Epicureanism and Scientism: What are the main differences?

Post by “Titus” of July 22, 2024 at 11:47 AM

We are convinced that Epicurus' philosophy is probably the most realistic approach to life and the one most closely orientated to human needs.

As we know, it allows for numerous interpretations, but conversely also assumes generalities and generalisations.

Epicurus' philosophy is very strongly orientated towards the correct perception and interpretation of our environment and derives the guidelines of ethics from this: Could we also speak of Scientism here? Where do we draw the dividing line? Is the main difference that scientist-scientists use science as a rhetorical tool to realise their goals, as it has become common in debates to underpin everything ‘scientifically’ with research and statistics?

Ultimately, at first glance, Scientism does not seem so far removed from Epicurus' way of thinking of deducing everything from nature and observations. But do scientist-scientists simply lack the right telos and overall understanding of human existence?

What do you think?

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Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2024 at 1:03 PM

> Quote from Titus
>
> Could we also speak of Scientism here? Where do we draw the dividing line? Is the main difference that scientist-scientists use science as a rhetorical tool to realise their goals, as it has become common in debates to underpin everything ‘scientifically’ with research and statistics?

Titus --

My first response would be to point out the reason that you are asking the question -- No one really has a clear definition of what "Scientism" means, any more than anyone can give a precise answer to what "Humanism" means.

Unlike with Epicurus, which we can trace back more or less accurately to the writings of a single group of people, "Scientism" is an attitude that has no clear definition. If someone suggestions that a particular doctrine is or ought to be considered a part of Epicurean philosophy, they can compare that assertion to the preserved doctrines of Epicurus and make their own determination of whether Epicurus would have agreed.

But the Epicureans did not call their philosophy "hedonism" or "pleasure-ism," not did they call it "canonicsism" or "empiricism." They were aware that they were teaching an entire world-view of which adherence to the authority of the senses is critical, and which deduces that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life, and in which "virtue" is important, but they likewise denounced "placing the cart before the horse" and elevating virtue or reason or any other "tool" above the ultimate conclusions of the philosophic approach.

So from that point of view I would assert that we need to apply all of the cautions that Epicurus applied to "virtue," and even to the feeling of pleasure in that we do not always choose what is immediately pleasurable, to emphasize the point that every time we elevate a tool -- even such important tools as pleasure and friendship" into the place of the ultimate conclusions, then we are ignoring the thrust of Epicurean philosophy. To elevate "science" as an end in itself would be as wrong as elevating "reason" or "logic" or "friendship" or "wisdom" as ends in themselves, which Epicurus clearly warned against doing.

And to the extent it is possible to make any sense of the words "Scientism" or "Humanism," that's exactly what those terms are doing -- setting up a standard which Epicurean philosophy would clearly hold to be false.

Post by “Martin” of July 22, 2024 at 1:04 PM

After first reading of Cassius' comment, I agree with him but have the following to add:
Epicurus' philosophy is not Scientism because in Scientism, the scientific method is the only method to produce meaningful/"true"/reliable knowledge of the world.
Whereas the formation of preconceptions from sensations may be interpreted as a precursor of science, the feelings as another leg of the Epicurean canon go much further than the narrow scope of science.
Adherents of Scientism do use science as their only tool and usually do that properly and usually not as a rhetorical tool. They differ from people with other worldviews in that they do not accept other sources of knowledge.

Underpinning arguments ‘scientifically’ with research and statistics is the proper way to conduct debates on topics which are inherently within the scope of science. Trying that for aspects which are out of the scope of science is sometimes called Scientism, too, but the people who apply science out of its scope are usually not scientists because scientists usually know the limits of their profession.
Epicureans use scientific knowledge to get rid of beliefs in supernatural gods and the afterlife and and other superstitions, and to make prudent decisions on which options for goals are feasible and which actions are effective but within that scope of wise choices, they use pleasure and not science to set there goals and decide on actions. Most of the ethics of Epicurus is based on pleasure as the goal. E.g., the Epicurean emphasis on friendship comes from pleasure as the goal and not from science.
To answer whether an adherent of Scientism lacks the right telos and overall understanding of human existence, we would need to pick specific people and answer the question for each individual.

Post by “Cassius” of July 22, 2024 at 1:05 PM

Good question Titus and good answer Martin.

