

Question on Lucretius

Post by “briefvacation” of October 30, 2024 at 3:38 PM

Hi all, thanks for having me here on your forums.

I was reading Lucretius books I-III and I had a question occur to me.

It seems that the main reason Lucretius advocates for right understanding is so that one can avoid being lead astray to false beliefs about the afterlife which lead to pain and distress.

My question is does Lucretius have any grounds for advocating right understanding over any other understanding which would similarly take care of concerns about the afterlife?

Curious to hear what you think.

BV

Post by “Joshua” of October 30, 2024 at 4:11 PM

Welcome!

I'm at work at the moment so I can't engage more fully, but I will suggest Epicurus' [Letter to Pythocles](#) as a good starting point;

Quote

First of all then we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky, whether they are dealt with in connection with other doctrines or independently, than peace of mind and a sure confidence, just as in all other branches of study. We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one

explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations. For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

I'll try to expand on that this evening when I get home.

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 4:39 PM

[Quote from briefvacation](#)

It seems that the main reason Lucretius advocates for right understanding is so that one can avoid being lead astray to false beliefs about the afterlife which lead to pain and distress.

Welcome to the forum and I agree with Joshua's response. However I do not think it is correct presumption that Lucretius or Epicurus "advocate for right understanding" mainly because of the pain and distress of false beliefs about the afterlife. Yes those are major concerns of life, but it is recorded that Epicurus started off his philosophic career because he rejected the conventional views of chaos and creation of the universe (which led him to atomism). Yes atomism leads to views that erase fears of an afterlife, but Epicurus and Lucretius are concerned mainly with having an intelligent view of the question which they can have confidence is correct. If they had thought that it was correct that a god was going to reward or punish them after death, then they would have gone with what they thought was correct, and they would have been "more catholic than the pope." They didn't choose their opinions solely because of the way those opinions made them feel emotionally, they chose the opinion which in fact deprives them of hope of a happy afterlife because they thought that conclusion was correct.

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 5:32 PM

I wrote my last post in a hurry and probably i should go further. Earlier today I had been reading David Hume's "Dialogues on Natural religion, and one of the characters in that Dialogue was a strong mystic who was focused on suffering in life as the main reason for being concerned about "gods." I observe over time that there is a significant tendency in some circles to focus on "escaping pain" rather than "obtaining pleasure," and even though in Epicurean terms those end up being the same thing, anyone who does not think strictly in Epicurean terms (and that is 99.9% of people today) will not realize that since there are only two categories of feelings, "absence of pain" measures out to have precisely the same meaning as "pleasure." Rather than knowing Epicurus' equivalency of terms, they tend to think that he is prioritizing organizing one's life to 'minimize pain" rather than to "maximize pleasure." Again those turn out to be the same thing in Epicurean terms, but ask any Buddhist or Stoic or someone else who is focused on the idea that "life is suffering" or that "suffering is good" and they are likely to think that you mean something else.

Epicurus clearly focuses on the view that life is short, and only life gives an opportunity for pleasure, and that nature's calling is to maximize pleasure. Nature gives us huge numbers of ways to do that, and given Epicurus' expansive way of viewing pleasure, the wise man will always have more reason for joy than for vexation.

So that distinction between "running from pain" vs "pursuing pleasure, even when some pain is required" is what I wanted to emphasize.

If Epicurus had thought that you could submit to a supernatural god and thereby obtain an eternal life of pleasure, he would certainly have done so. He wanted to know the truth, and he concluded that pleasure in life is the best we can hope for, so he developed a theory that allowed him to do that. But the starting point was wanting to know the truth, and only then did he decide that pleasure and pain are the way to measure the best life. He didn't start with a preferred conclusion and a willingness to bend the truth to what he wanted.

Post by “briefvacation” of October 31, 2024 at 12:31 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Thanks for the response, you got to the core of what I was asking which was: is understanding truth an end in itself, or a way of getting to pleasure.

Post by “Cassius” of October 31, 2024 at 1:02 PM

[Quote from briefvacation](#)

Thanks for the response, you got to the core of what I was asking which was: is understanding truth an end in itself, or a way of getting to pleasure.

It certainly seems like a chicken and egg situation, but presumably that's why there are several branches of philosophy that need to be brought into consistency to reinforce each other. You can stake your flag on choosing to listen to nature, and realize that pleasure/pain is the only faculty given by nature directly for choice and avoidance, but you can't be truly confident of that conclusion in intellectual discussions until you have a consistent physics and epistemology. And given the way the world is a constant bombardment of conflicting opinions, in the end most people find it is important to them to be able to justify that position using reason and an understanding of the way the universe really works.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 31, 2024 at 1:16 PM

An understanding of truth is the basis of everything. If you begin with false premises, you can't reach proper conclusions. But if you take the time to ascertain the truth, you have a solid base on which to build the best life and from which to come to proper conclusions in other matters.