

Episode Fifty-Five - Reason Is Dependent On The Senses (Part 2)

Post by “Cassius” of January 23, 2021 at 10:38 AM

Welcome to Episode Fifty-Five of Lucretius Today. Last week we started this passage from Book 4, and today we will finish it, focusing on the last two passages underlined below.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please check back to [Episode One](#) for a discussion of our goals and our ground rules. If you have any question about that, please be sure to contact us at Epicureanfriends.com for more information.

In today's podcast we will discuss how reason is dependent upon the senses.

Latin Lines 469 -521

Munro Notes

469-521 if a man teaches that nothing can be known, how does he know that? how distinguish between knowing and not knowing? on the truth of the senses all reasoning depends, which must be false if they are false: nor is one sense more certain than another; all being equally true; nor is the same sense at one time more certain than at another: all reasoning, nay life itself would at once come to an end, if the senses are not to be trusted; as in any building, if the rule and square are wry, every part will be crooked and unstable, so all reasoning must be false, if the senses on which it is grounded are false.

Brown 1743

Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards. And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before to lead him into such a knowledge) whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know;

what it was that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

But you will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us? Will reason, derived from erring sense, claim the privilege to contradict it? Reason - that depends wholly upon the senses, which unless you allow to be true, all reason must be false. Can the ears correct the eyes? Or the touch the ears? Or will taste confute the touch? Or shall the nose or eyes convince the rest? This, I think, cannot be, for every sense has a separate faculty of its own, each has its distinct powers; and therefore an object, soft or hard, hot or cold, must necessarily be distinguished as soft or hard, hot or cold, by one sense separately, that is, the touch. It is the sole province of another, the sight, to perceive the colors of things, and the several properties that belong to them. The taste has a distinct office. Odors particularly affect the smell, and sound the ears. And therefore it cannot be that one sense should correct another, nor can the same sense correct itself, since an equal credit ought to be given to each; and therefore whatever the senses at any time discover to us must be certain.

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

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

Munro 1886

Again if a man believe that nothing is known, he knows not whether this even can be known, since he admits he knows nothing. I will therefore decline to argue the case against him who places himself with head where his feet should be. And yet granting that he knows this, I would

still put this question, since he has never yet seen any truth in things, whence he knows what knowing and not knowing severally are, and what it is that has produced the knowledge of the true and the false and what has proved the doubtful to differ from the certain.

You will find that from the senses first has proceeded the knowledge of the true and the false and that the senses cannot be refuted. For that which is of itself to be able to refute things false by true things must from the nature of the case be proved to have the higher certainty. Well then, what must fairly be accounted of higher certainty than sense? Shall reason founded on false sense be able to contradict them, wholly founded as it is on the senses? And if they are not true, then all reason as well is rendered false. Or shall the ears be able to take the eyes to task, or the touch the ears? Again shall the taste call in question this touch, or the nostrils refute or the eyes controvert it? Not so, I guess; for each apart has its own distinct office, each its own power; and therefore we must perceive what is soft and cold or hot by one distinct faculty, by another perceive the different colors of things and thus see all objects which are conjoined with color. Taste too has its faculty apart; smells spring from one source, sounds from another. It must follow therefore that any one sense cannot confute any other. No nor can any sense take itself to task, since equal credit must be assigned to it at all times. What therefore has at any time appeared true to each sense, is true.

And if reason shall be unable to explain away the cause why things which close at hand were square, at a distance looked round, it yet is better, if you are at a loss for the reason, to state erroneously the causes of each shape than to let slip from your grasp on any side things manifest and ruin the groundwork of belief and wrench up all the foundations on which rest life and existence. For not only would all reason give way, life itself would at once fall to the ground, unless you choose to trust the senses and shun precipices and all things else of this sort that are to be avoided, and to pursue the opposite things. All that host of words then be sure is quite unmeaning which has been drawn out in array against the senses.

Once more, as in a building, if the rule first applied is wry, and the square is untrue and swerves from its straight lines, and if there is the slightest hitch in any part of the level, all the construction must be faulty, all must be wry, crooked, sloping, leaning forwards, leaning backwards, without symmetry, so that some parts seem ready to fall, others do fall, ruined all by the first erroneous measurements; so too all reason of things must needs prove to you distorted and false, which is founded on false senses.

Bailey 1921

Again, if any one thinks that nothing is known, he knows not whether that can be known either, since he admits that he knows nothing. Against him then I will refrain from joining issue, who plants himself with his head in the place of his feet. And yet were I to grant that he knows this too, yet I would ask this one question; since he has never before seen any truth in things, whence does he know what is knowing, and not knowing each in turn, what thing has begotten the concept of the true and the false, what thing has proved that the doubtful differs from the

certain?

You will find that the concept of the true is begotten first from the senses, and that the senses cannot be gainsaid. For something must be found with a greater surety, which can of its own authority refute the false by the true. Next then, what must be held to be of greater surety than sense? Will reason, sprung from false sensation, avail to speak against the senses, when it is wholly sprung from the senses? For unless they are true, all reason too becomes false. Or will the ears be able to pass judgement on the eyes, or touch on the ears? or again will the taste in the mouth refute this touch; will the nostrils disprove it, or the eyes show it false? It is not so, I trow. For each sense has its faculty set apart, each its own power, and so it must needs be that we perceive in one way what is soft or cold or hot, and in another the diverse colours of things, and see all that goes along with colour. Likewise, the taste of the mouth has its power apart; in one way smells arise, in another sounds. And so it must needs be that one sense cannot prove another false. Nor again will they be able to pass judgement on themselves, since equal trust must at all times be placed in them. Therefore, whatever they have perceived on each occasion, is true.

And if reason is unable to unravel the cause, why those things which close at hand were square, are seen round from a distance, still it is better through lack of reasoning to be at fault in accounting for the causes of either shape, rather than to let things clear seen slip abroad from your grasp, and to assail the grounds of belief, and to pluck up the whole foundations on which life and existence rest. For not only would all reasoning fall away; life itself too would collapse straightway, unless you chose to trust the senses, and avoid headlong spots and all other things of this kind which must be shunned, and to make for what is opposite to these. Know, then, that all this is but an empty store of words, which has been drawn up and arrayed against the senses.

Again, just as in a building, if the first ruler is awry, and if the square is wrong and out of the straight lines, if the level sags a whit in any place, it must needs be that the whole structure will be made faulty and crooked, all awry, bulging, leaning forwards or backwards, and out of harmony, so that some parts seem already to long to fall, or do fall, all betrayed by the first wrong measurements; even so then your reasoning of things must be awry and false, which all springs from false senses.

Post by “Charles” of January 24, 2021 at 9:54 AM

Last week I brought up an instance of 10 religious devotees “witnessing” a miracle and using that as a source of certainty for their faith, according to their perception, however, miracles by their very nature are miraculous and defy standards of nature, and are by definition exceptional, therefore in keeping with the materialist position, miracles cannot be considered

as definitive proof or stand on legitimate grounds for defending faith, as they do not hold up to materialist scrutiny, by being unable to be repeated and observed with sensory experience.

