

Keen Reasoning Based on the Evidence of the Senses

Post by "Kalosyni" of November 27, 2022 at 9:12 PM

The following is a copy of a text dialog, which I wanted to share so as to bring in others.

Cassius: Well unless you get rid of the fear of death and fear of gods then you by definition are always going to be anxious, and if you are anxious about those things you can't be completely happy. Therefore the mental understanding through philosophy is required for the most happy life possible. And this is why I keep stressing nothing from nothing. This is the self contained example of the analysis.

Kalosyni: Oh nothing from nothing is important and a different angle to the same problem.

Cassius: "agnosticism" about these things does not resolve anxiety. The issue is using your mind confidently to expel doubt.

Kalosyni: I think Buddhism is trying to get to the same goal of "fearlessness", but is going about it from a Pyrrho/skeptic practice. Which is much more difficult, nearly impossible.

Cassius: Which Epicurus' would say is crazy yes.

Kalosyni: Because then you throw out the things that are needed. That is said in canonics. PD 23.

Cassius: Lot of this comes back to trusting the senses as a solid ground for reasoning.

Kalosyni: So trusting the senses, that is also unclear to me, since we know there are optical illusions, and we make mistakes in perception as well

Cassius: Meaning that yes illusions are possible and you find them and get accuracy by more observations. There is nothing ELSE to trust because you have no other faculties.

Plato said they cannot be trusted so you must use mind to do geometry and stuff that he could not explain because he made it up. And skeptics said forget about accuracy all is illusion so give up.

Kalosyni: So that means we have to collect a certain number of data sets before we can be certain

Cassius: Yes til you get consistent results, until then you have to "wait". You can consistently see that nothing comes from nothing and therefore no further waiting is necessary. And it is not legitimate to say "maybe it will tomorrow!" Because there is no evidentiary reason to support

that possibility.

Kalosyni: This is pretty complex

Cassius: If you mean nothing from nothing, any average first century Roman was presumed smart enough to understand it 😊

Kalosyni: No I mean the basis of trusting the senses

Cassius: Yes that too 😊

Kalosyni: You have to still apply reason

Cassius: That is Lucretius book 4. Apply reason to what? Answer: observations of the senses. There is no other basis for observing.

Kalosyni: These signs were put up all around the park in downtown Evans -- "Santa Facts". And if kids visit Santa at the park for pictures, then they think Santa is real. For example: Peter's niece was told that Santa is real.



Cassius: Yes and Peter's niece will wake up and find there is no Santa clause. One day when she has enough observations away from tricksters. The senses do not guarantee you will not be

fooled by illusions.

You have to test and test till you get consistent results. But the only kind of testing possible is through the senses.

Kalosyni: Santa is a good parallel to God, At least for children.

Cassius: Yes maybe so and Santa is disproven the same way God is. Yes children are an example of being under illusions.

And not knowing how to test the senses. You learn that over time. That is why you must understand how the senses work. And Lucretius spends a lot of time on that.

Kalosyni: Did you read Santa Fact number 7 (picture above)? This was her reason for still believing in Santa...as a teenager.

Also, I didn't get a picture of the sign that explained why Santa puts coal in children's stockings. Parents use the Santa myth as a punishment/reward motivator for correct behaviour and say to their kids: If you're not good then Santa will put coal in your stocking instead of presents.

Cassius: Those signs are the equivalent of religious deception and you cannot simply accept what they say about God or Christianity or anything else. There are people out there who just want to manipulate you. That is why you need to understand philosophy and how the world works. This is exactly what Lucretius says in book one.

102] You yourself sometime vanquished by the fearsome threats of the seer's sayings, will seek to desert from us. Nay indeed, how many a dream may they even now conjure up before you, which might avail to overthrow your schemes of life, and confound in fear all your fortunes.

And justly so: for if men could see that there is a fixed limit to their sorrows, then with some reason they might have the strength to stand against the scruples of religion, and the threats of seers. As it is there is no means, no power to withstand, since everlasting is the punishment they must fear in death

And you go directly from that to nothing comes from nothing as proof

127] Therefore we must both give good account of the things on high, in what way the courses of sun and moon come to be, and by what force all things are governed on earth, and also before all else we must see by keen reasoning, whence comes the soul and the nature of the mind, and what thing it is that meets us and affrights our minds in waking life, when we are touched with disease, or again when buried in sleep, so that we seem to see and hear hard by us those who have met death, and whose bones are held in the embrace of earth.

Kalosyni: So it is the senses, and also "by keen reasoning"

Cassius:

146] This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature; whose first rule shall take its start for us from this, that nothing is ever begotten of nothing by divine will.

Fear forsooth so constrains all mortal men, because they behold many things come to pass on earth and in the sky, the cause of whose working they can by no means see, and think that a divine power brings them about. Therefore, when we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing, then more rightly after that shall we discern that for which we search, both whence each thing can be created, and in what way all things come to be without the aid of gods.

By keen reasoning based on the evidence of the senses, which is the only kind of evidence there is

Which does not mean that you have to see or touch atoms, but that the things you can see and touch are only explainable by atoms

Kalosyni: So what is "keen reasoning"?

Cassius: There are a couple of rules preserved such as [PD25](#) and some references in Torquatus about reasoning through analogy, and some references also in Philodemus

But it's nothing magic - it's just comparing observations and deducing only what is consistent with the evidence. And not accepting things without evidence.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 2:23 AM

Here's another way to step through the same reasoning process:

1. **The best life (the goal) is a life completely filled with pleasures of many kinds from which all pain has been expelled.** [[Torquatus' identification of the best life in On Ends](#): "The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural

power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement." ... "If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure." [Letter to Menoecus](#): " And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."]

2. **It is impossible to expel all pain from life unless you expel fear of the gods and fear of death and fear of unmanageable pain.** [[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. [PD13](#). There is no profit in securing protection in relation to men, if things above, and things beneath the earth, and indeed all in the boundless universe, remain matters of suspicion. [PD04](#). Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."]
3. **It is impossible to expel all fear of the gods and fear of death and fear of unmanageable pain through the senses alone, and for this Epicurean philosophy is needed.** [[PD18](#). "The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind." [PD20](#). "The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life." [PD03](#). "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once." [PD04](#). "Pain does not last continuously in the flesh, but the acutest pain is there for a very short time, and even that which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not continue for many days at once. But chronic illnesses permit a predominance of pleasure over pain in the flesh."]
4. **The key element of Epicurean philosophy needed to accomplish this is the understanding of how to have confidence in conclusions formed through use of**

the observations of the senses (which includes the ability to detect and reject deceptions and imaginary threats). [PD22, PD23] [Torquatus: "Further, our mental perceptions all arise from our sensations; and if these are all to be true, as the system of Epicurus proves to us, then only will cognition and perception become possible. Now those who invalidate sensations and say that perception is altogether impossible, cannot even clear the way for this very argument of theirs when they have thrust the senses aside. Moreover, when cognition and knowledge have been invalidated, every principle concerning the conduct of life and the performance of its business becomes invalidated. So from natural science we borrow courage to withstand the fear of death, and firmness to face superstitious dread, and tranquility of mind, through the removal of ignorance concerning the mysteries of the world, and self-control, arising from the elucidation of the nature of the passions and their different classes, and as I shewed just now, our leader again has established the canon and criterion of knowledge and thus has imparted to us a method for marking off falsehood from truth." [Lucian - Alexander the Oracle-Monger](#): "And at this point, my dear Celsus, we may, if we will be candid, make some allowance for these Paphlagonians and Pontics; the poor uneducated 'fat-heads' might well be taken in when they handled the serpent—a privilege conceded to all who choose—and saw in that dim light its head with the mouth that opened and shut. It was an occasion for a Democritus, nay, for an Epicurus or a Metrodorus, perhaps, a man whose intelligence was steeled against such assaults by skepticism and insight, one who, if he could not detect the precise imposture, would at any rate have been perfectly certain that, though this escaped him, the whole thing was a lie and an impossibility."]