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 22, 2024 at 7:40 PM

Just for fun here is a wikipedia entry on "Scientism":

Scientism - Wikipedia

Post by “Titus” of July 23, 2024 at 1:16 PM

> Quote from Martin
>
> Trying that for aspects which are out of the scope of science is sometimes called Scientism, too, but the people who apply science out of its scope are usually not

> scientists because scientists usually know the limits of their profession.

This is a key point I think, of what I would call "Scientism of the streets" and this is also what comes in my mind when talking about "Scientism". But I think there is discrepancy in the original Scientism too, but because you can argue with one hypothesis this year and with another one a few years later, argumenting the results have changed. But perhaps just your opinions have and you changed the way you constructed your research.

> Quote from Martin
>
> To answer whether an adherent of Scientism lacks the right telos and overall understanding of human existence, we would need to pick specific people and answer the question for each individual.

It seems the devil is in the details, especially when talking about something so difficult to grasp like "Scientism". I just find it interstesting, because many people of today argument with science as the backbone of there argumentation.

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2024 at 1:27 PM

Yes, it would be easier if there were actually a philosopher or scientist who said "I am am advocate of "Scientism" and this is what it means.

As it is (or at least as i understand it) nobody actually advocates such a position. But the phenomena of how to deal with assertions of what "is" and what "is not" science, and and under what circumstances it is appropriate to say "Science says...." and the proper attitude toward "science" as a concept has apparently led to the issue being widely accepted as a real topic to discuss. Again, to some extent it appears to me to be parallel to "Humanism," but in the case of "Humanism" you do have people who embrace the term and apply it to themselves, so at least in their cases you sometimes have a specific set of ideas to analyze and accept or reject.

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 23, 2024 at 5:06 PM

There is Epicurus and his canonics...and wondering if there is a name or label for the part which says to be sure you are bringing up multiple hypothoses and do not settle too quickly onto one

explanation for causes of phenomenon? (Cassius ?)

Seems like it might be good to also compare Epicurus to science. And also to be clear about pseudoscience.

So we can study the extant texts of Epicurus, but we live now in modern times, so we have a much more evolved understanding of the world.

Being clear what is good science, what is scientism, and what is pseudoscience ...being clear on these would be good for the modern Epicurean ...so that we can be certain about things and not ambivalent/skeptical about the world that we now live in.

Post by “Martin” of July 24, 2024 at 1:29 AM

> Quote
>
> Yes, it would be easier if there were actually a philosopher or scientist who said "I am am advocate of "Scientism" and this is what it means.
>
> As it is (or at least as i understand it) nobody actually advocates such a position.

There are quite a few people who habe been labelled advocates of Scientism by others or themselves, e.g.:
Auguste Comte (positivist philosopher, apparently without using the term "Scientism")
Peter Atkins (reported to have asserted the “universal competence” of science in his essay “Science as Truth”, 1995)
James Ladyman, Don Ross, and David Spurrett (reportedly in their book "Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized", 2007)
Alex Rosenberg
Don Ross

Post by “Little Rocker” of July 24, 2024 at 9:48 AM

> Quote from Martin

> Whereas the formation of preconceptions from sensations may be interpreted as a precursor of science, the feelings as another leg of the Epicurean canon go much further than the narrow scope of science.

This seems right to me. Martin mentioned Rosenberg (and I might add Paul and Patricia Churchland), and one of their key theses is 'eliminativism' about mental states. I have heard Rosenberg say we should dispense with 'feeling' language altogether.

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> There is Epicurus and his canonics...and wondering if there is a name or label for the part which says to be sure you are bringing up multiple hypothoses and do not settle too quickly onto one explanation for causes of phenomenon?

I've seen this just called 'Epicurean multiple explanation' or treated as the 'Doctrine of Multiple Explanation.' And it seems super relevant to what Martin wrote earlier.

I was reminded of a passage I read recently about Epicurus' indifference to finding the right explanation. Actually it seems like more than indifference--he actually recommends not getting invested in finding the actual explanation.

> Quote
>
> 'The ethical and epistemological turn in Epicureanism has the curious effect that what has appeared to many modern commentators to be the most materialistic and least teleological of ancient philosophies (in short, the most scientific) represents at the same time a deliberate turning away from examination, experiment. and the elimination of competing hypotheses for astronomical, cosmological, and meteorological phenomena' (Lehoux).

Post by “Cassius” of July 24, 2024 at 10:36 AM

> Quote from Little Rocker
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> I was reminded of a passage I read recently about Epicurus' indifference to finding the right explanation. Actually it seems like more than indifference--he actually recommends not getting invested in finding the actual explanation.