Post by “Cassius” of January 24, 2021 at 10:56 AM

In addition to what Charles said, I think everyone will be happy to hear that our recording of Episode 55 is now complete and is probably one of our most helpful and friendliest conversations that will be very helpful in moving forward toward further precision on some of our recent conversations. I'll get it edited and uploaded asap!

Post by “Elayne” of January 24, 2021 at 11:01 AM

Ha, as soon as we finished, I realized that I should have pointed out that whenever Lucretius appears to be using logic to fight against logic, what he is really doing is to show logicians that their logic leads to conclusions which they have never observed happening. He is using observations to point out that logic isn't as accurate, more than using logical arguments against logical arguments. Without the observations, this method would have no teeth-- it is an observations vs logic, and observations win, instead of a logic vs logic structure.

Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2021 at 4:56 PM

Episode Fifty-Five of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. In today's podcast we will continue to discuss how Reason is Dependent on the Senses, and Elayne will take Cicero's Torquatus to task for his position on how best to explain that pleasure is the ultimate good. As always, let us know your questions and comments in the thread below.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/43114211>

Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2021 at 5:47 PM

I hope some of the people who have been following the recent conversations on logic and reason will be able to listen and comment on this discussion. I think we have the foundation here for broad agreement on the role of the senses, but there is still much more to discuss in terms of fleshing out and --to use the term of the day - "describing" - the Epicurean method of thinking and decision-making.

We also need to deal in much greater detail with Charles's observation about Epicurus' views on "dogmatism." We have discussed that knowledge must be based on the senses (more accurately, the three legs of the Canon) but we have not really discussed what "knowledge" is.

This is probably a good time to review principal doctrine 24:

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

Also, from Diogenes Last time:

"Again, the fact of apperception confirms the truth of the sensations. And seeing and hearing are as much facts as feeling pain. From this it follows that as regards the imperceptible we must draw inferences from phenomena. For all thoughts have their origin in sensations by means of coincidence and analogy and similarity and combination, reasoning too contributing something.

....

Opinion they also call supposition, and say that it may be true or false: if it is confirmed or not contradicted, it is true ; if it is not confirmed or is contradicted, it is false. For this reason was introduced the notion of the problem awaiting confirmation: for example, waiting to come near the tower and see how it looks to the near view."

How does an Epicurean decide whether he "knows" something has been confirmed, or whether he should wait for more information? (Much the same question Martin raised in the podcast.)

Much more to come!

Post by “Bryan” of January 25, 2021 at 8:38 PM



Great Stuff! Certainly we distinguish between (1) *what is technically visible but too distant for us to observe*, (2) *what we can observe* and (3) *what is unobservable*. Here is KD 24 from a somewhat different angle.

Εἴ τι ν' ἐκβαλεῖς ἀπλῶς αἴσθησιν καὶ μὴ διαιρήσεις τὸ δοξαζόμενον κατὰ τὸ προσμένον καὶ τὸ παρὸν ἤδη κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν καὶ τὰ πάθη καὶ πᾶσαν φανταστικὴν ἐπιβολὴν τῆς διανοίας, συνταράξεις καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς αἰσθήσεις τῇ ματαίῳ δόξῃ, ὥστε τὸ κριτήριον ἅπαν ἐκβαλεῖς. εἰ δὲ βεβαιώσεις καὶ τὸ προσμένον ἅπαν ἐν ταῖς δοξαστικαῖς ἐννοίαις καὶ τὸ μὴ τὴν ἐπιμαρτύρησιν, οὐκ ἐκλείψεις τὸ διεψυσμένον: ὡς τετηρηκῶς ἔση πᾶσαν ἀμφισβήτησιν κατὰ πᾶσαν κρίσιν τοῦ ὀρθῶς ἢ μὴ ὀρθῶς.

"if You reject even one sensation and will not separate

(1) *a theory about what is still pending*

versus (2) *what is actually present according sensation,*

feelings, or the whole visual focus of the mind:

then you will disturb the remaining senses with empty thought

as you will reject the whole basis of judgment.

also if You affirm

(1) *all that which is still pending in theoretical concepts*

along with (2) *that which is not pending confirmation:*

...you will not avoid error

since you will have retained all doubt

regarding all judgment of what is true or not true."

(1) τὸ προσμένον ἅπαν ἐν ταῖς δοξαστικαῖς ἐννοίαις "all that which is still pending [confirmation] regarding theoretical concepts" is equivalent to τὸ δοξαζόμενον κατὰ τὸ προσμένον 'a theory about what is still pending' (both of which are explaining τὸ δοξαζόμενον), as in the common observation of the distant square tower.

Post by "Cassius" of January 25, 2021 at 10:00 PM

Bryan (and others) if you had a chance to listen to the full episode, you heard Elayne ask the question of whether we would be comfortable substituting "adequate description" or "adequately described" as largely equivalent to "reasonable" or "logical." [Edit: I have a typo - Elayne said "accurately described" not "adequately described."]

What do others think about that?

I don't mean to assert that Elayne's position and Frances Wright's position are exactly the same, but I do think we have a challenging question here that can be best analyzed by looking at the paragraph in Frances' Wright's Chapter 15 at the paragraph beginning "["I apprehend the difficulties," observed Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend."](#)

I would focus particularly on these two sentences: "*You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge*"

Also: as "that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing.

Also: "To this simple exposition of the phenomena of nature (which, you will observe, is not *explaining* their wonders, for that is impossible, but only *observing* them,) we are led by the exercise of our senses. In studying the existences which surround us, it is clearly our business to use our eyes, and not our imaginations. "

Also: "Until we occupy ourselves in examining, observing, and ascertaining, and not in *explaining*, we are idly and childishly employed."

Does Frances Wright go too far in her position, or is this a reasonable restatement or extension of Epicurus' position?

Post by “Elayne” of January 25, 2021 at 11:04 PM

[Cassius](#) maybe my accent isn't clear-- I said "accurately described", not "adequately." And I definitely don't agree with FW. Hypotheses and reason do have a use, and so does imagination, but they are not the same as direct observations of senses and feelings and should play second fiddle. I think it's important not to conflate the observations we get from the Canon with the interpretations and predictions we make about those observations.

I think we should not find ourselves saying "these observations don't fit my model so I'm going to disregard them because I like my model", but instead say "my model no longer fits my observations as well, so I'll either make a new model or wait for more observations-- and in the meantime I'll continue to have confidence that I can make observations of reality."

Post by “Elayne” of January 25, 2021 at 11:07 PM

And the same for "common sense "-- we will be in error, possibly to the detriment of our pleasure, if we put more weight on common sense than on evidence. You might be amazed at how many research studies have been totally screwed up because scientists did just exactly that. They couldn't believe a finding could be right bc it didn't make sense to them, so they ignored data in favor of common sense. The delay in physicians adopting handwashing is a classic example but it happens still to this day!

Post by “Bryan” of January 26, 2021 at 2:45 AM

Elayne, hello! It has been a great to hear you on the podcasts, and I am happy to be speaking with you now.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I think we should not find ourselves saying "these observations don't fit my model so I'm going to disregard them because I like my model", but instead say "my model no longer fits my observations as well, so I'll either make a new model or wait for more observations-- and in the meantime I'll continue to have confidence that I can make observations of reality."

