Epicurus On Causation

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 11:13 AM

Only time at the moment to connect a couple of references that relate to Epicurus views on causation and what (if anything) is "causless," which relates to attacks that some make against Epicurus when they allege that the swerve, being "uncaused," is ruled out of court.

Below is a Ciceronian discussion of Epicurus' views. I would suggest at some point we compare this to the way Frances Wright discusses Epicurus' view (responds to this argument?) in A Few Days In Athens:

a cause when without it the effect could not have happened, but when by its specific action it necessarily produces the effect caused. Before the wound of the serpent who bit Philoctetes changed into an ulcer, what reason was there in the nature of things why the Greeks should leave this hero in the isle of Lemnos? Afterwards this cause existed, and in much closer connexion with the event—and the event itself declared and manifested the cause. Reason, therefore, points out the cause of the event. But from all eternity this proposition was true, "Philoctetes shall be left in an island," nor could it be altered into a false one. For two contrary propositions (when I say contrary, I mean such that one affirms a thing, and the other denies it) which oppose each other can never stand together, for, in spite of Epicurus, one must be true and one false. Thus this proposition, "Philoctetes shall be wounded," was true before all ages; and the contrary, "He shall not be wounded," was false; unless, indeed, we adopt the opinion of the Epicureans, who affirm that such propositions are neither true nor false, or, when they are ashamed of that,

utter that still more impudent assertion, that disjunctive propositions composed of two contradictions are true, though neither of their component parts is true. Oh, marvellous licentiousness and miserable ignorance of logic! If anything in speech is so indifferent as to appear neither true nor false, that is certainly not true. That which is not true must of necessity be false, and that which is not false must be true. We must, therefore, maintain that doctrine which Chrysippus has proved, namely, that every proposition is either true or false. Reason itself will oblige us to grant, that there are things which are true from all eternity, that these things are not bound to eternal causes of necessity, and that they are free from the compulsion of fate.

XVII. It appears, indeed, to me, since the ancient philoso-

examine the question concerning fate, and not rush with Epicurus to a fortuitous concourse of atoms to help us out of our difficulty. Every atom has a motion of its own, says he. In the first place, why is it so? It possesses a peculiar energy; that force, for example, of Democritus, which this philosopher terms an impulse, and which Epicurus calls gravity or weight. But you have not yet discovered that primitive power in nature from which your atoms derive their motion. Do they cast lots with one another which shall move this way and which that way? If they can thus move through small spaces, they may move through great ones, and the spaces of their movements may be multiplied to infinity. To make such assertions as these, is rather to beg the question than to discuss it. You have not yet revealed to us any extrinsic cause which impresses each atom with that impulse which gives it its proper direction. In the empty space which your atom occupies, I see nothing to prevent it from precipitating itself for ever in a perpendicular line; and in the atom itself I discover no quality which can counteract its specific gravity, or rescue it from falling. However, though Epicurus refuses to assign any cause for his atomic motion, he thinks he has started a very noble theory, when he has thrown out that sophism, which all men of sense despise and reject. Nor do I think it possible for any one to give greater support to the arguments of fate and necessity and universal compulsion, or more completely to deprive the soul of all freedom of volition, than Epicurus has done, when he confesses that he could never otherwise have resisted fate if he had not taken refuge in these imaginary declinations. For even though there were such things as atoms, which he can never prove to me, those declinations could never be explained. For if these atoms are moved and agitated by their specific gravity according to the necessity of nature, since it is the law of all heavy bodies to move and proceed till they meet some opposing obstacle, this also follows inevitably, that these atoms, some, if not all of them. . . . . .

Post by “Cassius” of May 18, 2024 at 12:09 PM

As indicated I would suggest comparing that excerpt from Cicero to Chapter 15 of A Few Days In Athens.

“But is not the existence of a first or creating cause demonstrated to our senses by all we see, and hear, and feel?”

“The existence of all that we see and hear and feel is demonstrated to our senses; and the belief we yield to this existence is immediate and irresistible, that is, intuitive. —The existence of the creating cause, that you speak of, is not demonstrated to our senses; and therefore the belief in it cannot be immediate and irresistible. I prefer the expression “creating” to “first” cause, because it seems to present a more intelligible meaning. When you shall have examined farther into the phenomena of nature, you will see, that there can be as little a first as a last cause.”