5. **Proper reasoning based on the senses requires the understanding that the senses report honestly, but that the data from the senses must be processed for consistency until it is appropriate to have confidence that the opinion we form from them is true.** Until then we "wait" before selecting any single opinion as true. At first we look for and identify as possible any and all opinions that are consistent with available evidence. Only when we can eliminate all but one as consistent with the evidence do we hold that only one opinion is true. Sometimes we can only conclude that any of several opinions, and even more than one, may be true. This is sufficient for peace of mind so long as we have identified at least one that is consistent with nature, leaving us free of fear of a supernatural cause. [PD24] [Torquatus: " He judged that the logic of your school possesses no efficacy either for the amelioration of life or for the facilitation of debate. He laid the greatest stress on natural science. That branch of knowledge enables us to realize clearly the force of words and the natural conditions of speech and the theory of consistent and contradictory expressions; and when we have learned the constitution of the universe we are relieved of superstition, are emancipated from the dread of death, are not agitated through ignorance of phenomena, from which ignorance, more than any thing else, terrible panics often arise ; finally, our characters will also be improved when we have learned what it is that nature craves. Then again if we grasp a firm knowledge of phenomena, and uphold that canon, which almost fell from heaven into

human ken, that test to which we are to bring all our judgments concerning things, we shall never succumb to any man's eloquence and abandon our opinions."]

6. **The first and most fundamental step in the Epicurean process of chain reasoning is the observation that nothing is ever created from nothing at the will of gods or through any other means.** From this observation, and from the related observation that nothing is ever destroyed to nothing, we conclude that at the heart of existence are eternal unchanging atoms moving through void, which allows us a fully sufficient explanation of the natural functioning of the universe that we observe around us, without need of supernatural or imaginary forces for which there is no evidence. [[Lucretius Book 1 and 2, Letter to Herodotus](#)] [Lucretius Book 1: "[146] These terrors of the mind, this darkness then, not the Sun's beams, nor the bright rays of day, can ever dispel, but Nature's light and reason, whose first of principles shall be my guide: **Nothing was by the Gods of nothing made.** For hence it is that fear disturbs the mind, that strange events in Earth and Heaven are seen, whose causes cannot appear by reason's eye, and then we say they were from Powers Divine. But when we rest convinced that nothing can arise from nothing, then the way is clear to our pursuit; we distinctly see whence every thing comes into being, and how things are formed, without the help and trouble of the Gods. If things proceed from nothing, every thing might spring from any thing, and want no seed; Men from the sea might first arise, and fish and birds break from the Earth, and herds and tender flocks drop from the sky, and every kind of beast, fixed to no certain place, might find a being in deserts or in cultivated fields.... Again, if things could spring from nought, what need of time for bodies to fulfill their growth by accession of new matter? An infant then might instantly become a youth, and trees start up in full perfection from the Earth. But 'tis not so, 'tis plain; for things, we know, grow by degrees from certain seeds, and still, as they grow, keep their kind; and thus you find each being rise into bulk, and thrives from seed and matter proper to itself."]
7. **This chain reasoning process continues from that point to allow us to conclude with confidence a number of crucial opinions, among the most important of which are: that the universe is eternal in time, that the universe is infinite in space, that nothing has an eternal unchanging existence except matter and void, that bodies are constantly changing and in the normal course of events do not remain together forever (thus the human soul does not survive death), and that the universe has no supernatural forces ruling over it.** [[Lucretius Book 1 and 2, Letter to Herodotus](#): "Having made these points clear, we must now consider things imperceptible to the senses. First of all, that nothing is created out of that which does not exist: for if it were, everything would be created out of everything with no need of seeds. [39] And again, if that which disappears were destroyed into that which did not exist, all things would have perished, since that into which they were dissolved would not exist. Furthermore, the universe always was such as it is now, and always will be the same. For there is nothing into which it changes: for outside the universe there is nothing which could come into it and bring about the change. Moreover, the universe is bodies and

space: for that bodies exist, sense itself witnesses in the experience of all men, and in accordance with the evidence of sense we must of necessity judge of the imperceptible by reasoning, as I have already said. [40] And if there were not that which we term void and place and intangible existence, bodies would have nowhere to exist and nothing through which to move, as they are seen to move. And besides these two, nothing can even be thought of either by conception or on the analogy of things conceivable such as could be grasped as whole existences and not spoken of as the accidents or properties of such existences."]

8. **These conclusions allow us to have confidence that there are no eternal forms or eternal essences on which any kind of absolute rules of human conduct (absolute notions of "virtue") can have any basis, and that the ultimate and only true basis of human conduct are the faculties given us by nature - the feelings of pleasure and pain.** [[Torquatus Narrative from On Ends](#), including as to *virtue*: "Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science, but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure." *And as to pleasure and pain*: "Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?"]
9. **Just as the senses alone are incapable of eliminating all fear of gods and death and unmanageable pain without proper (Epicurean) philosophy, it is necessary for us to employ proper Epicurean philosophy to determine when to choose pain or to avoid choosing a particular pleasure for the sake of achieving greater pleasure through that prudent selection.** [[Letter to Menoeceus](#): And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. [130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.' [Torquatus](#): "But I must explain to you how all

this mistaken idea of reprobating pleasure and extolling pain arose. To do so, I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure? On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided. But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains."]

10. **All of this is why we need Epicurean philosophy and why - because he was the first to identify this system through which we can free ourselves from false religions and false fears - Epicurus deserves to be seen as one of the greatest reformers and benefactors in human history.** [[Torquatus narrative in On Ends](#), including: "If then the doctrine I have set forth is clearer and more luminous than daylight itself; if it is derived entirely from Nature's source; if my whole discourse relies throughout for confirmation on the unbiased and unimpeachable evidence of the senses; if lisping infants, nay even dumb animals, prompted by Nature's teaching, almost find voice to proclaim that there is no welfare but pleasure, no hardship but pain—and their judgment in these matters is neither sophisticated nor biased—ought we not to feel the greatest gratitude to him who caught this utterance of Nature's voice, and grasped its import so firmly and so fully that he has guided all sane-minded men into the paths of peace and happiness, calmness and repose?" [Lucretius Book 1](#): "When human life, all too conspicuous, lay foully groveling on earth, weighed down by grim religion looming from the skies, horribly threatening mortal men, a man, a Greek, first raised his mortal eyes bravely against this menace. No report of gods, no lightning-flash, no thunder-peal made this man cower, but drove him all the more with passionate manliness of mind and will to be the first to spring the tight-barred gates of Nature's hold asunder. So his force, his vital

force of mind, a conqueror beyond the flaming ramparts of the world, explored the vast immensities of space with wit and wisdom, and came back to us triumphant, bringing news of what can be and what cannot, limits and boundaries, the borderline, the benchmark, set forever. Religion, so, is trampled underfoot, and by his victory we reach the stars."]