This is a thoroughly scientific and most reasonable position to take. This is our position for the first class of things mentioned in KD 24, but Epicurus would differentiate between those inferences which we consider subject to correction and those inferences which we consider to be fully confirmed and certain conclusions.

MODELS FOR THE UNINSPECTED

(1) "that which is believed regarding what is still pending confirmation (τὸ δοξαζόμενον κατὰ τὸ προσμύνον)" -- These are observable things which we have not yet fully observed. For all the things in this class we are totally open to the possibility for future correction if (when we have the opportunity for closer and repeated examination) we receive observations that contradict any theories we may have previously considered regarding them. This view is in line with most modern scientific approaches.

FOUNDATION (THE INSPECTED AND EXPERIENCED)

The second class are all the things we are able to directly observe (2) "that which is actually present to sensation, feelings, or the whole visual focus of the mind (τὸ παρὸν ἤδη κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν καὶ τὰ πάθη καὶ **πᾶσαν φανταστικὴν ἐπιβολὴν τῆς διανοίας**)" -- These are things which can be sensed and inspected and form the basis of all our clear thinking.

MODELS FOR THE UNINSPECTABLE

The third class are all the things we cannot directly observe (3) "that which is unobservable (τὰ ἄδηλα)" -- These invisible things must be tested by their observable interactions with class (2) things actually present (τὸ παρὸν ἤδη). Because our conclusions about things in this class are based upon their visible interactions with (2) what is directly observable and not based upon (1) that which is pending confirmation, we are certain about the conclusions we have reached regarding them. Clearly, this final view is antagonistic to most modern scientific approaches.

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2021 at 5:32 AM

Thank you both for those two replies, and Elayne I apologize you were perfectly clear with "accurately" - I don't know how "adequately" got in my post above.

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2021 at 5:43 AM

It seems to me that the distinction that Bryan is raising with his third category is being illustrated in this section from the

[letter to Pythocles:](#)

Quote

First of all then we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky, whether they are dealt with in connection with other doctrines or independently, than peace of mind and a sure confidence, just as in all other branches of study.

We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: **witness such propositions as that ‘the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,’ or that ‘the elements are indivisible,’ and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena.**

For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, **when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them.**

But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry

and has recourse to myth.

Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.

Yet we must never desert the appearance of each of these phenomena, and further, as regards what is associated with it, must distinguish those things whose production in several ways is not contradicted by phenomena on earth.

Display More

It seems to me that this text is at variance from Frances Wright's position - agree or disagree?

And Elayne, what would you say about this passage, especially the underlined portions?

Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2021 at 9:30 AM

In regard to Wright's position, her full article on the "Nature of Knowledge" is so interesting that I took the time to [transcribe the whole thing](#). It's well worth reading. Even if we don't end up agreeing with her on every point, the Epicurean influence is very clear.

Post by “Elayne” of January 26, 2021 at 11:09 AM

Yes, he is saying not to desert the observations. Whereas sticking to one conclusion out of many is "myth", sticking to observations is correct. I do not see any sign of him recommending firm conclusions on the unseen, just being secure that observations are the way to go.

Post by “Don” of January 31, 2021 at 3:27 PM

I'm not sure I'm onboard with the idea of the pleasurable "feeling when you 'know' something" paradigm y'all have been discussing. Are you saying that's a criteria of what's real or true? That seems to be cutting out 2/3 of the Canon. Or are you saying that that pleasurable reaction is

just part of confirmation of being true. This all seems to go back to my "facts don't care about feelings" thread.

I may be misunderstanding the episode, so here's my take on what I've heard. Please correct me if I misunderstood.

When a Flat-earther says, "I 'know' the Earth is flat" they no doubt feel pleasure at "knowing" they're "right" because their belief is echoed by their friends, it's "corroborated" by all the "sources" shared within that community, it makes them feel like they're in on a big truth that other people don't realize, etc.

But they're not truly applying observation through the senses, and so are missing that component of the Canon.

So, their feeling of "pleasure at knowing" is not the same as - or of the same use in the Canon - as someone who knows something that actually aligns with reality?

This specific Flat-earther knowledge pleasure may be one that shouldn't be chosen until it is weighed against the sensations. Maybe? The pleasure of "knowing the Earth is flat" can lead to pain if there is derision from outside the group -- although that could also be a pleasure in "knowing" you're in the In group and know the "truth" about the Earth. It could also lead to pain if you finally accept the Earth is not flat and feel you've been duped.

I'm just having a hard time understanding the importance of "that pleasure of knowing" being canonical. Or wasn't it meant to be?

Post by “Cassius” of January 31, 2021 at 5:42 PM

Don thank you for raising this - I have been concerned about it too and it would be good to see if [Elayne](#) can find time to elaborate on her thoughts here. I understood her to be saying that there is a feeling of certainty or confidence that comes from grasping something, and I agree that there is such a feeling. But I think you picked up something more than that, as if we might be associating it with a source of knowledge in itself, and I think it would be good to clarify this.

Post by “Elayne” of February 1, 2021 at 4:07 PM

[Don](#) and [Cassius](#)

I'm confused as to why my words were taken that way. I was being descriptive.

In EP, we observe reality through our senses, part of the Canon. We feel our feelings, also part of reality. We have the prolepses. These are the 3 direct ways we know what is real. These 3 ways of knowing reality are non-conceptual-- they are direct. Not abstract.

However, when it comes to certainty in conclusions about our sense perceptions, feelings, and prolepses, this is added on to actual contact with reality. Concepts and so on are not primary information.

I thought we were discussing how people decide when certainty is sufficient for them-- which is an entirely different issue from saying what the primary contacts with reality are.

There are two aspects to "certainty "-- the abstract concept, which can also be described mathematically, and an inner sensation of knowing something. There is no absolute "thing" we can find through our senses, feelings, or prolepses which is "objective certainty", even though relative certainty can be described by math. This knowing sensation is a subjective experience that has been studied. It can be produced directly with brain stimulation, minus any content. The sensation of knowing is neurological but doesn't necessarily correlate with accuracy. It's one of those features selected for by evolution because it was close enough and humans who had it out-reproduced those who didn't.

I report that for me, the sensation of knowing has a sort of "rightness" that I classify as pleasurable. Similar sensation to a picture being lined up evenly on a wall or the sensation of symmetry in justice. I experience it as satisfying. That doesn't mean I actually am correct. It's just a known human phenomenon which was relevant to our discussion of how an individual decides what amount of certainty is enough to act on. It's a subjective decision influenced by feelings. There is no way to find a fixed rule. What confidence interval do you want before you are going to try a new drug, for instance? There are statistical likelihoods that satisfy most researchers, but none of them are 100%. Whether a person wants to take a 1 in 100 chance of being wrong and will feel certain enough not to worry, 1 in 1000, 1 in 1 million-- there's no absolute rule.

I would advise being cautious with that sensation of knowing, given that it can cause people to overlook primary data. Cherry-picking, etc, is a risk. Some people appear to feel very anxious without that sensation, more than others. Some people prefer a sense of uncertainty. These are biological reactions, and noticing them is primary canonical data, while drawing further conclusions about their function is abstract.