“But there must be always a cause, producing an effect.”

“Certainly; and so your cause, — creating all that we see and hear and feel — must itself have a producing cause, otherwise you are in the same difficulty as before.”

“I suppose it a Being unchangeable and eternal, itself unproduced, and producing all things.”

“Unchangeable it *may* be, — eternal it *must* be — since every thing is eternal.”

“Every thing eternal?”

“Yes; that is, the elements composing all substances are, so far as we know and can reason, eternal, and in their nature unchangeable; and it is apparently only the different disposition of these eternal and unchangeable atoms that produces all the varieties in the substances constituting the great material whole, of which we form a part. Those particles, whose peculiar agglomeration or arrangement, we call a vegetable to-day, pass into, and form part of an animal to-morrow; and that animal again, by the falling asunder of its constituent atoms, and the different approximation and agglomeration of the same, — or, of the same with other atoms, — is transformed into some other substance presenting a new assemblage of qualities. 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. To see things as they are, is all we should attempt, and is all that is possible to be done. Unfortunately, we can do but little even here, as our eyes serve us to see but a very little way. But, were our eyes better — were they so good as to enable us to observe all the arcana of matter, we could never acquire any other knowledge of them, than that they are as they are; — and, in knowing this, that is, in seeing every link in the chain of occurrences, we should know all that even an omniscient being could know. One astronomer traces the course of the sun round the earth, another imagines that of the earth round the sun. Some future improvements in science may enable us to ascertain which conjecture is the true one. We shall then have ascertained a fact, which fact may lead to the discovery of other facts, and so on. Until this plain and simple view of the nature of all science be generally received, all the advances we may make in it are comparatively as nothing. Until we occupy ourselves in

examining, observing, and ascertaining, and not in *explaining*, we are idly and childishly employed. — With every truth we may discover we shall mix a thousand errors; and, for one matter of fact, we shall charge our brain with a thousand fancies. To this leading misconception of the real, and only possible object of philosophical inquiry, I incline to attribute all the modes and forms of human superstition. The vague idea that some mysterious cause not merely *precedes* but *produces* the effect we behold, occasions us to wander from the real object in search of an imaginary one. We see the sun rise in the east: instead of confining our curiosity to the discovery of the time and manner of its rising, and of its course in the heavens, we ask also — *why* does it rise? What *makes* it move? The more ignorant immediately conceive some Being spurring it through the heavens, with fiery steeds, on wheels of gold, while the more learned tell us of laws of motion, decreed by an almighty fiat, and sustained by an almighty will. Imagine the truth of both suppositions: in the one case, we should see the application of what we call physical power in the driver and the steeds followed by the motion of the sun, and in the other, an almighty volition followed by the motion of the sun. But, in either case, should we understand *why* the sun moved? — *why* or *how* its motion followed what we call the impulse of the propelling power, or the propelling volition? All that we could *then* know, more than we *now* know, would be, that the occurrence of the motion of the sun was preceded by another occurrence; and if we afterwards frequently observed the same sequence of occurrences, they would become associated in our mind as necessary precedent and consequent — as cause and effect: and we might give to them the appellation of law of nature, or any other appellation; but they would still constitute merely a truth — that is a *fact*, and envelope no other mystery, than that involved in every occurrence and every existence."

"But, according to this doctrine," said Theon, "there would be no less reason in attributing the beautiful arrangement of the material world to the motion of a horse, than to the volition of an almighty mind."

"If I saw the motion of a horse followed by the effect you speak of, I should believe in some relation between them; and if I saw it follow the volition of an almighty mind —the same."

"But the cause would be inadequate to the effect."

"It could not be so, if it were the cause. For what constitutes the adequacy of which you speak? Clearly only the contact, or immediate proximity of the two occurrences. If any sequence could in fact be more wonderful than another, it should rather seem to be for the consequent to impart grandeur to the precedent — the effect to the cause, — than for the cause to impart grandeur to the effect. But in reality all sequences are equally wonderful. That light should follow the appearance of the sun, is just as wonderful, and no more so, as if it were to follow the appearance of any other body — and did light follow the appearance of a black stone it would excite astonishment simply because we never saw light follow such an appearance before. Accustomed, as we now are, to see light when the sunrises, our wonder would be, if we did not see light when he rose : but were light regularly to attend the appearance of any other body, our wonder at such a sequence would, after a time, cease; and we should then say, as we now

say, there is a light *because* such a body has risen; and imagine *then*, as we imagine *now*, that we understand why *light* is."

