

Epicurus' Response To The Sorites Argument / Paradox

Post by "Cassius" of March 18, 2025 at 4:47 PM

Background note: *(The Sorites paradox (from the Megarian/Stoic tradition) asked: if you remove one grain from a heap, is it still a heap? And another? At what point does it cease to be a heap? Epicurus rejected the entire framework as a linguistic trap rather than a genuine metaphysical problem. His response was characteristically empiricist: the Canon (sensation, prolepsis, feelings) determines what we mean by concepts, and when a question pushes beyond what the Canon can adjudicate, the correct response is suspension of the question itself rather than pursuit of a logical answer into the void. This connects to his rejection of empty dialectical cleverness.)*

Going through Cicero's "Academic Questions" today I came across the following reference to the "Sorites" Argument. There is a lot of interesting material in AQ, and some good reference to Epicurus, but surrounded by a lot of gobbledygook. This is an example of good information:

[Cicero - Academic Questions - EpicureanFriends Handbook](#)

Quote from Academic Questions - Yonge

XVI.¶

Now on all these empty perceptions Antiochus brought forward a great many arguments, and one whole day was occupied in the discussion of this subject. But I do not [pg 046] think that I ought to adopt the same course, but merely to give the heads of what he said.

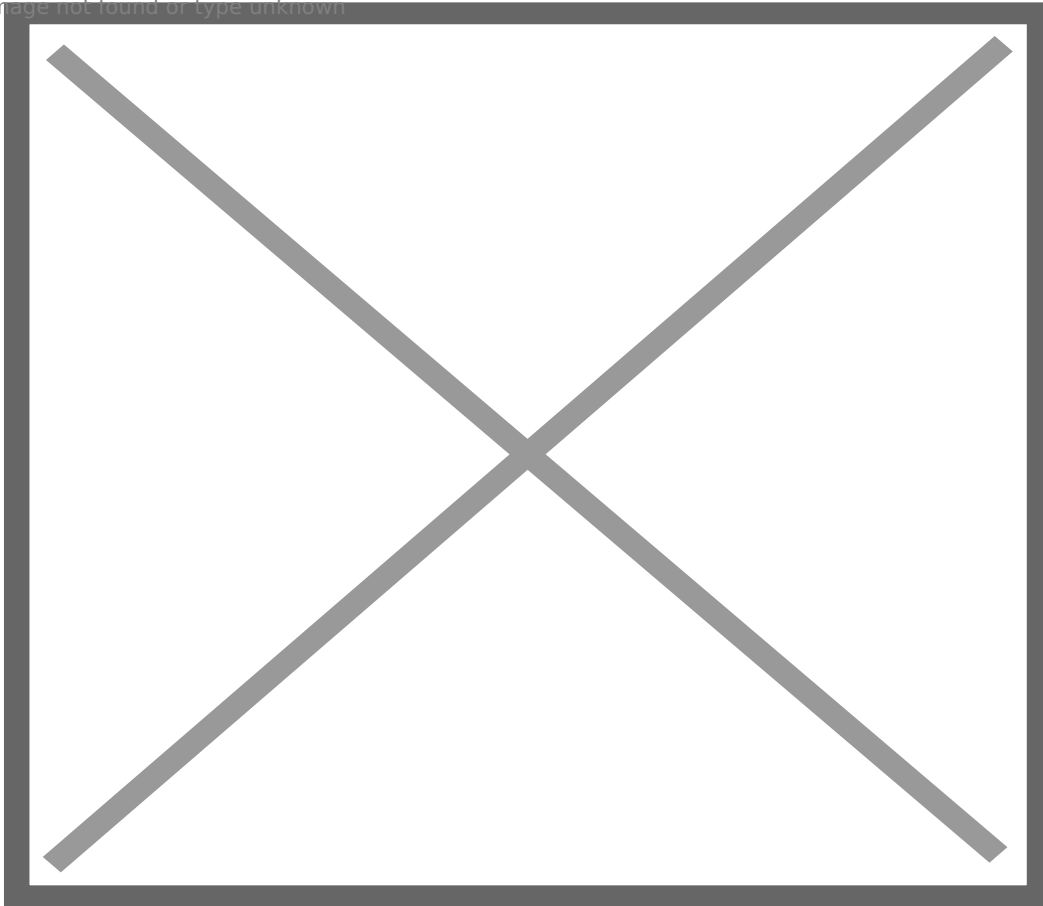
And in the first place, they are blameable in this, that they use a most captious kind of interrogation. And the system of adding or taking away, step by step, minute items from a proposition, is a kind of argument very little to be approved of in philosophy. They call it sorites, when they make up a heap by adding grain after grain; a very vicious and captious style of arguing. For you mount up in this way:—If a vision is brought by God before a man asleep of such a nature as to be probable (probabile), why may not one also be brought of such a nature as to be very like truth (verisimile)? If so, then why may not one be brought which can hardly be distinguished from truth? If so, then why may there not be one which cannot be distinguished at all? If so, then why may there not be such that there is actually no difference between them?—If you come