Post by “Don” of February 1, 2021 at 10:16 PM

We may be talking past each other again.

Let's get specific: I'm listening to 27:30 -- 30:27 including when [Charles](#) says it "feels like evidence" and [Elayne](#) says "that feeling of correctness is usually pleasurable". My point was that the Flat-earther's "pleasurable" feeling of "correctness" is probably just as pleasurable for them as yours is for you. People cherry picking facts when they have that "pleasurable" feeling of "correctness" is exactly my concern. That "pleasure" reaction needs to be tethered to corroboration from the senses to be a valid criteria for truth. Which I think you're saying, but of what value - other than its pleasure - is that feeling of "correctness" then?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

This knowing sensation is a subjective experience that has been studied. It can be produced directly with brain stimulation, minus any content. The sensation of knowing is neurological but doesn't necessarily correlate with accuracy.

This sounds fascinating. Do you have any citations or names of researchers or studies for us to follow-up on?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I report that for me, the sensation of knowing has a sort of "rightness" that I classify as pleasurable. Similar sensation to a picture being lined up evenly on a wall or the sensation of symmetry in justice. I experience it as satisfying. That doesn't mean I actually am correct.

So, I'm still confused then. If you're just saying you have a "sensation of knowing" that's "pleasurable" and that it doesn't mean what you know is correct, then it's not evidence of anything if someone is trying to change your mind. It's just a pleasurable feeling. It seems to me that holding a warm, fuzzy blanket and feeling pleasure at that while someone explains something would - for purposes of accepting an argument - would be the same.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

It's just a known human phenomenon which was relevant to our discussion of how an individual decides what amount of certainty is enough to act on. It's a subjective decision influenced by feelings. There is no way to find a fixed rule. What confidence interval do you want before you are going to try a new drug, for instance?

The key term here is "decide" - that's choice and avoidance - which involves using reason to assess the evidence from your sensory input, initial reaction of pleasure or pain, and mental anticipations. I'm still cautious of phrases like "influenced by feelings." Are you talking emotions? From my perspective, emotions are not what Epicurus talks about. The emotions -

fear, anger, sadness, love, contentment - are how we mentally process the reaction of pleasure or pain. Decision making while subjective is a cognitive process.

Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2021 at 12:25 AM

Quote

The sensation of knowing is neurological but doesn't necessarily correlate with accuracy

This is what I came away with as the point which is why I did not pursue it further in the episode. But I sensed at the time that Dons question or something like it would come up. We need to be clear about the general question of truth, knowledge, certainty etc which we probably have not emphasized enough. Due to modern presumptions we probably need to hit over and over how we are defining these words in an Epicurean non-absolute-perspective universe.

Whether our definitions are related or not to a "correspondence theory of truth" or some other formulation needs to be made clear. Or to get back to a recurring issue it isn't sufficient to describe the physiological process in detail - we need to reduce the picture to an understandable theory and show how it fits the rest of the philosophy. In this context the picture has to do with the feeling of confidence having nothing much to do with an accurate grasp of the physical details under consideration. Plus, the picture involves the bliss pill issues - in the end we are concerned about living happily, not necessarily having the ability to give the most "accurate" recitation of the details. That point is uncomfortable for many people to accept - even me - but I think it is the clear implication of the philosophy and in the end does "make sense.". To use another cliché it is an " elephant in the room" that we can't forget is there even as we dive into the details of what Lucretius / Epicurus are saying.

As we go through these episodes we need to constantly flip back and forth from the general to the particular and back again. I am afraid we probably didn't succeed in that in upcoming episode 56 so I will try to work on that for the next episode.

Post by “Don” of February 2, 2021 at 6:48 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

the picture involves the bliss pill issues - in the end we are concerned about living happily, not necessarily having the ability to give the most "accurate" recitation of the details.

Your comment here hints at something I've been planning on writing a longer post about so I'll *try* to be brief here.

When we all use catchphrases like "The goal is pleasure" it can easily be misinterpreted that we mean "the goal is to walk around all day with warm, fuzzy feelings" or "the goal is to exist in a blissful haze." That's not the goal of Epicurus's philosophy. At least not the way I understand it. The goal or telos is to live the most pleasurable life. That's not the same as warm fuzzy blissed out feelings every minute of the day. That's why we endure pains for pleasure that will result from those painful choices. That's why we remember past pleasures when things aren't necessarily going well. Using the catchy motto "pleasure is the goal" was used to caricature Epicurus's philosophy in his own lifetime. The idea that "the goal is to walk around all day with warm, fuzzy feelings" approach is Cyrenaic not Epicurean, and Epicurus fought hard against those stereotypes. When we use "pleasure is the goal" it can easily be misinterpreted as well as "Capital-P Pleasure is the goal" like there's some Platonic ideal form of Pleasure that we're aiming for. I wouldn't want people to think that if they're not experiencing Pleasure that they're doing it wrong. This may also be why people redefine pleasure - to try to attain that mistaken Platonic ideal. That's not the Garden path either.

I'm also concerned [Cassius](#) by your "not necessarily having the ability to give the most "accurate" recitation of the details." This seems to me to open the door to some problems and I'd like to hear or read more about what you actually mean here before I go off on a tangent.

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2021 at 7:34 AM

i completely agree with your comment Don and would like to see you develop it because I think it is so important - even if we take it in different directions.

Quote

When we all use catchphrases like "The goal is pleasure" it can easily be misinterpreted that we mean "the goal is to walk around all day with warm, fuzzy feelings" or "the goal is to exist in a blissful haze." That's not the goal of Epicurus's philosophy.

I completely agree.

When I say the goal is pleasure, the first thing that comes to my mind that Epicurus is saying is not the feelings you list but "this is an affirmation that the goal is NOT set by gods or virtue or idealism or rationalism but by Nature herself through the faculty of feeling." That is why I personally write very little about particular pleasures, and I don't gather the Epicureans did either. As a philosophy I don't see this as a vacation guide or a cookbook or a relaxation therapy. Instead, it's much more a blueprint for philosophical and moral revolution against the powers of religion and conventional academia.

As for your final paragraph, what I mean here refers to how I read Diogenes Of Oiononanda's comment on the flux. The flux exists but it is not so unstable that we can't navigate through it. Meaning: yes it is true that we and everything else are made up of little particles whirring around, but that is not our level of perception. We live at a level where we do not need to distinguish every whirring element - nor should we WISH to! That is what I refer to as a limit of caring about the details or accuracy of description of where every particle is whirring at every particular moment. We want to understand enough so that we can control " our reality" but more detailed observation of every whirring atom is not feasible - or more importantly for our philosophical outlook, it is not even desirable - unless that knowledge somehow practically effects our happiness. When I look at my hand, I want to see a hand, I can't see every atom whirring about to form the hand. Nor would it be desirable or good for me if I did see those whirring atoms instead of my hand.

