. It is foolish to ask of the gods that which we can supply for ourselves. μάταιόν ἐστι παρὰ θεῶν αἰτεῖσθαι ἃ τις ἑαυτῷ χορηγήσθαι ἰκανός ἐστι.

VS 79. He who is as peace within himself also causes no trouble for others. ὁ ἀτάραχος ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἑτέρῳ ἀόχλητος.

(NOTE - Just like a god from PD 1)

Letter to Menoikeus:

First, believe that god is a blissful, immortal being, as is commonly held. Do not ascribe to god anything that is inconsistent with immortality and blissfulness; instead, believe about god everything that can support immortality and blissfulness.

.πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη, μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε· πᾶν δὲ τὸ φυλάττειν αὐτοῦ δυνάμενον τὴν μετὰ ἀφθαρσίας μακαριότητα περὶ αὐτὸν δόξαζε.

For gods there are: our knowledge of them is clear.

θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσὶν· ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ γνῶσις·

[Knowledge of them is ἐναργῆς 1. visible, palpable, in bodily shape, properly of gods appearing in their own forms; so of a dream or vision; 2. manifest to the mind's eye, distinct:— adv. -γῶς, manifestly. 3. of words, etc., distinct, manifest]

Yet they are not such as most people believe; indeed most people are not even consistent in what they believe. It is not impious to deny the gods that most people believe in, but to ascribe to the gods what most people believe. The things that most people say about the gods are based on false assumptions, not a firm grasp of the facts [note], because they say that the greatest goods and the greatest harms come from the gods. For since they are at home with what is best about themselves, they accept that which is similar and consider alien that which is different.

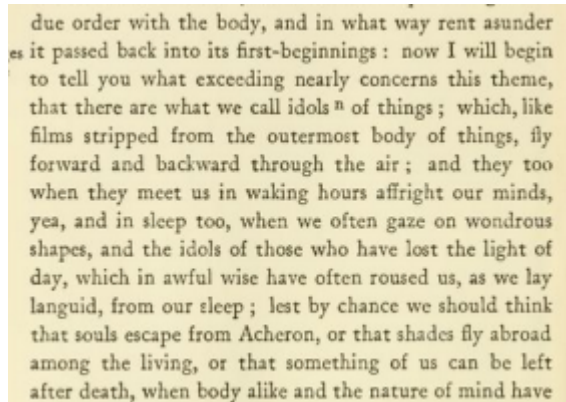
Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 3:39 AM

Thanks for assembling that Don!

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 6:43 AM

So far we've primarily been referring to anticipations, but of course there is a great deal of text material on idols / images / spectres or whatever term you prefer. It is going to be several weeks before we reach this point in the podcasts, so we have not had occasion to review the details of this as a group, but of course this discussion can hardly even begin before we review the material on images in book four of Lucretius, starting here:

<https://archive.org/details/lucretiusepicureanfriendsreferenceeditionversion01/page/n1026/mode/1up>
(That's page 1027 of the PDF if the link doesn't go to the right place.)



due order with the body, and in what way rent asunder
as it passed back into its first-beginnings: now I will begin
to tell you what exceeding nearly concerns this theme,
that there are what we call idolsⁿ of things; which, like
films stripped from the outermost body of things, fly
forward and backward through the air; and they too
when they meet us in waking hours affright our minds,
yea, and in sleep too, when we often gaze on wondrous
shapes, and the idols of those who have lost the light of
day, which in awful wise have often roused us, as we lay
languid, from our sleep; lest by chance we should think
that souls escape from Acheron, or that shades fly abroad
among the living, or that something of us can be left
after death, when body alike and the nature of mind have

I don't myself rule out at all the possibility that some form of this theory has some validity, but I wouldn't even want to start speculating on what parts or how that validity could occur without going through the details of what was being asserted, how it relates to light and all the issues of waves and energy and particles and gravity and action-at-a-distance that science discusses today, how our sense organs work,, how the brain works, and all sorts of other things.

However, such a review is exactly what a thorough consideration of this part of Epicurean theory would require. I've rarely seen much of this treated in modern commentary at all - it's always dismissed out of hand, but I definitely do not think it should be.