Would you not add the important caveat that he would recommend not getting invested in finding "the" actual explanation *when you know in advance that that isn't going to be possible due to the lack of evidence?*

It seems to me that this from the letter to Pythocles pretty clearly delineates the times when we *do* want to be dogmatic (when we have sufficient information from things on earth that show us clearly how to live) from the times when we *don't* want to be dogmatic, and the difference seems pretty clearly based on the availability of evidence:

> Quote from Letter to Pythocles
>
> [86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that ‘the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,’ or that ‘the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.
>
> [87] For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.
>
> Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth. Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.

It would be pretty easy to conclude from thinking that Epicurus didn't *care* about knowing the right answer to reaching some dramatic conclusions about being right and wrong that would seem to me to go far astray from the general tenor of his attention to detail in the whole philosophy.

Post by “Little Rocker” of July 24, 2024 at 11:54 AM

> Quote from Cassius
>
> Would you not add the important caveat that he would recommend not getting invested in finding "the" actual explanation when you know in advance that that isn't going to be possible due to the lack of evidence?

Yeah, I'm not really opposed to that caveat, and I don't like it when people claim that the *only* reason Epicurus cares about science is whenever it helps us get rid of fear of the gods and death. But I also think he seems pretty clear about what he considers 'most important' scientifically (namely things that help us psychologically and practically). And it strikes me that he so often treats the multiple explanations as equally compelling. It's like you might want him to say, 'but this entirely material account of lunar eclipses seems a bit more likely than the one where the moon has a bright and a dark side.'

I'm also somewhat sympathetic to people who point out that blocking multiple explanations in the context of matter and motion seems ad hoc when more than one material account is consistent with the phenomena, even if it has turned out to be wrong.

Post by “Cassius” of July 24, 2024 at 12:22 PM

It seems to me that it would be tempting for opponents of Epicurus to say: "He never seems to be weighing evidence and discussing probabilities at all. He is always going straight from 0% certainty to 100% certainty, with nothing but "maybes" in between. And therefore we can discard Epicurus because no one with any sense would do away with the concept of probabilities."

But I don't think that would be a fair reading of Epicurus to reach that conclusion. Is it even possible to imagine that in his life or teaching Epicurus did not admit that "some things are more probable than others?"

It would be good to go through the texts and see what arguments can be raised based on specific examples, but I can't imagine that in his intention to refute the skeptics who said that "nothing is knowable" he would have erased any distinction between "the more and less probable."

I see that Bailey references "probable" in that quote from Pythocles:

> Quote

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

Post by “Cassius” of July 24, 2024 at 12:49 PM

For some reason I missed seeing that quote the first time through:

> Quote
>
> 'The ethical and epistemological turn in Epicureanism has the curious effect that what has appeared to many modern commentators to be the most materialistic and least teleological of ancient philosophies (in short, the most scientific) represents at the same time a deliberate turning away from examination, experiment. and the elimination of competing hypotheses for astronomical, cosmological, and meteorological phenomena' (Lehoux).

Yes that's the direction I can see some people wanting to go, and as a defender of Epicurus I'd want to strike back at that as firmly as possible. 

But that's definitely a part of the issue that we are discussing in this thread so it's great that you've pointed that out! It's been implicit in many comments i have seen made over the past but I don't think I've seen it asserted so starkly.

I guess you may be talking about this:

https://philpapers.org/rec/HANLEA-2

Post by “Little Rocker” of July 24, 2024 at 1:33 PM

I suppose I'm playing Devil's Advocate here, but I admit that I struggle to understand the point of introducing some of the explanations except to have multiple ones--that eclipses are caused by bad air, that the moon comes into and out of existence daily, etc.

> Quote from Cassius

> I can't imagine that in his intention to refute the skeptics who said that "nothing is knowable" he would have erased any distinction between "the more and less probable.

Maybe it wouldn't be so strange to concede equipollence in some cases to explain why you reject it in others.

I mean, don't get me wrong, in some ways he's at least in the ballpark of recommending the intellectual virtues of science-- considering multiple explanations when sensory evidence won't settle the question, humility about the possibility that future science will refute you. I just need to look at the text again to see if he's ever like, 'but don't generate implausible explanations just to muddy the water,' or 'but you should feel free to narrow it down to the more probable.' Or, 'sure, there's only one actual best explanation, but we would all do well to recognize our intellectual limitations when it comes to discovering it.'