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2021 at 7:54 AM

Don. - I think this part is getting closer to the point we need to regularly bring up as the big picture in the podcasts as we read the details of Lucretius

Quote

As for your final paragraph, what I mean here refers to how I read Diogenes Of Oiononanda's comment on the flux. The flux exists but it is not so unstable that we can't navigate through it. Meaning: yes it is true that we and everything else are made up of little particles whirring around, but that is not our level of perception. We live at a level where we do not need to distinguish every whirring element - nor should we WISH to! That is what I refer to as a limit of caring about the details or accuracy of description of where every particle is whirring at every particular moment. We want to understand enough so that we can control " our reality" but more detailed observation of every whirring atom is not feasible - or more importantly for our philosophical outlook, it is

not even desirable - unless that knowledge somehow practically effects our happiness. When I look at my hand, I want to see a hand, I can't see every atom whirring about to form the hand. Nor would it be desirable or good for me if I did see those whirring atoms instead of my hand

Post by “Elayne” of February 2, 2021 at 7:55 AM

[Don](#) a good book with a summary of research on the sensation of knowing is Burton's "On Being Certain." There has been more research since then, but it's a good intro to the neurobiology.

We would be wise to always remember that our sense data is obtained subjectively, through the perspective of a particular subject, and although it is real it is never experienced as an absolute, objective point of view, there being no such thing. I think people who worry about including emotion and feeling do not understand that our brains function as a whole, and these aspects of experience are not really separable. But if we remember our senses are also subjective-- not opinions, but particular to subjects-- maybe that will place things in context.

Although I've just said we can't really fully separate our brain functions in everyday life, I'm going to break things down a little to show you what I mean by the difference between sense perception and abstract thought.

Seeing a table right now, in this moment, is a sense perception. Recognizing it as an object separate from the background is due to innate, rudimentary physics expectations-- a sort of pattern recognition present even in newborns, which I would term as a prolepsis rather than as a formal concept. The "object permanence" of the table, the expectation that it will still be there in the next minute, is a similar phenomenon which emerges on a tight developmental schedule, across cultures, which is not seen with purely learned cognitions. These innate physics expectations are strengthened by experience but are not solely empirical.

But too quickly for us to perceive, we immediately connect what we see with the word "table", the function of being able to put things on top of it, how it relates to similarly shaped objects, ideas about where the material came from such as the type of wood-- conceptual thinking. If I were to say "I know that is a table", I'm going beyond the Canon just a tiny hair, into concepts, but I'm still going to have a strong sensation of certainty. It would be hard to talk me out of it. If it started moving and growling, showing itself to be some strange animal camouflaged as a table, like in movies where characters step on what they think is a stone but which turns out to be a creature, I would change my mind, and this would also involve some conceptual thinking.

Even the words "I know I am really seeing what I'm seeing" are conceptual-- the whole idea that "there is a reality" is conceptual. But the experience of perceiving reality is non-conceptual. The idea of "truth" is conceptual, but encountering the phenomena we label as true is not conceptual. That actual perception is what we are talking about with the Canon.

Almost all our thinking involves some slight level of concepts of this type. However, in addition to concepts about knowing, we also have an inner sensation that goes with it, which isn't always accurate but is often more pleasurable to people than uncertainty. Moving from uncertainty to certainty is a dopamine, seeking driven process. We can want it without liking it, but usually that moment of discovery of a conclusion feels pleasurable and reinforces our wanting more.

Although the distinction between emotion and feeling is interesting, for most of us in real life we have strong associations between certain emotions and pain or pleasure. Epicurus was correct in assigning anxiety to the pain column. Some people do get an endorphin rush from fear-- that's why we have horror movies and roller coasters-- but the endorphin pleasure is a second event while the initial fear is not a pleasure. It's more of a pain that can lead to pleasure. For almost all of us, emotions like contentment, gratitude, or affection for others-- are pleasurable, and those words wouldn't be accurate communication with the feeling of pleasure removed. Try to imagine feeling gratitude that had no pleasure but pain instead -- it wouldn't make sense! Instead you'd choose a word like indebted or obligated or guilty. The emotion of guilt is painful-- if it were pleasurable we'd say satisfaction or pride in our actions.

Again, this sensation of knowing isn't always going to correlate with the level of certainty science can demonstrate-- a high degree of statistical probability regarding the causal chain. Even so, we can't extricate it from our experience of living, so it's useful, IMO, to know about it, to be conscious of it. Is it unsafe to enjoy it? I think Epicurus would object to that idea. He was very focused on relieving anxiety and substituting certainty. The wisest thing is to decide on some level of certainty such that you won't be highly upset if you are wrong, and it inevitably involves a subjective experience. You can't remove that from the process of a person deciding how much accuracy they want. If your level of accuracy is low, you'll possibly wind up with more pain than pleasure, so that's the main factor-- how much accuracy do you need for a pleasurable life? There can't possibly be an absolute answer to that question.

Post by "Don" of February 2, 2021 at 7:55 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As for your final paragraph, what I mean here refers t...

LOL! 😊 Well, I'm glad I didn't go off on that tangent I was going to. Turns out I actually agree with your clarification there. Thanks!

Post by “Elayne” of February 2, 2021 at 8:10 AM

I don't want to leave out that the seeking process itself can feel pleasurable, as well as enjoying that there remain mysteries about reality to be solved. Like an adventure. If we ever did figure out a theory of everything, I wonder if there would be something like a post-adventure let-down. This pleasurable seeking is part of why I don't mind leaving so many questions about reality open!

The other reasons that sort of uncertainty feels fine to me include that it isn't threatening/scary. Uncertainty about whether there's a burglar hidden in the house is unpleasant. Uncertainty about cosmology details is not dangerous and so can feel pleasurable. We know enough physics that I think anxiety over remaining uncertainties can usually be solved with more physics education. None of the many physicists I know seem to be anxious about cosmology and most are atheists.

The 3rd reason IMO to keep our superficial physics up to date is that more advanced concepts gradually get incorporated into popular knowledge. So not updating it ensures the philosophy will deviate more and more even for a minimally educated person, and it will gradually seem less relevant.

Post by “Don” of February 3, 2021 at 7:00 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Epicurus is saying is not the feelings you list but "this is an affirmation that the goal is NOT set by gods or virtue or idealism or rationalism but by Nature herself through the faculty of feeling."

Agreed. I would even be more specific on saying "... through the faculty of feeling pleasure or pain." The Canon itself is not about emotions, the colloquial connotation of "feeling," but the initial reaction of pleasure or pain (attraction or repulsion) - before you have the chance to "think" about something. The names we give to the emotions are built on that foundation of

pain or pleasure "at the speed of thought." I'll address this in response to Elayne's post asap.

I still think Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett's research has some intriguing applications in this area: e.g., <https://michaelrucker.com/thought-leader...emotion-affect/> Elayne may have touched on some of this.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

As a philosophy I don't see this as a vacation guide or a cookbook or a relaxation therapy. Instead, it's much more a blueprint for philosophical and moral revolution against the powers of religion and conventional academia.

It has to be both. I agree with your second statement, but I don't think that precludes the first. The "revolution" has to have everyday applications on the beach, in the kitchen, or at the spa (to try and line up your examples 😊)

Post by "Cassius" of February 3, 2021 at 10:12 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

agree with your second statement, but I don't think that precludes the first

Yes I agree and I think I reworded several times trying to make that clear but it bears emphasis as you said. They aren't mutually contradictory.