Note: As a reminder to myself if I update this I will also update the easier-to-find "article" version [here](#).

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 28, 2022 at 8:46 AM

Some ideas to summarize:

--We must understand the physical nature of the world as built on atoms which have always been in existence and were not created by a god.

--On the earth everything exists from previous physical causes and follows the laws of physics -- no supernatural explanations (and when a child can grasp this then they will understand there is no Santa Claus because Santa violates the natural laws of physics).

--The God Myth has something parallel, in that how could God keep track of every human being's prayers ([Joshua](#) did you recently say something about this and that some writer or philosopher said this?)

--We observe to see that things follow from the physical causes and follow the laws of physics. We have to judge other people's claims to these same standards.

A further question: How to deal with fake news? We have people who make claims but we can't observe with our senses, so then we have to find out for whom do they work for to see if they can be trusted -- which is why now there is this phrase: "trusted source". Also the people who are doing the "fact checking" -- we have to see who they are working for. So then the scientific method and its correct application is very important also -- but there are studies that show one thing, and then a year later another study says oh that was wrong. So then we will have to emphasize that certain things can't be taken to be absolutely true. And even the news that we read, it seems that we can't always take it to be absolutely true -- but this could be the beginning of the downfall of democracy, when you can't trust the news or the leaders who might be basing their statements on fake news.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 9:14 AM

I think this is covered by the texts (such as Alexander the Oracle monger) which discuss detecting fraud, and that gives us a lot to talk about. Extending this too far in terms of contemporary political issues will get us in trouble with our forum rules so I would advise against going that direction and instead stay on the generic level of how we detect imposition in general and how we deal with who should be trusted and who not, and related issues of bias and prejudice, at a general level. There's probably plenty to explore there without crossing swords on exactly who is a trusted source and on what topic in 2022. But in general even there the reasons why some will disagree (even here) on who should be trusted and who not can be explored dispassionately I think.

Not all who call out the name of Jesus are Christians, as the saying goes, and not all who speak in the name of "science" or "fairness" or "objectivity" can be trusted either. How do we make these distinctions? Is it purely or primarily or even partly a matter of consensus, or can in fact consensus be the enemy of truth, as Galileo might say? When do we know when to follow consensus and when not?

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 28, 2022 at 9:17 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

stay on the generic level of how we detect imposition in general and how we deal with who should be trusted and who not, and related issues of bias and prejudice, at a general level.

Is there a thread on that already?

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 9:18 AM

I don't think there is a specific one and that would be good to start

Post by “Joshua” of November 28, 2022 at 11:36 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

--The God Myth has something parallel, in that how could God keep track of every human being's prayers ([Joshua](#) did you recently say something about this and that some writer or philosopher said this?)

There is a reference in DeWitt to a quote from Menander along these lines, but by far the best example of this comes from Giordano Bruno. This is a passage from *The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt, and it is rather long:

Display Spoiler

During his stay in England, Bruno wrote and published a flood of strange works. The extraordinary daring of these works may be gauged by taking in the implications of a single passage from one of them, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, printed in 1584. The passage—quoted here in Ingrid D. Rowland's fine translation—is long, but its length is very much part of the point. Mercury, the herald of the gods, is recounting to Sofia all the things Jove has assigned him to bring about. He has ordered

that today at noon¹⁹ two of the melons in Father Franzino's melon patch will be perfectly ripe, but that they won't be picked until three days from now, when they will no longer be considered good to eat. He requests that at the same moment, on the jujube tree at the base of Monte Cicala in the house of Giovanni Bruno, thirty perfect jujubes will be picked, and he says that several shall fall to earth still green, and that fifteen shall be eaten by worms. That Vasta, wife of Albenzio Savolino, when she means to curl the hair at her temples, shall burn fifty-seven hairs for having let the curling iron get too hot, but she won't burn her scalp and hence shall not swear when she smells the stench, but shall endure it patiently. That from the dung of her ox two hundred and fifty-two dung beetles shall be born, of which fourteen shall be trampled and killed by Albenzio's foot, twenty-six shall die upside down, twenty-two shall live in a hole, eighty shall make a pilgrim's progress around the yard, forty-two shall retire to live under the stone by the door, sixteen shall roll their ball of dung wherever they please, and the rest shall scurry around at random.

This is by no means all that Mercury has to arrange.

Laurenza, when she combs her hair, shall lose seventeen hairs and break thirteen, and of these, ten shall grow back within three days and seven shall never grow back at all. Antonio Savolino's bitch shall conceive five puppies, of which three shall live out their natural lifespan and two shall be thrown away, and of these three the first shall resemble its mother, the second shall be mongrel, and the third shall partly resemble the father and partly resemble Polidoro's dog. In that moment a cuckoo shall be heard from La Starza, cuckooing twelve times, no more and no fewer, whereupon it shall leave and fly to the ruins of Castle Cicala for eleven minutes, and

then shall fly off to Scarvaita, and as for what happens next, we'll see to it later.

Mercury's work in this one tiny corner of a tiny corner of the Campagna is still not done.

That the skirt Mastro Danese is cutting on his board shall come out crooked. That twelve bedbugs shall leave the slats of Costantino's bed and head toward the pillow: seven large ones, four small, and one middlesized, and as for the one who shall survive until this evening's candlelight, we'll see to it. That fifteen minutes thereafter, because of the movement of her tongue, which she has passed over her palate four times, the old lady of Fiurulo shall lose the third right molar in her lower jaw, and it shall fall without blood and without pain, because that molar has been loose for seventeen months. That Ambrogio on the one hundred twelfth thrust shall finally have driven home his business with his wife, but shall not impregnate her this time, but rather another, using the sperm into which the cooked leek that he has just eaten with millet and wine sauce shall have been converted. Martinello's son is beginning to grow hair on his chest, and his voice is beginning to crack. That Paulino, when he bends over to pick up a broken needle, shall snap the red drawstring of his underpants....

Conjuring up in hallucinatory detail the hamlet where he was born, Bruno staged a philosophical farce, designed to show that divine providence, at least as popularly understood, is rubbish. The details were all deliberately trivial but the stakes were extremely high: to mock Jesus' claim that the hairs on one's head are all numbered risked provoking an unpleasant visit from the thought police. Religion was not a laughing matter, at least for the officials assigned to enforce orthodoxy. They did not treat even trivial jokes lightly. In France, a villager named Isambard was arrested for having exclaimed, when a friar announced after mass that he would say a few words about God, "The fewer the better."²⁰ In Spain, a tailor named Garcia Lopez, coming out of church just after the priest had announced the long schedule of services for the coming week, quipped that "When we were Jews,²¹ we were bored stiff by one Passover each year, and now each day seems to be a Passover and feast-day." Garcia Lopez was denounced to the Inquisition.