to this point because I have granted you all the previous propositions, it will be my fault; but if you advance thither of your own accord, it will be yours. For who will grant to you either that God can do everything, or that even if He could He would act in that manner? And how do you assume that if one thing may be like another, it follows that it may also be difficult to distinguish between them? And then, that one cannot distinguish between them at all? And lastly, that they are identical? So that if wolves are like dogs, you will come at last to asserting that they are the same animals. And indeed there are some things not honourable, which are like things that are honourable; some things not good, like those that are good; some things proceeding on no system, like others which are regulated by system. Why then do we hesitate to affirm that there is no difference between all these things? Do we not even see that they are inconsistent? For there is nothing that can be transferred from its own genus to another. But if such a conclusion did follow, as that there was no difference between perceptions of different genera, but that some could be found which were both in their own genus and in one which did not belong to them, how could that be possible?

Post by “Cassius” of July 4, 2025 at 7:38 AM

This is to provide a cross-reference to where the sorites argument is discussed in DeWitt's "Epicurus and His Philosophy"

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[DeWitt's References On The Sorites Question - Epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)

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Post by "Cassius" of July 4, 2025 at 6:17 PM

On my first readings of DeWitt's references to the sorites ("heap") argument, I did not know whether to think DeWitt was being accurate or exaggerating as to its reputation, but I see that Cicero goes on and on in Academic questions about its "viciousness" and therefore presumably its effectiveness in combating dialectical logic.

Quote

What is there that can be perceived by reason? You say that Dialectics have been discovered, and that that science is, as it were, an arbiter and judge of what is true and

false. Of what true and false?—and of true and false on what subject? Will a dialectician be able to judge, in geometry, what is true and false, or in literature, or in music? He knows nothing about those things. In philosophy, then? What is it to him how large the sun is? or what means has he which may enable him to judge what the chief good is? What then will he judge of? Of what combination or disjunction of ideas is accurate,—of what is an ambiguous expression,—of what follows from each fact, or what is inconsistent with it? If the science of dialectics judges of these things, or things like them, it is judging of itself. But it professed more. For to judge of these matters is not sufficient for the resolving of the other numerous and important questions which arise in philosophy. But, since you place so much importance in that art, I would have you to consider whether it was not invented for the express purpose of being used against you. For, at its first opening, it gives an ingenious account of the elements of speaking, and of the manner in which one may come to an understanding of ambiguous expressions, and of the principles of reasoning: then, after a few more things, it comes to the sorites, a very slippery and hazardous topic, and a class of argument which you yourself pronounced to be a vicious one.

XXIX.

What then, you will say; are we to be blamed for that viciousness? The nature of things has not given us any knowledge of ends, so as to enable us, in any subject whatever, to say how far we can go. Nor is this the case only in respect of the heap of wheat, from which the name is derived, but in no matter whatever where the argument is conducted by minute questions: for instance, if the question be whether a man is rich or poor, illustrious or obscure,—whether things be many or few, great or small, long or short, broad or narrow,—we have no certain answer to give, how much must be added or taken away to make the thing in question either one or the other.

But the sorites is a vicious sort of argument:—crush it, then, if you can, to prevent its being troublesome; for it will be so, if you do not guard against it. We have guarded against it, says he. For Chrysippus's plan is, when he is interrogated step by step (by way of giving an instance), whether there are three, or few, or many, to rest a little before he comes to the “many;” that is to say, to use their own language, ἡσυχάζειν. Rest and welcome, says Carneades; you may even snore, for all I care. But what good does he do? For one follows who will waken you from sleep, and question you in the same manner:—Take the number, after the mention of which you were silent, and if to that number I add one, will there be many? You will again go on, as long as you think fit. Why need I say more? for you admit this, that you cannot in your answers fix the last number which can be classed as “few,” nor the first, which amounts to “many.” And this kind of uncertainty extends so widely, that I do not see any bounds to its progress.