Post by "Don" of February 3, 2021 at 6:36 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

a good book with a summary of research on the sensation of knowing is Burton's "On Being Certain." There has been more research since then, but it's a good intro to the neurobiology.

Picked up the book at the library today. Thanks for the recommendation!

Post by “Don” of February 6, 2021 at 11:27 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

We would be wise to always remember that our sense data is obtained subjectively, through the perspective of a particular subject, and although it is real it is never experienced as an absolute, objective point of view, there being no such thing.

I thought the reason for the senses (the [αἰσθήσεις](#)) being a criterion of the Canon was that they were a direct connection with reality without any intermediary. Our opinions and beliefs are then constructed on that "real" authentic reflection of objective reality "out there." While each perceiver - the one who senses - will have a subjective and culturally influenced reaction to the senses, I don't think it's accurate to say "our senses are also subjective." That sounds like a Skeptical position as if our senses can't be trusted and nobody could agree on what their senses are telling them. We sense a real reality, we react to that sensation with pleasure or pain, and our prolepses then compare it to previous sensations. We then form concepts, beliefs, and opinions in keeping with the choice that will provide the path to the most sustained pleasurable life to the best of our ability.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

For almost all of us, emotions like contentment, gratitude, or affection for others-- are pleasurable, and those words wouldn't be accurate communication with the feeling of pleasure removed.

To be clear, I'm not implying that pleasure or pain can be removed from the emotions. But the initial reaction - pain or pleasure - is what gives rise to the emotions. You can't construct the emotion without the initial reaction. Pleasure and pain are part of [affect](#) (as I understand that concept in [Dr. Barrett's work](#)) and the emotions are constructed based on that interoception. I believe what Epicurus felt intuitively was this separation of affect and emotion which was why he placed pleasure/pain in the Canon (the pathē are two). One of the most important criterion in our Canonical decision-making process in choice and avoidance is the initial interoception of pain and pleasure. I believe you touched on this when you talked about sensing unease about someone. Don't stick around. The interoception of unpleasantness/pain gives rise to unease, fear, anxiety.

I'm intentionally leaving out a discussion of the "feeling of knowing" since I just got that book and don't feel I've studied that enough to have an opinion on that.

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2021 at 6:29 AM

Thanks for those two points Don because I think discussing them is going to be helpful.

In both cases I agree with Elayne's points as written, but I think you're bringing out aspects that need to be very clear.

On the first point, the issue it seems you are pointing out is "I don't think it's accurate to say "our senses are also subjective." That sounds like a Skeptical position as if our senses can't be trusted and nobody could agree on what their senses are telling them. " To me the issue there is that I don't think there is a contradiction in saying that the senses are both subjective AND at the same time trustworthy and repeatable. Elayne's final point is really the foundation ("absolute, objective point of view, there being no such thing") which is based on the conclusion that there is no center point in the universe where God or anyone else stands and says "MY perspective is the correct one and all others are to be judged against mine." This is why I say taking positions on deep physics issues has such practical importance. While it may be possible to come a similar conclusion through all sorts of other theories, if you DO come to the conclusion that there is no absolute perspective against which all others are judged, you know easily that "one-for-all" perspectives cannot exist.

On the other hand, while we don't have a single one for all god perspective, there is a "We" which consists of humans like ourselves, living on a place like earth, and within the confined grouping even though our perspectives are not universal for the universe, there is a very large degree of repeatability and verifiability within our own experiences. I think back to the example of looking at our hand, and that we see a hand rather than a zillion whirring atoms. In fact what is there is a zillion whirring atoms, were our eyes geared to see them, but instead our eyes are geared to see the hand, and we can have great confidence that every time we or other humans look at our hands, we will see the hands and not the zillion atoms.

On the second point, I am not sure exactly where you are going except to flesh out the distinct meanings of the words "emotion" vs pain and pleasure or feeling or other words. I agree with you that we need to use words clearly and that emotion conveys something different than pain and pleasure, much in the way the word happiness conveys something different. But I still think Elayne's sentence is correct as written and I would be interested in where you are going with the distinction in this context. Are you trying to construct a definition of emotion that leaves out the feeling that it describes? Again I agree with Elayne that a feeling is an inherent part of an emotion.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 7:30 AM

We may be talking/writing past each other again on the first point, so I'll try and respond in more detail to that later.

The second point is that emotions are built on pleasure/pain but have a lot more going on. That's why it's important to "feel" pleasure/pain and know why you're feeling pleasure/pain and not just label it with an emotional description. Take anger [as discussed here in this conference abstract](#). According to this (and I've seen similar more detailed expositions in Tsouna's book), anger can stem from pain but be sustained by "the pleasure of revenge." One is acceptable and understandable, the other is "empty." Anger and most if not all of the emotional designations have culturally influenced definitions and connotations (as in Barrett). I think that's why Epicurus put so much emphasis on pleasure and pain. Strip things down to the bare essentials free of all indoctrination. Nature provides pleasure and pain. Period. That's why he can say that ataraxia, aponia, khara, and euphrosyne are different expressions of pleasure: they have the reaction of pleasure as their foundation.

To make choices about leading the pleasurable life, we have to really know what's motivating us, what's driving our choices. What are we really feeling? We need to be honest with ourselves and not overthink what we're feeling. Are we angry from real pain caused to us, or are we feeling pleasure at self-righteous indignation and thoughts of getting even? If the latter, choosing a path based on that could lead to more pain and could be a pleasure we should not choose. Humans are good at fooling ourselves. That's where reason gets the better of us. What are we *really* feeling? And is it pleasure or pain that motivates our decisions? And as I mentioned, I still think Dr. Barrett's work (of which I'm continuing to look into) has some interesting and potentially important light to shed on this topic.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2021 at 8:25 AM

I need to read what you just wrote Don but I want to mark this point: After we read the new text for the podcast today we will circle back around and take up these two issues as they are great points to discuss to keep the podcast focused on the big picture issues.

Post by "Elayne" of February 7, 2021 at 9:04 AM

For me, I am a connoisseur of emotions and find the incredible variety and particularity marvelous. I never experience pain or pleasure without a full context of experience, so trying to

isolate feelings seems almost Platonic in idealism. In contrast to real life. Epicurus made the point that pleasures are not interchangeable-- there is variety!

Nor do I ever have any delay in knowing whether I'm having pleasure or pain-- that is a foreign concept to me. Of course, others could be differently wired and will need to figure themselves out. I see the primary challenge as gaining experience and accuracy in knowing which decisions will work out for pleasures, and age helps a lot with this, if a person pays good attention to results of their actions.

Post by “Elayne” of February 7, 2021 at 9:28 AM

[Don](#) the sense are subjective in that they involve both the real, external object being sense _plus_ that person's specific locus and specific sense organs. We are not idealists-- our sense are material functions, biological, and of course they have differences between people. That does not make the sense inaccurate-- if I have cataracts in my eyes, the color I am seeing is an accurate perception of the object's color plus the yellowing of my lenses.