But Bruno was in England. Despite the vigorous efforts that Thomas More made, during his time as chancellor, to establish one, England had no Inquisition. Though it was still quite possible to get into serious trouble for unguarded speech, Bruno may have felt more at liberty to speak his mind, or, in this case, to indulge in raucous, wildly subversive laughter. That laughter had a philosophical point: once you take seriously the claim that God's providence extends to the fall of a sparrow and the number of hairs on your head, there is virtually no limit, from the agitated dust motes in a beam of sunlight to the planetary conjunctions that are occurring in the heavens above. "O Mercury," Sofia says pityingly. "You have a lot to do."

Sofia grasps that it would take billions of tongues to describe all that must happen even in a single moment in a tiny village in the Campagna. At this rate, no one could envy poor Jove. But then Mercury admits that the whole thing does not work that way: there is no artificer god standing outside the universe, barking commands, meting out rewards and punishments,

determining everything. The whole idea is absurd. There is an order in the universe, but it is one built into the nature of things, into the matter that composes everything, from stars to men to bedbugs. Nature is not an abstract capacity, but a generative mother, bringing forth everything that exists. We have, in other words, entered the Lucretian universe.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 1:30 PM

A few notes -

The idea that anyone can or should objectively *believe* a proposition - regardless of evidentiary confidence - **because** such belief will relieve anxiety is absurd. Such a “belief” would, at best, involve some cognitive dissonance (or at least some non-evidentiary notion of “belief” that would, I think, would allow anyone to believe anything willy-nilly - allowing any kind of religious cultism or conspiracy theories flying in the face of empirical evidence).

Now, I use the word “believe” (or “belief”) strictly to mean such things as: “It seems [or appears] to me that ...;” or “the [preponderance of] evidence indicates that ...;” and the like.

Subjective confidence, even when supported by a plethora of evidence is still not the same as objective (empirical) certainty - though a subjective attitude of confidence in the face of recognized objective uncertainty can be a psychological help in agency/action (ala in sports psychology).

And while absence of evidence might not be evidentiary proof of absence, repeated null findings can add to a reasonably secure confidence (think of supernatural, interventionist gods - or unicorns).

However, belief in something that is logically absurd is simply delusive. The opposite of “logical” (in the deductive sense) is not “false” but - absurd, incoherent, “gobbledygook.” (Hmm: once again I think of supernatural, interventionist gods ... But maybe I’m wrong. ☐)*

For some people, the very idea that they **could** be wrong is a source of anxiety. (I suspect that has a lot to do with a person’s experiences and pressures during their formative years - which can often be a kind of psychological conditioning than can be difficult to jettison, even if one realizes it is there.) And that can lead to a willingness to “believe” anything at all - and back to the first paragraph ...

And, to make a long story longer, the best we've got is the evidence of the senses and our best, evolving reasoning therefrom (and a due nod to prolepsis). And, for me personally, once I let go of a perceived need for certainty, a lot of prior anxiety fell away too.

~ ~ ~

* I always liked that quote by the detective Mr. Monk (from the TV series *Monk*) : "I could be wrong. ... But I don't think so."

Post by "Pacatus" of November 28, 2022 at 1:38 PM

I want to add that I'm not sure how keen our reasoning needs to be - but I don't think that Epicureanism is somehow reserved for the intellectual elite or experts in deductive and inductive logic. Nor do I think we need to trouble ourselves over our own perceived shortcomings in such regard. (I'm reminded of Philodemus rejection of the need for technical expertise - "techne" - in household management.)

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 2:22 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

And, for me personally, once I let go of a perceived need for certainty, a lot of prior anxiety fell away too.

I skimmed some of this but I don't think my comment here is a disagreement. Before *letting go of certainty" the question should be asked "what do we mean by certainty?" And is that the same as confidence. Much of the problem with "certainty" I think resolves when we dig into what is meant by that term and what reasonable to seek. There is a lot of distance between being confident in major issues vs being totally uncertain of everything, and it is hard to even talk intelligently about the subject without defining some parameters of what is confidence vs what is foolhardiness.

This also gets very close to the issue on which Licretius / Epicurus take a firm position as to the possibility of knowledge in book 4 (they of course say that knowledge IS possible).

Post by "Pacatus" of November 28, 2022 at 2:57 PM

Knowledge is usually defined as “justified, true belief.” That is, you 1) believe something (think it is so); 2) have good reason to think it is so (otherwise you're just guessing); and 3) it turns out to be true (factually confirmed).

Now, suppose I point and say: “That’s a maple tree.”

You ask: “Are you sure?”

Well, am I? Objectively? I’d say it depends on how close we are and how well we examine it.

[This is akin to the oft-cited “square tower / round tower” example.]

At some evidentiary point, I think it’s reasonable to claim certainty in such a case. My point about anxiety comes in when someone has some fear of being wrong – or even uncertain. I’ve encountered that, for example, among some Christians. [And I should add that there is some controversy among epistemologists about fallibilism versus infallibilism. I think the ancient Greeks thought of actual knowledge as being infallible. I tend to as well. But the question becomes, not is knowledge possible, per se, but is infallibility possible -- to know something infallibly (and a perhaps a stronger version?) do I infallibly know that my knowledge of some proposition is infallible? That is, am I infallibly certain about my own capacity for having infallibly certain knowledge? (That would border on a claim of omniscience, it seems to me).]



But that means that if (contrary to all expectation) it was somehow shown that there are gods that intervene in some way in our world, I would not be anxious about it (partly because I see most claims about supernatural gods to be logically absurd – so any such gods would have to be part of the nature of the cosmos, etc.). Just as I have no anxiety about idealism versus realism for the Epicurean view of the gods.

But we need to be careful about thinking the sheer number of observations can confirm to a probability of 1.0 the truth of a hypothesis – it only takes one (as yet unobserved) counter-observation to disconfirm it. (The “Black Swan” event.)

So, I guess my general viewpoint is to rest easy about such things – and don’t cling to a need for certainty: that does not always relieve anxiety. (I think sometimes we can cling to a need for too much precision as well.)

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 3:04 PM

After all that, my brain is creamed corn.



with knowledge possible. My guess is that infallible knowledge is logically possible
- but I don't claim to have any.

And I refuse to be anxious about it. (Chuckling as I say that.) 😄

EDIT: I may have overshoot your question, Cassius. I am using certainty in an objective empirical sense, not how "sure" someone is or feels subjectively. Confidence can include a subjective level of surety, or some objective statistical measure. I'm really using it in the former sense. (Don't know if that helps.)

Now, my brain really is creamed corn ...