Especially since the discussion of images leads right into the discussion of epistemology about dismissing those who say that no knowledge is possible, we must rely on the senses, etc.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 27, 2020 at 7:10 AM

[Don](#), thank you for the amazing quotes. They add a lot to the picture and I would love to talk about every one of them. Thank you for expressing an interest, too.

A lot of good points have been made and I wonder if what we are looking at is two overarching threads: one in which we are testing the admissibility of each of Epicurus' teachings of a theological nature, and another that instead departs from the premise that there are gods that are worthy of the awe and reverence they inspire, and that it is admissible that more can be said about them of practical value. Certainly, that would also include discussion of the "god-like" stature of Epicurus himself, and of Lucretius' description of Venus, etc. (Nietzsche might fit in there too - I apologize, I really need to read more of him yet.)

I'm just trying to get a handle on what might be a way forward. I would be willing to continue to admass and categorically organize the quotes we can collect from the literature so that individual topics could be examined (e.g. piety, spiritual practice, images from the gods, religious festivals, adoration, etc.), if that would be of value at some point.

Oops, I just saw Cassius' post on wanting to go through the science first re images, etc. So maybe we let that first thread play out for a while first. The topic of applied theology would, after all, require that we have some accepted theology first.

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 7:48 AM

Susan, no, no need to go through the images material first. I posted that just as my latest thought to add to the pot. From the point of view of how I have observed the forum to function best, I think it is always best if someone who is interested in pursuing a topic "strikes while the iron is hot" and proceeds at whatever pace is comfortable to them. It is much much easier to edit or comment on a discussion after material is collected, rather than collect material after time or energy to post it has waned.

So this would be a valuable contribution: *'I would be willing to continue to admass and categorically organize the quotes we can collect from the literature so that individual topics could be examined (e.g. piety, spiritual practice, images from the gods, religious festivals, adoration, etc.), if that would be of value at some point.'*

I will mention that one problem that has occurred in the distant past, primarily on Facebook and other locations, is that some people have posted a lot of material from "other traditions" (primarily eastern) probably from the point of view presuming that they are parallel and therefore helpful to studying the Epicureans. At some point down the road that is probably acceptable here too, but I strongly thing it is a good idea for us to focus on the Epicurean material and analyze it first before going beyond occasional observations on other areas that don't mention or concern Epicurus.

I don't raise this because you have shown any tendency to do that yourself - you haven't - but it's come up in the past [not anyone participating in this thread] and caused complaints from some quarters when there's too much emphasis on details from other viewpoints. Now having said that, it occurs to me to say that there are probably details in Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism, and others that the Epicureans came into contact with themselves that are relevant to the discussion. But the basic point here is that it has always seemed to me that there is a lot of raw material from the specifically Epicurean texts that ought to be given priority here first.

After we get a body of content here in the forum about our own Epicurean texts there will be plenty of time and space to comment on other viewpoints. But it's just kind of weird to have next to nothing in the forum on the Epicurean texts on divinty, but tons of material on Tibetan Buddhism or the like 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 7:57 AM

Susan - also - In order to help organization I have moved this thread out of "General Discussion" and into the forum which I renamed as [The Nature of Epicurean Divinity](#)

In turn I have that forum as a subsection of "Physics" as I gather that if we consider there to be three major branches of the philosophy, and physics is where the nature of the universe is discussed, and our topic is part of the nature of the universe, that's the place for it.

I see that there are some related threads there - it's possible that you might want to organize some of the topics as new threads there, or I can create "subforums" if appropriate. As we proceed we'll organize however makes sense, so if anyone wants to make suggestions on that, feel free.

In fact there are already enough threads there that we might want to pay attention fairly soon to breaking it down, or perhaps pinning a post that contains a discussion paragraph describing the issues and then linking within that discussion to where the subtopics can be found.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 27, 2020 at 8:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In fact there are already enough threads there that we might want to pay attention fairly soon to breaking it down, or perhaps pinning a post that contains a discussion paragraph describing the issues and then linking within that discussion to where the subtopics can be found.

Thanks, Cassius. I agree with all you've written. I don't intend to bring any foreign philosophies into it. There is a different section for that.