"In like manner all existences are equally wonderful. An African lion is in himself nothing more extraordinary than a Grecian horse; although the whole people of Athens will assemble to gaze on the lion, and exclaim how wonderful! while no man observes the horse."

"True — but this is the wondering of ignorance."

"I reply — true again, but so is all wondering. If, indeed, we should consider it in this and in all other cases as simply an emotion of pleasurable surprise, acknowledging the presence of a novel object, the feeling is perfectly rational; but if it imagine anything more intrinsically marvelous in the novel existence, than in the familiar one, it is then clearly the idle — that is, the unreasoned and unreflecting marveling of ignorance. There is but one real wonder to the thinking mind: it is the existence of all things; that is the existence of matter. And the only rational ground of this one great wonder is, that the existence of matter is the last link in the chain of cause and effect at which we can arrive. You imagine yet another link — the existence of a power creating that matter. — My only objections to this additional link, or superadded cause, are, that it is *imagined*, and that it leaves the wonder as before; unless, indeed, we should say that it has superadded other wonders, since it supposes a power, or rather, an existence possessing a power, of which we never saw an example."

"How so? Does not even man possess a species of creating power? And do you not suppose, in your inert matter, that very property which others attribute, with more reason it appears to me, to some superior and unknown existence?'"

"By no means. No existence, that we know of, possesses creating power, in the sense you suppose. Neither the existence we call a man, nor any other of the existences comprised under the generic names of matter, physical world, nature, &c., possesses the power of calling into being its own constituent elements, nor the constituent elements of any other substance. It can change one substance into another substance, by altering the position of its particles, or intermingling them with others: but it cannot call into being, any more than it can annihilate, those particles themselves. The hand of man causes to approach particles of earth and of water, and, by their approximation produces clay; to which clay it gives a regular form, and, by the application of fire, produces the vessel we call a vase. You may say that the hand of man creates the vase, but it does not create the earth, or the water, or the fire; neither has the admixture of these substances added to, or subtracted from, the sum of their elementary atoms. Observe, therefore, there is no analogy between the power inherent in matter, of changing its appearance and qualities, by a simple change in the position of its particles, and that which you attribute to some unseen existence, who by a simple volition, should have called into being matter itself, with all its wonderful properties. An existence possessing such a power I have never seen; and though this says nothing against the possibility of such an existence, it says every thing against *my belief* in it. And farther, the power which you attribute to this existence — that of willing every thing out of nothing, — being, not only what I have never

seen, but that of which I cannot with any distinctness conceive — it must appear to me the greatest of all improbabilities."

Post by "Pacatus" of May 26, 2024 at 4:54 PM

> Quote from Cassius
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This reminds me of how I think Pyrrhonists and Epicureans (both ancient and modern) seem to often talk past one another (not to say there aren't significant differences: they seem to have different understandings of "dogma" – and perhaps of "truth," with the Pyrrhonists perhaps holding to what would now be called an "infallibist" version: that is, to claim to know truth about how the reality "really is," one is claiming objective certainty – which a Pyrrhonist would say one cannot have about "non-evident" matters, even as one accepts inductive inference as the best guide we may have for agency – including further investigation). Epicurus' position in the quote would I think be perfectly acceptable to a modern Pyrrhonist like Adrian Kuzminski (P*yrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*). Here is a debate between two modern advocates of each camp:

In Defense of Dogmatism
The following is the continuation of the book review of Pyrrho's Way: The Ancient Greek Version of Buddhism, by Doug Bates. The first part of the review is...
theautarkist.wordpress.com