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 3:35 PM

I don't think you have overshoot the question and I appreciate your engaging on it because I do think it needs to be discussed at length as part of Epicurean discussions. I don't think we ultimately disagree but I am pushing the envelope for purposes of clarifying the "skepticism vs dogmatism" issue and so we can work toward clarifying Epicurus' position in way that normal people can understand. And that will mean as future discussions proceed to try to foreswear use of terms such as "ontological certainty" or other "big words" that these discussions often involved, but that ordinary people can't understand.

I see the issue as revolving more around the issue of thinking that there is in fact a standard of "infallibility" that is derived from a theological viewpoint. I don't think that it is a contradiction to take both the position "I am certain sugar is sweet" and "there might be some context hitherto unknown to me in which sugar is not sweet." The issue comes down to "must I experience everything in the universe to be "certain" of anything? And the answer to that in all practical terms is "no."

Now maybe the issue comes down as it often does to the meaning of words, and someone wants to say "Only god can truly be certain of anything because only HE is omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent." If that is the definition of the word "certain" that is required to be used then the word is useless because such a being does not exist.

But in our real world we often use the word "certain" and "confident" to mean things that sound like "human certainty" without requiring omniscience and omnipotence and omnipresence. That too seems to me to be a legitimate use of vocabulary and something that Epicurus was in fact saying is a valid concept for humans to maintain about many things in life.

Are there in fact some people for whom it creates anxiety to think that they are not certain of everything in the godlike sense? Certainly there are, but those people are operating with an

invalid standard of what it can possibly mean to be certain as a human being, and as such they need to be disabused of their false notion of certainty - not disabused of the idea that there are in fact many things in life that they can be confident to the point of "certainty" about.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 3:51 PM

Here's another way of saying it:

If we run into people who say "I am washing in the blood of the lamb and therefore I am certain that I will spend an eternity in heaven...." it is not the concept of "certainty" that we should question, but the sanity of the person making such a statement! 😊

So I don't think we let the existence of people who misuse a legitimate concept such as "certainty" or "confidence" (both of which we need to be clear in defining) drive us away from using legitimate concepts. That's much the same way that Epicurus did not let supernatural religion drive him away from referring to "gods."

If we allow those things to happen we really do end up throwing the babies out with the bathwater.

And I don't mean to be demeaning even to the people who talk about being washed in the blood of the lamb. Many good people are confused or have been deceived through no real fault on their own, and the process of communicating with such people and hopefully improving such situations revolves around being able to explain when and when it is not appropriate to have confidence in things. "I don't know" is sometimes all we have, but it's not ALWAYS all we have.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 5:52 PM

I will take objective certainty as knowing some hypothesis to the probability of $P = 1.0$: it is logically or mathematically impossible to be wrong.

In deductive logic and pure mathematics I believe this is possible. But not in the empirical world.

The most an empirical investigator (say, a scientist) can achieve is **to fail to disprove** a given hypothesis **to some probability (objective confidence) < 1.0**.

Now, in our everyday walk-a-bout affairs – where we might question the shape of a distant tower, etc. – this doesn't matter much. Who cares? But if, say, you're doing medical research or calculating the safe orbit of a satellite – or trying to determine if the substratum of the universe is particles and space, or energy, or vibrating strings of some kind – then I think it does matter.

So, I would have to say, at bottom, empirical knowledge is fundamentally probabilistic – but that, like Newtonian physics versus quantum mechanics, it doesn't matter at certain levels of reality: i.e., the one we routinely live in. (Wittgenstein thought that we need to be able *to take certain things as certain* in order to rationally navigate our world.)

When someone says they are certain of something that they cannot objectively prove to a $P = 1.0$ (whether by observation or logical reasoning), what they are really saying is that **they are so sure that they see no reasonable possibility of doubt**. That is not the same as saying there is no – let alone can be no – such possibility.

For me, the question then becomes: Why would anyone suffer any anxiety or agitation about any of this?

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 6:11 PM

To follow up (and maybe simplify), here is what I call the “generalized empirical formula” –

$$y = \mathbf{f}(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n; u) : p$$

where:

y is the dependent variable.

f is some defined function.

x_n are the observed independent variables.

u represents unobserved/unconsidered variables (which may be unknown or unknowable).

p is some probability (e.g. a statistical confidence level).

As long as there is any u - or f is uncertain (e.g., there is more than one possible function describing the relationships) - p must be < 1 . Further, to know that $p = 1.0$, one would also have to know that there are no u - and that f is perfectly specified. I might call that an "infallibility condition."

This is drawn from statistics, but I think is not confined to statistical analysis.

Post by "Pacatus" of November 28, 2022 at 6:59 PM

I realize I might have been veering into Pyrrhonian territory here, and maybe should clarify -

The Pyrrhonians did not deny evidentiary or logical criteria for agency (decision/action) but for "truth." Again, I suspect that they - like the other Hellenists - took "truth" to mean objective (infallible?) certainty; and, for the Pyrrhonians, specifically truth about what was "non-evident" (non-observable).

Adrian Kuzminski (in his book *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* - the best comprehensive introduction to Pyrrhonism I've found) argues that reasonable inference from sense experience and observations (appearances) would also be perfectly acceptable from a Pyrrhonian perspective.

Unfortunately, **I think that the Pyrrhonians (i.e., Sextus Empiricus) simply misunderstood Epicurus.** But none of them had modern understandings of, say, inductive logic - and maybe Kuzminski's conclusion on inference is therefore a bit neo-Pyrrhonian. Epicurus, it seems to me, had a better grasp. But his expression is still (if often intuitively prescient) necessarily limited by the knowledge base available in his time.

Note: Although Sextus can be all over the place, it seems to me that a dyed-in-the-wool Pyrrhonian can't really deny the possibility of knowledge (that would be more in the bailiwick of the Academic Sceptics) - but would have to maintain agnosticism on the question.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 7:13 PM

Pacatus you are approaching this exactly the way I appreciate detailed scientist to do, and that analysis will help inform whatever conclusions need to be reached. I think you're saying this

yourself and therefore you won't take offense to note that this kind of approach is just totally beyond the reach of the "average man" who has need of guidance for living today - in the moment - and who will never be able to appreciate half of where you are coming from.

There is a segment of people who are into such calculations as you are discussing who will take the position: "Well the masses will never understand what I am talking about so they just need to listen to ME! 😊" That's an attitude that I think well describes most "priestly classes."

But I think the reason you and most of us are interested in Epicurus is because we recognize that real people need a real and effective approach by which to guide their lives, and implying to them that nothing can be reduced to a P=1.0 certainty is not relevant to their lives or thought processes. Many of them when faced with such a discussion will simply conclude that what is being asserted is that nothing is knowable and that they should just give up trying to make sense of anything -- which is to play into the hands of the aforesaid priestly class, whether they are priests of Yahweh or priests of "science."

So that leads back to the question of how to understand and appreciate Epicurus' perspective on this, which was apparently understood by the people of his time to be a combination of skeptical questioning of all claims of authority combined with a common sense attitude that certain decisions do have to be made with confidence, and that we do the best we can to make the best decisions we can without holding ourselves up to unrealistic expectations. What I perceive, and what I think Epicurus was also perceiving and saying, is that the pendulum can swing too far in the direction of skepticism leading to nihilism, and that it is necessary to articulate a common sense and usable approach to knowledge formation which allows for happy living.