Maybe the first sub forum could be "Relevant Texts", which would just be quotes and links to source material all in one place, and then the rest of the sub forums would be the categories like I suggested: Epicurean Piety, Images of the Gods, The Material Nature of the Gods, Non-Intervention, The Appearance of the Gods.... Gosh, I can think of a lot. We could create all the sub-forums now or write a direction that people can create these kinds of sub-forums as interest inspires.

These are just suggestions. You know better than me what kind of structures work here.

I can Also work at searching through the forum for relevant material and link to it from within these categories. It will all take time, of course, but I can try to split my time between the research and reading and still participating in discussion.

Hopefully, we can pull back in some of the interesting threads that were left hanging in this way too.

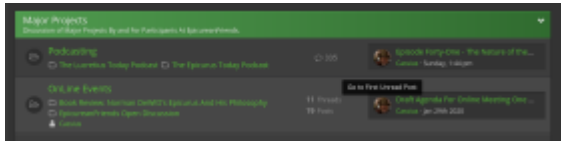
Any thoughts, gang?

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 9:46 AM

Susan and others --

Creating subforums is something that I have to do myself under the software rules, but creating threads is easy for anyone to do anywhere, and it is easy for me to move threads to different forums once the threads and forums are created.

Here is an example of how three levels of forums look:



I think most people are generally using telephones to access the site, so we need to see how that looks on a telephone.

I am thinking that regardless of the direction we go, that it will eventually be useful to formulate an opening paragraph that describes the topics and their relationships to each other.

Here is an example, but I think this needs much work and expansion:

The topic of Epicurean Divinity is very complex. The place to start is by looking at what is left to us from what the Epicureans actually wrote, here in **“Relevant Texts.”** The issues involved in this subject include **Epicurean Piety, Images of the Gods, Anticipations of the Gods, The Material Nature of the Gods, The Origin, Life, and Potential Death of the Gods, The Relationship of Non-Intervention Between Gods and Humans, and The Appearance of the Gods,**

See where I am going with that? It could be in outline format, but I am thinking that a narrative paragraph might make more sense.

Let me know thoughts and suggestions.

In the meantime Susan I am fine with what you wrote in that last post.

EDIT: Also to be clear, once we do a paragraph with links, I can "pin" that to the top of the forum, or maybe even include it in the forum description.

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 27, 2020 at 10:08 AM

Thank you for clarifying the file structure, Cassius. Maybe we only need two sub-forums, then - "Relevant Texts" and "Topics" (or something similar), and then all those other item headings would be thread titles under "Topics". Does that make sense?

Where would that intro paragraph(s) go? I can have a shot at writing it, if you like. (Subject to editorial review.)

Post by "Cassius" of October 27, 2020 at 10:15 AM

I will either PIN it to the top of the "Nature of Epicurean Divinity" subforum, or I might even be able to make it a "description" of the forum itself.

Yes please make a suggestion for writing it, that would be great. I can then set something up and we can change it as needed.

Post by "Elayne" of October 27, 2020 at 10:36 AM

I propose that we need some procedural agreements when evaluating the texts on statements about the gods. My suggestions are:

- 1) Epicurus' own words take precedence over all other source material. Anywhere Epicurus leaves room for different interpretations is not narrowed down by commentary from other sources, such as Philodemus or DeWitt. Neither will individual quotes be taken out of context

with his whole body of work.

2) The process of determining what is real takes precedence over details of prior or current conclusions. When new data is available that Epicurus didn't have, we agree to present both what he concluded based on information available to him and revisions which are necessary to continue adhering to his process of observing nature and trusting the senses. We agree that such revisions are an embedded expectation in a philosophy based on observations of nature, and that to ignore new data is to distort Epicurus' intentions beyond recognition.

3) Prolepses are subject to the same verification process as any other sense data and are not to be given special status when the combined sense evidence contradicts them, no matter how compelling they are. We will not say prolepses are infallible when the content is in the form of a conclusion about reality. This is the same as we do not say a straw in a glass of water is bent because it looks to be so from one view. Instead, we examine it from different positions and touch it. We combine our senses to test any conclusion. A sensation about gods from an intuition or dream is not a mistake in the same way seeing an optical illusion is not a mistake, but assumptions about the cause of those intuitions and dreams is a matter up for verification by the other senses. We must especially beware of making assertions of material fact on grounds that we received special knowledge due to a prepared mind, because this closes off the importance of examination by the senses.