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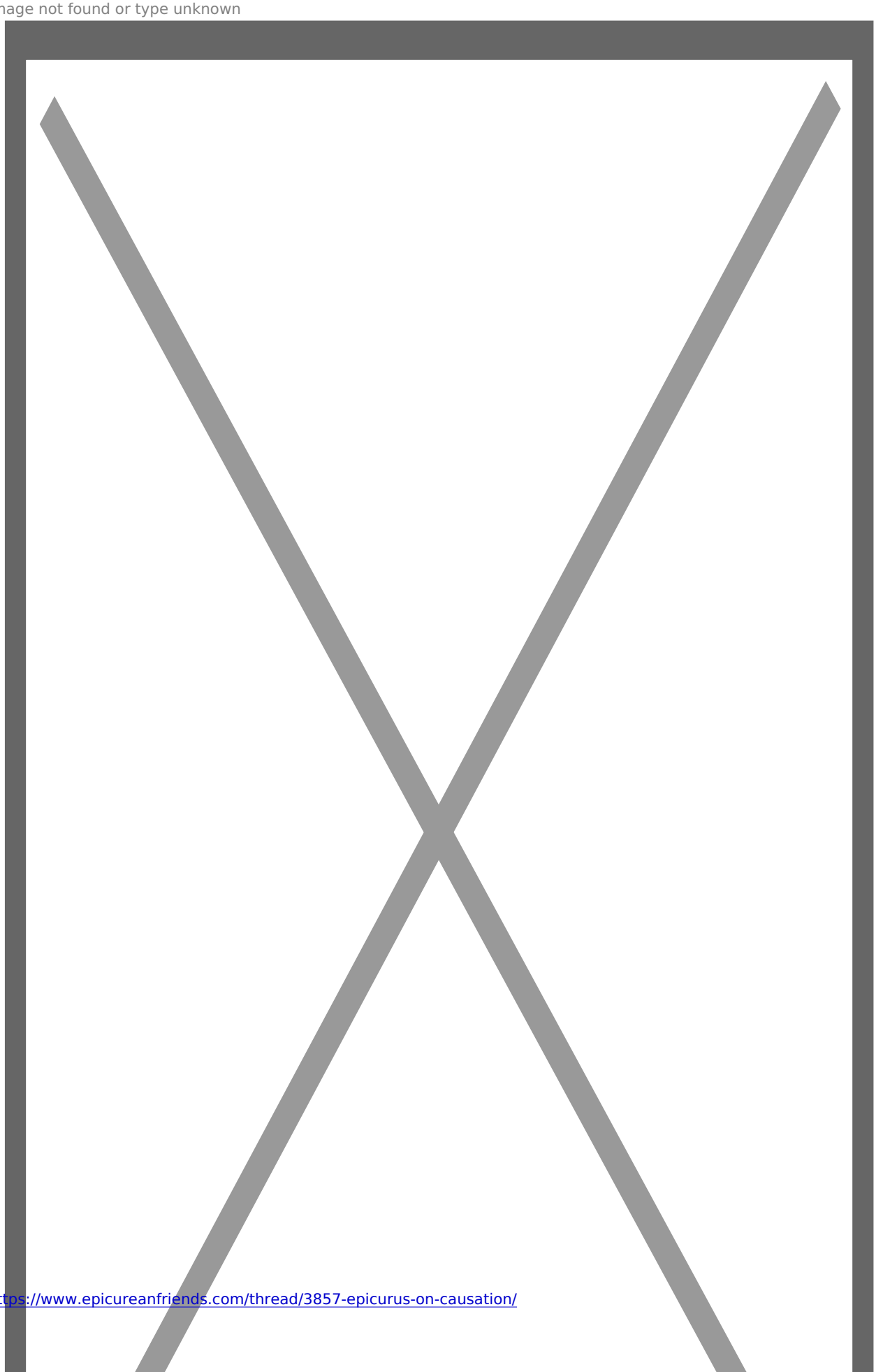

Epicureanism Versus Pyrrhonism

Comparisons between any two philosophies typically focus on their differences. This article will instead focus on similarities. In...

pyrrhonism.medium.com

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Note: It also reminds me of Hume's skepticism about causality (perceived correlation versus actual cause) – but I think he might have done well to draw on Epicurus' early (original?) views on the possibility of any effect having multiple causes (causal over-determination), e.g. in the *Letter to Phytocles*.

http://www.academyofathens.gr/static/philosophy/Abstract-Handout_Tsouna_010421.pdf