So that seems to me to be the direction that these discussions need to proceed. By all means we take the input from all of the complicated abstractions to which we can gain access and on which we can draw upon, but that in the end we articulate an understandable technique for trusting the senses and making the everyday decisions with confidence that allow us to live happily -- rather than take the position of a Socrates and play games with the idea that we know nothing except that we know nothing.

Quote from Lucretius Book IV

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

Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards. And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before to lead him into such a knowledge) whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what it was that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty? But you will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us?

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

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

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

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 7:23 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I think you're saying this yourself and therefore you won't take offense to note that this kind of approach is just totally beyond the reach of the "average man" who has need of guidance for living today - in the moment - and who will never be able to appreciate half of where you are coming from.

There is a segment of people who are into such calculations as you are discussing who will take the position: "Well the masses will never understand what I am talking about so they just need to listen to ME! 😊" That's an attitude that I think well describes most "priestly classes."

Agreed entirely!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So that leads back to the question of how to understand and appreciate Epicurus' perspective on this, which was apparently understood by the people of his time to be a combination of skeptical questioning of all claims of authority combined with a common sense attitude that certain decisions do have to be made with confidence, and that we do the best we can to make the best decisions we can without holding ourselves up to unrealistic expectations. What I perceive, and what I think Epicurus was also perceiving and saying, is that the pendulum can swing too far in the direction of skepticism leading to nihilism, and that it is necessary to articulate a common sense and usable approach to knowledge formation which allows for happy living.

And with this as well!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So that seems to me to be the direction that these discussions need to proceed. By all means we take the input from all of the complicated abstractions to which we can gain access and on which we can draw upon, but that in the end we articulate an understandable technique for trusting the senses and making the everyday decisions with confidence that allow us to live happily -- rather than take the position of a Socrates and play games with the idea that we know nothing except that we know nothing.

Yes.

With regard to the Lucretius quote (and with the hope that [Don](#) might help with translations), I think maybe we would be well advised (today) to replace "certainty" with "reliance." What can we -- must we -- rely upon? And that, I think, Epicurus nailed (and, again, something that I suspect Sextus just misunderstood).

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 7:34 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And I don't mean to be demeaning even to the people who talk about being washed in the blood of the lamb.

Yes. Understood (and important).

I spent some months in a 12-Step program where many people identified their “higher power” in supernatural God terms. I would never express doubt (especially to them) that such a belief may have helped them achieve sobriety and serenity. There were also agnostic/atheist folks who might identify their “higher power” with something like Nature. In the group I was in, they just didn't engage in argument about such things – it wasn't the purpose.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 7:59 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

With regard to the Lucretius quote (and with the hope that Don might help with translations), I think maybe we would be well advised (today) to replace "certainty" with "reliance." What can we -- must we -- rely upon? And that, I think, Epicurus nailed (and, again, something that I suspect Sextus just misunderstood)

LOL! You know I'm always up for a good translation exercise, even in Latin. To which Lucretius quote are we referring?

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 8:03 PM

I think he is pointing to brown translation here:

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?

that would be around line 469

This is Bailey:

[469] 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?

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 8:07 PM

I think I understand and I do respect where you are coming from on "certainty" Pacatus. I think the question of wording has to depend on the audience we are addressing at a particular time, much as Don referenced in his recent post in this thread.

Due to the corruption of language there doesn't seem to be a way to get around the need to explain our terms pretty much no matter what term we use.

In this section of Lucretius there are no doubt various words that could be used to convey the intended meaning.....

But the anxiety that the skeptics will have with these formulations will always be present too, and I am afraid that is a problem that can be improved with explanations, but can't be addressed by using the same words with all audiences. And if the skeptics cling to a P=1.0 requirement for holding that there is no hell -- and no doubt some will! - then I am afraid they

are providing exactly the type of example of a self-limitation on happiness that Epicurus is warning against.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 10:38 PM

"You don't know there's no hell - and there's no way you can be certain - because you've never been there!"

Is that really a trump-card argument that should stymie an Epicurean into saying, "Well gee I guess you're right!" 😊

No I don't think so.

Nor is it sufficient as a general rule to say "We can never be sure of anything. Life is only a matter of probabilities." [Yes that's sufficient for those who are committed to be professional skeptics. I have to wonder how large a percentage of the world's population that is. I doubt it's 10% and it's probably a lot less.]

And if those aren't sufficient answers, and if Epicurean philosophy is open to and can be grasped by everyone who is of normal intelligence (as I think we all agree, which applies to everyone expect possibly very small children and those with true mental issues) then we have to be able to articulate an understandable theory of what it means to know something -- just as it appears the ancient Epicureans were doing in rebelling against Socrates/Plato and Pyrrho.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 10:39 PM

Caveat: My Latin knowledge (no pun intended) is slim to none, but I want to learn... so here goes.

Here is the pertinent section in English on Perseus (Leonard translation):

[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, BOOK IV, line 469](#)

Same section in Latin:

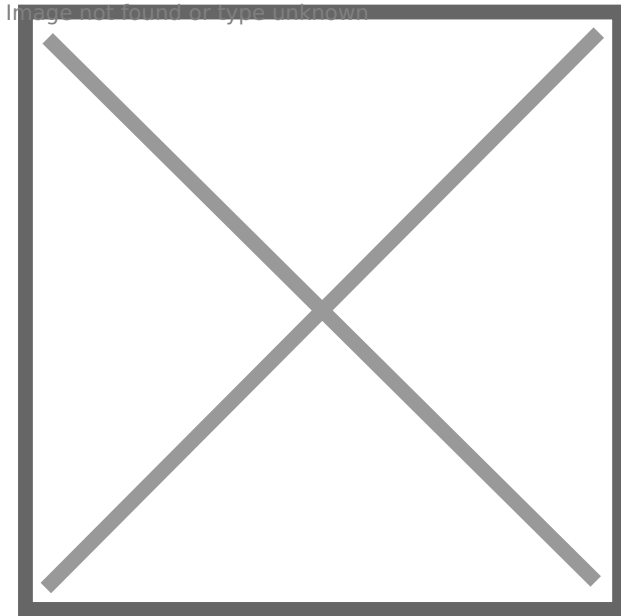
[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, Liber Quartus, line 469](#)

Pertinent word for knowing here is sciri. That's the word that is used throughout this section.

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, scĭo](#)

"In gen., to know, in the widest signif. of the word; to understand; perceive; to have knowledge of or skill in any thing, etc."

Here's a nice discussion on Stack Exchange on the difference between scio vs novi (and other "to know" verbs):



[What is the difference between "novi" and "scio"?](#)

Latin has at least two words that straightforwardly translate to English "know": novi (perf. of nosco) scio Plautus combines the two pleonastically: nec...

latin.stackexchange.com

Quote

This is quite a large question, to which a comprehensive answer is easily found in the more comprehensive dictionaries under Know, with copious examples. However, in direct answer, there certainly are meanings not shared between the two, which I will try to summarise, although it is worth pointing out that the differences in usage can be very slight.