People who have bought into the popular notion of "objective" fact often feel very uncomfortable at the material reality that there is no absolute perspective and that every perception is _by_ a subject and includes that subject's materiality.

You could think of it as similar to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. In the act of measuring very small particles, we have to change what that particle is doing and so we can't separate the act of observing from what the particle does.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 11:19 AM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Don the sense are subjective in that they involve both the real, external object being sense _plus_ that person's specific locus and specific sense organs. We a...

Thanks for the clarification. I have no problem with this X-plus-Y characterisation you state here. The previous post sounded to me like there was no objective reality to be sensed. As long as we're "subjectively" sensing a real physical reality, I'm fine with acknowledging we all have

different abilities to sense that reality.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

there is no absolute perspective and that every perception is by a subject and includes that subject's materiality.

Isn't that even the basis of Einstein's Theory of Relativity? That there's no absolute vantage point?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

I never experience pain or pleasure without a full context of experience, so trying to isolate feelings seems almost Platonic in idealism.

LOL. Ouch. No need to accuse me of Platonism! 😊 I'm going to defer to the work of Dr. Linda Feldman Barrett's work on constructed emotions on this. Her empirical research isn't Platonic.

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Epicurus made the point that pleasures are not interchangeable-- there is variety!

There are different things that we experience as pleasurable, but the common characteristic is the reaction of pleasure. Are you referring to Principal Doctrine 9 here or another text? Just want to make sure so I don't respond further off the cuff.

Post by “Elayne” of February 7, 2021 at 11:21 AM

Another consideration-- because we experience

continual stimulation of our pain/pleasure system, it's not just the initial experience which triggers pleasure then emotion, but the emotion itself continues to trigger pleasure or pain-- and this should be included in our understanding of how different decisions affect us. The emotions involved in affectionate friendship create strong pleasure. If we weren't having pleasure from our emotional responses, we would use different words to describe the relationship in question.

So feeling is not just a brief blip followed by emotion-- feeling continues to be evoked.

Post by “Elayne” of February 7, 2021 at 11:22 AM

[Don](#) yes, PD9

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2021 at 11:36 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

According to this (and I've seen similar more detailed expositions in Tsouna's book), anger can stem from pain but be sustained by "the pleasure of revenge." One is acceptable and understandable, the other is "empty."

I know that you're putting the quotes around "empty" because you're referring to references in the texts. At some point I would like us to spend some closer time examining those texts because I sense that "empty" is conveying things in English of which I don't think Epicurus would have approved. (I think another example of such a term would be "vainglory" as used a few times on this and other forums.)

I find that I don't use the "empty" term myself very much or at all, and when I see it used it seems it's frequently being applied as a label of disapproval for reasons that don't seem to have much to do with Epicurean philosophy. Maybe I will stand to be corrected on that and if so I will learn something, but I question how this term can be reconciled with the "all pleasure is desirable" foundation, and the foundation that pleasure and pain are intrinsically desirable/undesirable in themselves.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 12:18 PM

Good point on defining our terms. The word Epicurus most often uses is κενός kenos where were see "empty" in translations:
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=keno/s>

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 12:35 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I question how this term can be reconciled with the "all pleasure is desirable" foundation,

"While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is choiceworthy, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned."

Note that he doesn't say all pleasure is desirable. He says all pleasure is a good (αγαθόν agathon) not that every pleasure is desirable. Pleasure is the good toward which all our actions point, but that doesn't mean *every* pleasure is desirable or choiceworthy.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2021 at 12:57 PM

Well yes that last comment goes to the heart of the issue -- the word "empty" in English at least to me is indicating that it is not in actuality what it represents itself to be, and that is not my understanding of what Epicurus is saying as to pleasure. No pleasure, no matter how much pain the choice may later bring, is devoid of pleasure, and that would be what I would infer from use of the term "empty." Yes a particular pleasure may be unchoiceworthy in that it brings excessive pain in a myriad of ways, and that kind of analysis is core Epicurean thought, but a pleasure would NOT be labeled "empty" because the pleasure does not bring pleasure, because if that choice or action were not pleasurable then it would not be pleasure.

If the meaning to be conveyed is "don't choose it because it doesn't bring net pleasure" or anything that means something similar, then I am all ok. But that is not what the word "empty" conveys to me ,or to what I would wager would be a large number of people in common understanding. That's why I recoil from it.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2021 at 12:59 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Pleasure is the good toward which all our actions point, but that doesn't mean *every* pleasure is desirable or choiceworthy.

We are totally in agreement as to this result, but I do sense that the way the point is made is very important and can be confusing if the phrasing is unclear enough to imply in some way that pleasure is not pleasure, and that is where I think "empty" is uncomfortably close to implying that the pleasure is not in fact a pleasure, but only a "shell" of pleasure without any substance. Pleasure in fact presumably has no substance other than pleasure itself.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 1:03 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

t a pleasure would NOT be labeled "empty" because the pleasure does not bring pleasure, because if that choice or action were not pleasurable then it would not be pleasure.

It's not the pleasure itself that's "empty." It's the desire for specific pleasures that lead to pain that is "empty." Desires and "pleasure as the good" are two very different things.

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2021 at 1:09 PM

That distinction could in fact be a very good one when used very clearly like that. An "empty" pleasure makes no sense to me. An "empty desire" might make sense, but even then I can't see "empty" being the best word to describe the problem. Why use a word like "empty" when it is pretty darn easy to be clear that the issue is that the decision may lead to more pain than pleasure, and that THAT is the issue.....?

Maybe I will chase that rabbit next, but maybe not 😊

Ha - I don't mean to be argumentative here -- just thinking that this is one of those areas where I've seen in the past (not YOU!) use of the word "empty" in ways that made me uncomfortable, so I think it's good to think through the issues involved.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 1:43 PM

It's not argumentative by any means! These are important issues. Besides, there's pleasure in the intellectual pursuit so that's (a) good 😊

The reason people like to use empty in translations is because that's the literal meaning of the Greek word. But as we know, literal doesn't always mean best. When used in this sense, I think of it as an excuse with no real argument behind it - empty space behind the excuse. Colloquially as in "That's no excuse!" Colloquially again, an empty desire uses a rationalization. A valid desire uses the Canon.

(P.S: I should say "uses the Canon along with phronesis (to choose that desire).")

Post by “Elayne” of February 7, 2021 at 5:10 PM

Are you quoting Epicurus by using "empty" pleasure, [Don](#) ? Which text, if so?

Today I think most people would interpret an "empty pleasure" as being one without meaningfulness (a source of pleasure). If someone was experiencing pain from a sense of meaninglessness unrelieved by their choices for pleasures, it would be analogous to the profligate hedonists-- leaving some of their pleasures on the table instead of choosing the maximum pleasure.

But it reminds me of where Epicurus has been translated talking about "vain desires", which means "in vain" rather than prideful-- desires for imaginary pleasures, idealism-- infinite power and such. The desires wouldn't be in vain if they were for real, obtainable pleasures, so that's the problem. Futility. Idk if there's any correlation to what you are talking about with "empty."

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 5:18 PM

[Quote from Elayne](#)

Are you quoting Epicurus by using "empty" pleasure, Don ? Which text, if so?

See my posts above for clarification on that.