Post by "Cassius" of October 27, 2020 at 10:44 AM

That sounds like a good start to a document that would apply across the board to all our discussions. We need to develop such an approach because it probably would serve as a good supplement to the "Not Neoplatonist" list and the rules for posting everywhere on this forum.

Here's an example:

[Quote from Elayne](#)

We will not say prolepses are infallible when the content is in the form of a conclusion about reality.

That's the kind of observation that is a foundational premise from the very beginning. NONE of the three legs of the canon are "infallible" in the sense of providing us fully-formed true opinions. Every item of data has to be considered and evaluated in full context of all the data.

It's really inconvenient to repeat these points over and over so it would be good to develop a list of rules like this so we can point people to them easily.

We can discuss and refine this list over time.

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 11:04 AM

I realize in writing that last comment this which I think is important:

We all have a pretty good idea of how "a particular sight" is an example of the faculty of vision; how a particular sound is an example of the faculty of hearing. Same goes for pleasures and pains. We understand instances of pleasure and pain and we therefore understand how we are putting those in categories called "pleasures" and "pains."

I do NOT however, think that we have a consensus or even much articulation at all of what "an anticipation" is and how that differs from "the faculty of anticipations."

Almost by definition, "an anticipation" is not the same thing as a concept or a word or an opinion, nor would the "faculty of anticipations" constitute a "set of concepts or opinions."

We really need to find a way to articulate the meaning of these two categories. What is "an anticipation" and how does a single anticipation fit into our definition of "the faculty of anticipations"?

FWIW I am equally good with the word "preconception" because that stresses the distinction between preconceptions and conceptions, but I personally tend to shy away from "prolepsis" as that smacks to me of an untranslated Greek word for which we haven't settled on an understandable English term. I know not everyone agrees with me on that and I don't assert this as a rule of the forum (at least at this point without a lot more work on rules) but in general it does not seem to me to be a good idea to use untranslated Greek terms in our normal english discussions. The only way to really be clear when you do that is to give the greek accompanied by the translations, as Don generally does, but that gets to be unwieldy very quickly, and I don't think we want to compose most of our writing in ways that only experts can understand.

As Don and Dewitt would say, "[Philosophy for the Millions!](#)" 😊

Post by “Elayne” of October 27, 2020 at 11:10 AM

Cassius, I think the original writing leaves room for multiple interpretations, which is actually why I prefer the Greek lest our translations inadvertently close off interpretations prematurely.

I think it's ok to leave interpretations open IF we agree not to assume they are infallible, whatever they are, so that if one of us describes something we are calling a prolepsis, we agree it can be evaluated in context of all the senses.

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 11:12 AM

Yes I agree Elayne, and in this case I think "prolepsis" can be particularly suitable for those who want to use it, because I don't think we have a clear understanding of what the word means, so we might as well call it XYZ or "prolepsis" until we are ready to take a position to what it means to a common everyday english-speaker.

I think "anticipations" and "preconceptions" hint at the right direction, but only hint.

Post by “Elayne” of October 27, 2020 at 11:23 AM

This is the kind of thing I am talking about. There is strong data about Hyperactive Agency Detection in humans-- it's not something I made up. It means we have sense evidence that we assign agency where there is none, and to ignore that tendency is likely to lead us to accept conclusions about mental experiences that are false. False conclusions could in turn contribute to life choices not conducive to pleasure. If accuracy of conclusions didn't affect pleasure, the accuracy wouldn't matter, because mattering is the province of feeling.

So how do we accept any kind of prolepsis as true? We don't, in isolation. We accept it when it's in accord with the senses or at least does not contradict them. In this case, we have sense data that this particular type of mental experience can cause false opinions, we would be especially wary about those specific prolepses. So I think questioning those experiences is entirely Epicurean. Not cause for saying we are abandoning the philosophy in some way.

[Quote from Susan](#)

Quote

...but you suggested that we are hard-wired for animism in a way that deludes us about the existence or nature of gods, so how could you then accept any kind of prolepsis as conveying true information?