Scio is the most general word, meaning that you have a certainty, or at least clearly perceive, some fact(s) or other. It is followed by the kinds of clause that you would expect: acc. + inf., de + abl., relative + subj., neuter pronoun, and so on. Its opposite nescio, ('not to know', 'be unaware/ignorant of' etc.) is used similarly. But scio (and

nescio) can also have the sense of 'know how to ...' (particularly where it refers to a skill) as in scio scribere, nescio aratro uti.

The simple idea behind 'not to know' is expressed by ignoro (this being possibly more definite than nescio, which can be qualified by, for example, a clause after quin). The opposite of ignoro is nosco, meaning 'am acquainted with', which is more usually seen in the perfect tenses, still giving a present sense in English. To claim a personal acquaintance, say, you might appropriately introduce yourself with te novi, or me no(ve)ris.

With, I think, a shade of meaning rather more active than that of simply learning (for which disco/didici or certior fieri is appropriate), the verb for the sense of 'getting to know' or 'finding out' is cognosco, most often in the perfect tenses to imply the knowledge for which scio in the present might sometimes be used equally well. Comperio is different again, with the sense of 'know for certain' or 'tried and tested by experience'; compertum habet = 'he knows without doubt'.

---- and ----

I would use novi (not scio) to mean to have met someone.

Notus is the participle of nosco and in a specific sense means acquaintance, friend (at least post-Classically, L&S only lists the plural noti in this sense). It seems to me that there is no parallel with scio for this meaning.

From the definitions, it seems that one can scire and noscere something, but only noscere someone.

I can find examples of novi+person, but none of scio+person without some deed by that person being the thing that is actually known.

Display More

As you can see, "knowing" is much more complicated than the English word would have us believe. The Romans split up the semantic field much finer when it came to knowledge it appears.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 10:42 PM

So for 'certain' we are talking "certo"?

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 10:46 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"You don't know there's no hell - and there's no way you can know - because you've never been there!"

Where would this place called Hell be? My senses tell me there is nothing but atoms and void , and nothing is created from that which does not already exist.

You say "You've never been there." Again, I would ask "Where would I go to visit this place?" My senses and experience and reason tell me that there is no immortal soul that exists after I am dead. You say this "Hell" is a place of punishment potentially for me and for those who do evil in the world. But if I do not exist after I die - and I see no evidence that I do - how can this Hell-place affect me? Even if it does exist, who dwells in it? Spirits without bodies? And if they have bodies, where do they stand? If they are Spirit, they can have no effect on me now, while I am alive. And once I'm dead, I no longer exist for them to have an affect on me. If you say I've never there, you would be correct, because, to my understanding of the universe, there is no "there" to go to.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 10:47 PM

Probably the Latin for this jab from Cicero in "On The Nature of the Gods" is also going to be relevant:

Hereupon Velleius began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus!

I will see if i can find the Latin.....

Here it is: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3Asection%3D18>

18] Tum Velleius fidenter sane, ut solent isti, nihil tam verens quam ne dubitare aliqua de re videretur, tamquam modo ex deorum concilio et ex Epicuri intermundiis descendisset, “Audite” inquit “non futilis commenticiasque sententias, non opificem aedificatoremque mundi Platonis de Timaeo deum, nec anum fatidicam Stoicorum Pronoeam, quam Latine licet Providentiam dicere, neque vero mundum ipsum animo et sensibus praeditum rutundum ardentem volubilem

deum, portenta et miracula non disserentium philosophorum sed somniantium.

Interlinear translation: <https://nodictionaries.com/novifex?text=1...et%2C+%E2%80%9C>

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 10:48 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So for 'certain' we are talking "certo"?

Yes.

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, certus](#)

determined, resolved, fixed, settled, purposed: non dubius.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 11:06 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Probably the Latin for this jab from Cicero in "On The Nature of the Gods" is also going to be relevant:

Hereupon Velleius began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus!

I will see if i can find the Latin.....

Here it is: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3Asection%3D18>

18] Tum Velleius fidenter sane, ut solent isti, nihil tam verens quam ne dubitare aliqua de re videretur, tamquam modo ex deorum concilio et ex Epicuri intermundiis

descendisset, "Audite" inquit "non futilis commenticiasque sententias, non opificem aedificatoremque mundi Platonis de Timaeo deum, nec anum fatidicam Stoicorum Pronoeam, quam Latine licet Providentiam dicere, neque vero mundum ipsum animo et sensibus praeditum rutundum ardentem volubilem deum, portenta et miracula non disserentium philosophorum sed somniantium.

Interlinear

translation:

<https://nodictionaries.com/novifex?text=1...et%2C+%E2%80%9C>

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[M. Tullius Cicero, de Natura Deorum, LIBER PRIMUS, section 18](#)

You beat me to it! 😊 Cross posted

Tum Velleius fidenter sane nihil tam verens quam ne dubitare aliqua de re videretur, tamquam modo ex deorum concilio et ex Epicuri intermundiis descendisset

Then Velleius confidently feared nothing so much as not to be seen to doubt about any matter, as if he had just descended from the council of the gods and from the interworlds of Epicurus.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2022 at 11:14 PM

And the youth might ask in reply: "And so, kind sir, are you telling me that all this adds up to your telling me that you are certain, and that you know, that there is no hell? Or are you trying to drown me in a sea of words and answer questions with questions and leave me unsatisfied like that gadfly Socrates?" 😊

[Quote from Don](#)

You say "You've never been there." Again, I would ask "Where would I go to visit this place?" My senses and experience and reason tell me that there is no immortal soul that exists after I am dead. You say this "Hell" is a place of punishment potentially for me and for those who do evil in the world. But if I do not exist after I die - and I see no evidence that I do - how can this Hell-place affect me? Even if it does exist, who dwells in it? Spirits without bodies? And if they have bodies, where do they stand? If they are Spirit, they can have no effect on me now, while I am alive. And once I'm dead, I no longer exist for them to have an affect on me. If you say I've never there, you would be correct, because, to my understanding of the universe, there is no "there" to go to.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 11:16 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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[Quote from Don](#)

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I would simply turn the question back to you and ask you to define your terms when we speak of Hell. Describe this place of which you obviously have some knowledge that I do not possess. Please, tell me from whence you came about your certainty and where I, too, can gain knowledge of this place. I wish to learn!

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 11:17 PM

We crossposted again and i added more:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Or are you trying to drown me in a sea of words and answer questions with questions and leave me unsatisfied like that gadfly Socrates?"

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2022 at 11:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And the youth might ask in reply: "And so, kind sir, are you telling me that all this adds up to your telling me that you are certain, and that you know, that there is no hell? Or are you trying to drown me in a sea of words and answer questions with questions and leave me unsatisfied like that gadfly Socrates?" 😊

Seriously though, if someone is going to ask me "Do you believe Hell exists?" I'd have to ask them what they mean by Hell. Not trying to be the jerk Socrates, but if they want to talk about Hell, what are they talking about and what gives them confidence that this place exists?