Post by “Cassius” of July 25, 2024 at 8:18 AM

Thanks to a tip I see that there is an article by Professor Clerk Shaw available for public download at the link below which addresses some of these issues (the Epicurean concern for truth, and the importance of physics to the study of ethics) in a way I find very persuasive. I highly recommend this for those interested in the topic. This article is recent (2020) and (as I recall at the moment) new to me, so I appreciate the tip!

Epicurean Philosophy and Its Parts

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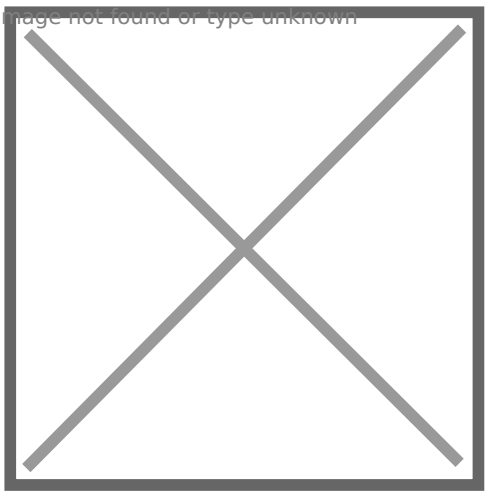

History for Shaw, Clerk (2020)
philarchive.org

The article contains this cite to Philodemus, with which i also was not familiar:

"This is confirmed by Philodemus, who says that all three parts contribute to choices and avoidances (De Elect. XIII):Above all, he [Epicurus] establishes the principles of philosophy, by which alone it is possible to act rightly. And it is clear that he also establishes the congenital ends, which yield the most conspicuous evidence and by which the calculations concerning choices and avoidances are performed. Besides, one must unfailingly draw the ethical arguments regarding both choices and avoidances entirely from the study of nature in order that they should be complete — if nothing else, the principle that nothing is produced without a cause and that … does not change.""

And a good reminder to a cite in Lucretius:

The diagnostic and therapeutic significance of this distinction is shown by Lucretius ’ case of a man who fails to understand that the cause of his trouble is internal, not external (III.1053 – 1075). Under the misapprehension that his surroundings bother him, he travels restlessly between city and country. The real cause,though, is his fear of death; if he knew that, he would instead devote himself to studying the nature of things — i.e., to physics. So, knowledge of causes, and particularly the distinction between internal and external causes, can alter our choices and avoidances: it can lead us to abandon travel for philosophy.This hypothesis also helps to explain the claims in SV 45 and De Fin. I.63 – 64 that the study of nature improves character. Character is primarily a matter of one’s evaluative beliefs, and such beliefs are among the main causes of living well or badly. Physics is thus relevant to living well in part because it draws distinctions among causes and enables us to alter those causes — among them, our evaluative beliefs. So, physics contributes to character development, making us moderate and self-sufficient."

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 25, 2024 at 8:21 AM

I think this is a much needed discussion, because those who consider themselves materialists, and study Epicurus, will likely have questions as to science, scientism, vs Epicurean physics.

> Quote from Little Rocker

> I just need to look at the text again to see if he's ever like, 'but don't generate implausible explanations just to muddy the water,' or 'but you should feel free to narrow it down to the more probable.' Or, 'sure, there's only one actual best explanation, but we would all do well to recognize our intellectual limitations when it comes to discovering it.'

Here is an excerpt from Letter to Herodotus, which gives us an overview of what Epicurus recommended to his students:

> Quote
>
> "For those who are unable to study carefully all my physical writings or to go into the longer treatises at all, I have myself prepared an epitome[56] of the whole system, Herodotus, to preserve in the memory enough of the principal doctrines,[57] to the end that on every occasion they may be able to aid themselves on the most important points, so far as they take up the study of Physics. Those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system ought to fix in their minds under the principal headings an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject. For a comprehensive view is often required, the details but seldom.
>
> [36] "To the former, then--the main heads--we must continually return, and must memorize them so far as to get a valid conception of the facts, as well as the means of discovering all the details exactly when once the general outlines are rightly understood and remembered ; since it is the privilege of the mature student to make a ready use of his conceptions by referring every one of them to elementary facts and simple terms. For it is impossible to gather up the results of continuous diligent study of the entirety of things, unless we can embrace in short formulas and hold in mind all that might have been accurately expressed even to the minutest detail.
>
> [37] "Hence, since such a course is of service to all who take up natural science, I, who devote to the subject my continuous energy and reap the calm enjoyment of a life like this, have prepared for you just such an epitome and manual of the doctrines as a whole.
>
> "In the first place, Herodotus, you must understand what it is that words denote, in order that by reference to this we may be in a position to test opinions, inquiries, or problems, so that our proofs may not run on untested *ad infinitum*, nor the terms we use be empty of meaning. [38] For the primary signification of every term employed must be clearly seen, and ought to need no proving[58]; this being necessary, if we are to have something to which the point at issue or the problem or the opinion before us can be referred.