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 27, 2020 at 12:36 PM

I’m not sure where I should put this. Edit freely or discard as pleasure dictates:

Intro Blurb:

Epicurean theology is a huge topic, especially because it differs in so many interesting ways from the theologies of mainstream organized religion, or the state-sponsored religion of Epicurus’ own time. Unfortunately, very little of the original writings on the subject have survived; however, from secondary period sources referring directly to the original teachings, we can still glean a great deal about the original doctrines of the Epicurean School of Philosophy.

For those to whom these teachings prove personally appealing, we can even examine ways in which a spirituality based in Epicurean theology may be lived out today.

This forum includes two main sections. The first, “Relevant Texts”, gathers together all of the textual source material pertaining to Epicurean theology, while the second consists of the sub-topics open for exploration and discussion. Areas of inquiry may include Epicurean Piety, Images of the Gods, Anticipations of the Gods, The Material Nature of the Gods, The Origin, Life, and Potential Death of the Gods, The Relationship of Non-Intervention Between Gods and Humans, and The Appearance of the Gods.

Threads on these topics or similar can be created by users as their pleasure prompts them. Links can be created referring to the source material to support ideas expressed.

Happy posting.

PAIAN ANAX

Post by “Don” of October 27, 2020 at 12:50 PM

I'm still slightly uneasy about the word spirituality, but I like the closing "Paian Anax" 😊

However, if we're using spirituality in the sense of "spiritual practice" that seems to be a big tent. I'll be frank that the Stoic "Logos" is what turned me away from the Stoics and toward Epicurus. Too much Christian baggage with The Word/Logos. But I'm not against exploring what Hadot would broadly call "spiritual exercises."

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 27, 2020 at 1:02 PM

[Don](#) , yes, it is so difficult to find words that are not laden with unintended meanings. I'm under the impression that the definition for the word "Logos" has been all over the place from the very beginning. Tricky.

Post by "Don" of October 27, 2020 at 1:40 PM

Check out the length of this dictionary entry for λόγος:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry%3Dlo%2Fgos>

Post by "Susan Hill" of October 27, 2020 at 2:50 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Check out the length of this dictionary entry for λόγος:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry%3Dlo%2Fgos>

Oh my gosh, that is insane. Well now we know if there is a word somebody doesn't like, we can just change it to λόγος and then they can pick their own flavour! Lol.

Do you know off the top of your head if Epicurus ever used it?

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 4:30 PM

Did you mean: *Pain Xanax*

I should have figured Don would like PAIAN ANAX 😊

Ok so what does that mean?

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 4:32 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

However, if we're using spirituality in the sense of "spiritual practice" that seems to be a big tent.

Not by any means exactly the same word, but a lot of the text that we've covered recently in the podcast has referred to "spirit" and "soul" -- I think based on anima and animus.

All this needs to be dissected and we come up with a glossary to match Elayne's rules of construction, or some such thing, or else we go on explaining ad infinitum.

Post by “Cassius” of October 27, 2020 at 4:37 PM

1) Is "theology" a good word, or should we stick with "divinity"?

2) Pending further discussion on "theology" and "spirituality," and other suggestions, my current minor rewrite would be:

Epicurean Divinity is a huge topic, especially because it differs in so many interesting ways from the theologies of mainstream organized religion, or the state-sponsored religion of Epicurus' own time. Unfortunately, very little of the original writings on the subject have survived; however, from secondary period sources referring directly to the original teachings,

we can still glean a great deal about the original doctrines of the Epicurean School of Philosophy.

For those to whom these teachings prove personally appealing, we can even examine ways in which Epicurean views of divinity may be applied today.

This forum includes two main sections. The first, "Relevant Texts", gathers together the textual source material pertaining to Epicurean theology, while the second consists of the sub-topics. Areas for exploration and discussion. include Epicurean Piety, Images of the Gods, Anticipations of the Gods, The Material Nature of the Gods, The Origin, Life, and Potential Death of the Gods, The Relationship of Non-Intervention Between Gods and Humans, and The Appearance of the Gods.

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Post by "Cassius" of October 27, 2020 at 5:20 PM

This thread has reached all time third most commented post on the forum - I definitely want it to make it into the top two, and maybe number one, before we consider splitting off in too many pieces!

Post by "Don" of October 27, 2020 at 5:50 PM

I vote for "divinity" since θεός theos can have that connotation in addition to "god."