But if we're going to discuss it,...

Are we talking about an actual place of fire and brimstone inhabited by condemned souls existing after death in the Christian mythology?

I'd have to say that I have no reason to believe such a "place" exists in the universe other than in the context of Christian mythology. My experience of the universe demonstrates to me - to high degree of confidence - that there is no supernatural overlord - either benevolent or malicious - dealing out punishment. My experience also demonstrates to me that I am no more than my physical parts working in unison and out of that comes my consciousness. When I die, and my physical parts dissolve back into atoms and void, there's not going to be any thing - there will be no thing - which would or could be sent to a place like this Christian figment of the imagination.

Are we talking about a metaphorical concept of psychological punishment in the present? A "Hell on earth"? Okay, that's a more viable concept we can discuss.

And so on...

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2022 at 11:41 PM

It's interesting to think about what terms to talk in. When Don says:

[Quote from Don](#)

Are we talking about an actual place of fire and brimstone inhabited by condemned souls existing after death in the Christian mythology?

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.... most reasonable people (98%?) are going to interpret that as as clear answer, and they are going to say to themselves and to each other (when talking about Don).... "Don is certain hell does not exist / Don takes the position that he knows that hell does not exist."

We as people sensitive to philosophical niceties shy away from terms like "know" and "are certain" because we don't like the philosophical sparring that goes along with those terms in philosophical contexts, But I would wager that most of the world does not think like that. And borrowing the terminology from Seneca they are looking to us for answers that they can understand, not riddles where we seem like we are evading giving a direct answer for reasons they cannot understand.

I think that's where Epicurus was willing to go considerably further than people in modern philosophical discussions are willing to go. He was standing up to Pyrrho and Socrates and he was willing to directly assert that it is possible to have confidence in knowledge and to say that indeed there are things that you "know" to be true -- even though you haven't been there or seen it for yourself. (When we think Epicurean confidence in atoms - which the Epicureans never saw or touched - it's kind of funny to be even having this discussion about taking firm positions on things we can't sense directly. Of course Epicureans were confident about things they had never experienced - and could never experience - except through indirect evidence!)

We're talking here in this thread in the abstract, and not about particular conversations with particular people. The context is going to determine the best wording. But the point of this thread, and the real point of the epicurean manner of argument it seems to me, is that it is possible to have confidence in the core conclusions of Epicurus and for Epicureans to say that they "know" that pleasure and pain are the ultimate guides, that there is no life after death, etc. etc. And in the proper context, even to say to ourselves or to other people that we are "certain" of them.

Post by “Don” of November 29, 2022 at 8:18 AM

So, are you saying my response is too Socratic? To be more Epicurean someone should just say "I'm certain Hell doesn't exist"?

I suppose you could state that out of the gate then give reasons for it.

However, the question itself is nonsensical within an Epicurean worldview since Epicurus firmly stands on the conviction that "[Death is nothing to us](#)" since we are only this arrangement of atoms and void. We are material beings. Even if "Hell" existed, there could be no one - no things - to populate it. The concept of Christian Hell is built on a faulty foundation.

Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2022 at 9:42 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I suppose you could state that out of the gate then give reasons for it.

Yes I think that's generally the best way. Try to make a clear statement, and then explain it, rather than go from question to question to question as Socrates does in the Platonic dialogues.

I think partly I am analyzing this as a lawyer, where the rules of court generally are that the judge will sometimes tell the witness (when the question is appropriate) to "Answer yes or no, and then you can explain your answer...."

And partly I am trying to analyze this from an "ordinary person" standard, which is where we generally want to be proficient in talking (as opposed to talking within professional philosophy settings). We can't help normal people if they can't understand what we are talking about.

It's not a question of being more or less accurate, because it's possible to state the issue in understandable terms, as Lucretius does in Book 4. Or as Diogenes of Oinoanda does when he says that we admit that there is a flux, but it is no so fast that we are not able to comprehend it. Maybe the issue is one of "rhetoric" but that's another example of a word which has connotations that have overcome the word's usefulness.

It's certainly possible to debate the question of knowledge into oblivion, but I think Epicurus has his finger on a very practical problem. The "priests" succeed in their manipulations in many cases precisely because they have convinced normal people that the questions and answers are too complicated for them to understand. The only way out of that box is to begin to unwind the issues involved in what "understanding" is in the first place so that people can "resist the threats of the priests."

Quote from Diogenes of Oinoanda

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

I've always liked this phrase in particular: "After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?"

The goal of the priests is to discourage people from even questioning them, and they succeed when they convince people that no answers and no knowledge is even possible. If you can never know anything, never be sure of anything, never be certain of anything - then why bother questioning authority in the first place?

Post by "Don" of November 29, 2022 at 10:25 AM

Question:

How does this conversation about certainty and "knowing" connect to the Epicurean position of waiting for evidence in matters with multiple potential, feasible causes?

Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2022 at 10:39 AM

Connects directly and in fascinating ways we need to explore! If the glove doesn't fit you must acquit!

We have to be able to identify when the evidence supports multiple causes, and when it supports only a single conclusion.

That seems to be directly the issue in [PD24](#), which by reason of its inclusions in the doctrines indicates how important this issue was to Epicurus:

[PD24](#). 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.

It's definitely not easy to articulate this since we've been acclimated to the skeptical position that nothing is knowable, but it does all fit together when you think about it. You have to firmly identify in your mind the method, realize that you're not omniscient and this is the only real standard you have, and then not get shaken by arguments like "You can't be sure because you haven't been there."

I was thinking a few minutes ago, that's EXACTLY the implication in Cicero's jab at Velleius -- he's saying that since Velleius had NOT just come down from the Epicurean intermundia, he shouldn't be taking any firm positions on it.

Unless we firmly identify the fallacy in thinking that "you haven't been there so you don't know" invalidates every claim of knowledge, we never get anywhere.

I have never stuck my head in an oven and turned on the gas and lit a match but i am CERTAIN that that is not something that will benefit me from doing. And no amount of "you don't know because you haven't done it" will shake my confidence in that conclusion.

Post by "Cassius" of November 29, 2022 at 11:13 AM

My OJ Simpson crack seems relevant too. In criminal law there's the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard of proof, which is cryptically unwound to mean "a doubt for which you can give

a reason."

On the other hand civil courts use the "preponderance of the evidence" or "more likely than not" standard.

And there's a lot of theory behind why one standard is appropriate in one context versus another, with "the need for finality" coming into play as maybe the ultimate reasoning behind having any standard at all.

So these are complicated issues but we deal with them every day and it makes sense to make it as clear as possible so that we can "affirm that which does not await confirmation" which maybe seems to be Epicurus' terminology.

Obviously we should wait before affirming a thing to be true when the evidence is inconclusive, and that's the part we are all comfortable with today.

But the rest of the story is that if we don't have good reason to wait before affirming an opinion to be true, then we shouldn't wait, seems to be the idea, especially when the issue is something important (supernatural gods, hell, heaven) which will have a direct impact on our enjoyment of life if we don't take a position.