> "Next, we must by all means stick to our sensations, that is, simply to the present impressions whether of the mind or of any criterion whatever, and similarly to our actual feelings, in order that we may have the means of determining that which needs confirmation and that which is obscure.
>
> "When this is clearly understood, it is time to consider generally things which are obscure. To begin with, nothing comes into being out of what is non-existent.[59] For in that case anything would have arisen out of anything, standing as it would in no need of its proper germs.[60] [39] And if that which disappears had been destroyed and become non-existent, everything would have perished, that into which the things were dissolved being non-existent. Moreover, the sum total of things was always such as it is now, and such it will ever remain. For there is nothing into which it can change. For outside the sum of things there is nothing which could enter into it and bring about the change.
>
> "Further [*this he says also in the Larger Epitome near the beginning and in his First Book* "*On Nature*"],...
>
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Post by “Kalosyni” of July 25, 2024 at 9:23 AM

Here are some definitions from Wikipedia:

> Quote
>
> **Scientism** is the view that science and the scientific method are the best or only way to render truth about the world and reality.[1][2]
>
> While the term was defined originally to mean "methods and attitudes typical of or attributed to natural scientists", some scholars, as well as political and religious leaders, have also adopted it as a pejorative term with the meaning "an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation (as in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities)".
>
> Source

> Quote

> **Science** is a strict systematic discipline that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable hypotheses and predictions about the world.[1][2] Modern science is typically divided into three major branches:[3] the natural sciences (e.g., physics, chemistry, and biology), which study the physical world; the social sciences (e.g., economics, psychology, and sociology), which study individuals and societies;[4][5] and the formal sciences (e.g., logic, mathematics, and theoretical computer science), which study formal systems, governed by axioms and rules.[6][7] There is disagreement whether the formal sciences are scientific disciplines,[8][9][10] as they do not rely on empirical evidence.[11][9] Applied sciences are disciplines that use scientific knowledge for practical purposes, such as in engineering and medicine.
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> Source

> Quote
>
> The **scientific method** is an empirical method for acquiring knowledge that has characterized the development of science since at least the 17th century. The scientific method involves careful observation coupled with rigorous scepticism, because cognitive assumptions can distort the interpretation of the observation. Scientific inquiry includes creating a hypothesis through inductive reasoning, testing it through experiments and statistical analysis, and adjusting or discarding the hypothesis based on the results.[1][2][3]
>
> Although procedures vary from one field of inquiry to another, the underlying process is often similar. The process in the scientific method involves making conjectures (hypothetical explanations), deriving predictions from the hypotheses as logical consequences, and then carrying out experiments or empirical observations based on those predictions.[4] A hypothesis is a conjecture based on knowledge obtained while seeking answers to the question. The hypothesis might be very specific or it might be broad. Scientists then test hypotheses by conducting experiments or studies. A scientific hypothesis must be falsifiable, implying that it is possible to identify a possible outcome of an experiment or observation that conflicts with predictions deduced from the hypothesis; otherwise, the hypothesis cannot be meaningfully tested.[5]
>
> While the scientific method is often presented as a fixed sequence of steps, it represents rather a set of general principles. Not all steps take place in every scientific inquiry (nor to the same degree), and they are not always in the same order.
>
> Source

> Quote

> **Pseudoscience** consists of statements, beliefs, or practices that claim to be both scientific and factual but are incompatible with the scientific method.[Note 1] Pseudoscience is often characterized by contradictory, exaggerated or unfalsifiable claims; reliance on confirmation bias rather than rigorous attempts at refutation; lack of openness to evaluation by other experts; absence of systematic practices when developing hypotheses; and continued adherence long after the pseudoscientific hypotheses have been experimentally discredited.
>
> Source

> Quote
>
> **Junk science** is spurious or fraudulent scientific data, research, or analysis. The concept is often invoked in political and legal contexts where facts and scientific results have a great amount of weight in making a determination. It usually conveys a pejorative connotation that the research has been untowardly driven by political, ideological, financial, or otherwise unscientific motives.
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> Source