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2021 at 5:18 PM

What I remember is Hiram referring to it fairly regularly, but I don't recall his context. Here is one example:

4. Nussbaum, ch. 4. Inwood and Gerson translate "empty" as "groundless."

"Of desires, some are natural and necessary, some natural and not necessary, and some neither natural nor necessary but occurring as a result of groundless opinion." Epicurus, *The Principal Doctrines*, xxix, in *The Epicurus Reader*, p. 34.♣

Which comes from here: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ca/7523862.0...iew=fulltext#N4>

Post by "Don" of February 7, 2021 at 5:38 PM

Quote

KD 29: Τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ <καὶ ἀναγκαῖαι· αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ> καὶ οὐκ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ οὔτε φυσικαὶ οὔτε ἀναγκαῖαι ἀλλὰ παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν γινόμεναι.

κενὴν δόξαν (kenēn doxan) "empty/groundless beliefs/opinions/doctrines"

κενὴν is the empty

δόξαν is the same word used for the Principal Doctrines.

If I typed earlier "empty pleasures" I was referring to pleasures chosen due to empty desires founded on empty beliefs.

Sorry for any confusion.

Post by "Don" of February 7, 2021 at 6:10 PM

Κενός empty was a popular word. I thought some additional context might help. These are not exhaustive by any means but I thought it might be interesting to see where empty is used.

KD 30:

Quote

30: Ἐν αἷς τῶν φυσικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν (physikōn epithymiōn "natural desires"), μὴ ἐπ' ἀλγοῦν δὲ ἐπαναγουσῶν ἔαν μὴ συντελεσθῶσιν, ὑπάρχει ἡ σπουδὴ σύντονος, παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν αὐταὶ γίνονται, καὶ οὐ παρὰ τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν οὐ διαχέονται ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κενοδοξίαν.

τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κενοδοξίαν tēn tou anthrōpou kenodoxian "the 'empty beliefs' (one word) of humans/humanity/'mankind'"

The word also occurs in KD 37:

Quote

37: Whatever in conventional law is attested to be expedient in the needs arising out of mutual intercourse is by its nature just, whether the same for all or not, and in case any law is made and does not prove suitable to the expediency of mutual intercourse, then this is no longer just. And should the expediency which is expressed by the law vary and only for a time correspond with the notion of justice, nevertheless, for the time being, it was just, so long as we do not trouble ourselves about empty terms (φωναῖς κεναῖς phōnais kenais "empty sounds, empty speech") but look broadly at facts.

Quote

And Fragments:116. I summon you to sustained enjoyment and not to empty and trifling virtues, which destroy your confidence in the fruits of what you have. ἐγὼ δ' ἐφ' ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς παρακαλῶ καὶ οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρετὰς κενὰς καὶ ματαίας καὶ ταραχώδεις ἐχούσας τῶν καρπῶν ἐλπίδας.

And 202, here translated groundless:

Quote

202. He who follows nature and not groundless opinions is completely self-reliant. With regard to what is enough by nature, everything he owns is a source of wealth; whereas with regard to unlimited desires, even the greatest wealth is poverty.

ὁ οὖν τῆ φύσει παρακολουθῶν καὶ μὴ ταῖς κεναῖς δόξαις ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτάρκης· πρὸς γὰρ τὸ τῆ φύσει ἄρκοῦν πᾶσα κτήσις ἐστὶ πλοῦτος, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἀορίστους ὀρέξεις καὶ ὁ μέγιστος πλοῦτός ἐστὶ πενία.

(Note: This is the same phrase as in KD 29 and 30)

Post by “Godfrey” of February 7, 2021 at 6:44 PM

Here are some passages from Tsouna's The Ethics of Philodemus (pages 38-40 in the Kindle version):

*"Like the vices, the emotions consist of cognitive and non-cognitive or extra-cognitive elements. This applies to all kinds of emotions, healthy or destructive, passionate as well as mild. Assuming that they all comprise desires, and that Epicurus classifies desires into natural and **empty** according to the kinds of beliefs on which they depend (KD 29), we may infer that he would classify emotions in a similar manner. In any event, Philodemus suggests that, e.g., anger and the fear of death belong to the category of **unnatural or empty** emotions, since both are related to empty (*i.e., both false and harmful*) beliefs or presumptions about their objects. What kinds of empty beliefs and judgements are involved in harmful emotions? Philodemus' analyses of anger and the fear of death might suggest that he concentrates on the issues of whether there is evil at hand and whether one reacts in an appropriate manner..."*

*"Philodemus says that all emotions, including anger, are 'consequent upon our own entertainment of **false opinion**' (ψυδοδοξ[ίαν]: *De ir. VI. 14-15*); in other words, upon **empty beliefs**. In the case of anger, such beliefs chiefly concern the intentions of the offender, the magnitude of the offence, and the value and appropriateness of revenge."*

In the chapter on anger she refers to "orge" and "thymos" which she interprets as natural and **empty** anger. It's a bit confusing though, since apparently Philodemus and his rivals had opposite definitions of the two terms. Possibly examining the original Greek meaning of these two words would provide more to chew on?

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 7:01 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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οργή orgē

[http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=o\)rg/](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=o)rg/)

θυμός thymos

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=qumo/s>

(Directly related to επιθυμία epithymia "desire, yearning, longing" which shows up in KD 29 & 30)

Post by “Elayne” of February 7, 2021 at 10:34 PM

Ok that's what gets translated as vain opinion also. In context to me it sounds like it's basically false opinions. Unreal ideals. Empty of facts, empty of reality ☐☐. Because it's contrasted with nature, which includes everything that actually exists. People today contrast natural with artificial/manmade, but Epicurus is contrasting it with unreal.

Post by “Don” of February 7, 2021 at 10:50 PM

Interestingly enough, κενός is also the word translated as "void" in "atoms and void." Ex., Περὶ ἁτόμων καὶ κενοῦ*. Peri atomōn kai kenou Concerning atoms and void/emptiness (The title of Epicurus's work on the topic).

*κενοῦ = genitive singular of κενός

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2021 at 2:05 AM

Thanks for all the references on empty. After reading them I am still left with the feeling that it is easy to misuse the word except in a context that is pretty clear like for example the void. - now there "empty" rings true, or in discussing "virtue" detached from a specific goal. Maybe its just that the English has a different connotation but in combining it with words that have a more positive connotation it smacks to me as being more moralistic and judgmental than helpful (again maybe just in English). Even the phrase "empty desire" sounds more like something s Buddhist or even stoic would say.

But anyway now we're probably reaching the point where this tangent is empty of additional benefit!

Post by “Don” of February 8, 2021 at 7:50 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But anyway now we're probably reaching the point where this tangent is empty of additional benefit!

Point taken 😊 but one last response to your comment...

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Even the phrase "empty desire" sounds more like something s Buddhist or even stoic would say.

Even if it "sounds" Buddhist or Stoic, we can't deny that that's the word Epicurus liked to use to convey these concepts. He obviously had a reason for doing it, so I wouldn't want us to obfuscate *his* meaning for the sake of our being uncomfortable or wanting to put a different slant on it.