Nothing hurts me, says he; for I, like a skilful driver, will rein in my horses before I come to the end, and all the more if the ground which the horses are approaching is precipitous. And thus, too, says he, I will check myself, and not reply any more to one who addresses me with captious questions. If you have a clear answer to make, and refuse to make it, you are giving yourself airs; if you have not, even you yourself do not perceive it. If you stop, because the question is obscure, I admit that it is so; but you say that you do not proceed as far as what is obscure. You stop, then, where the case is still clear. If then all you do is to hold your tongue, you gain nothing by that. For what does it matter to the man who wishes to catch you, whether he entangles you owing to your silence or to your talking? Suppose, for instance, you were to say, without hesitation, that up to the number nine, is "few," but were to pause at the tenth; then you would be refusing your assent to what is certain and evident, and yet you will not allow me to do the same with respect to subjects which are obscure.

That art, therefore, does not help you against the sorites; inasmuch as it does not teach a man, who is using either the increasing or diminishing scale, what is the first point, or the last. May I not say that that same art, like Penelope undoing her web, at last undoes all the arguments which have gone before? Is that your fault, or ours? In truth, it is the foundation of dialectics, that whatever is enunciated (and that is what they call ἀξιωμα, which answers to our word *effatum*,) is either true or false. What, then, is the case? Are these true or false? If you say that you are speaking falsely, and that that is true, you are speaking falsely and telling the truth at the same time. This, forsooth, you say is inexplicable; and that is more odious than our language, when we call things uncomprehended, and not perceived.

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Post by "Cassius" of December 2, 2025 at 8:16 AM

The sorites question is going to come up again in upcoming podcast episodes so I am posting this as a refresher (Edited from Grok). I suspect there are a lot of people like me who aren't very familiar with this question or its unusual name. However the question it frames (especially in terms of "emergent properties" of atoms coming together into bodies) is very important in understanding how Epicurus differs from Democritus and other Greek philosophers.

The sorites problem (from Greek σωρός, *sōros* = "heap") is a famous paradox in philosophy and logic that exposes how vague concepts break down when we try to apply sharp, precise boundaries to them.

Classic formulation (the heap paradox):

1. 1 grain of sand is not a heap.
2. Adding just 1 grain of sand to something that is not a heap can never turn it into a heap.
3. Therefore, even 1,000,000 grains of sand are not a heap.

The reasoning looks perfectly logical, but the conclusion is absurd — we all know a million grains of sand piled up is a heap. Same paradox with other vague concepts:

- Baldness: A man with 100,000 hairs is not bald. Removing one hair can't make him bald. So removing hairs one by one means even a completely hairless man is not bald.
- Tallness: If 5'0" is not tall, and adding 1 mm can't make someone suddenly tall, then no one — not even 7'5" basketball players — is tall.
- Forest: One tree is not a forest. Adding one tree can't create a forest. Therefore a million trees do not make a forest. (← this ties directly to your earlier question)

Why it's a problem

The sorites paradox reveals that many everyday concepts (heap, forest, tall, red, old, rich, conscious, alive, etc.) are vague — they have borderline cases and no precise cutoff point. Classical logic assumes everything is either true or false with a sharp boundary, but vague concepts don't work that way.

Main attempted solutions (very brief)

1. Deny the premise - There actually is a precise number where it flips from "not a heap" to "heap" ... we just don't know it. (Most people find this unsatisfying.)
2. Fuzzy logic / degree theory - Truth comes in degrees. 1 grain = 0% heap, 10,000 grains = 47% heap, 1,000,000 grains = 99.9% heap, etc.
3. Epistemicism - There is a sharp boundary (e.g., exactly 42,687 grains = the first heap), but it's unknowable to humans.
4. Supervaluationism - "It is a heap" is true when it's true in all reasonable ways of making the term precise, false when false in all, and undefined in borderline cases.
5. Reject the concept entirely - Some philosophers say vague terms like "heap" or "forest" are fundamentally defective and shouldn't be used in serious reasoning.

Bottom line

The sorites paradox shows that the world is full of genuinely fuzzy boundaries, and our crisp yes/no logic isn't always equipped to handle them cleanly. It's why the question — "Does a forest exist apart from its trees?" — is so slippery: there's no single tree whose addition magically creates "a forest," yet somehow the forest is undeniably real once enough trees are present. In short: the sorites problem is the philosophical land-mine hiding inside every vague word we use every day.

Example: Does a forest exist apart from its trees?

Yes — but only in certain ways, and no in others. It depends on what you mean by "exist."

1. The forest exists as a real, emergent thing that is more than the sum of its trees.
 - It has properties none of the individual trees have: a microclimate, a canopy layer, a soil ecosystem, migratory bird corridors, wildfire behavior, carbon sequestration at scale, a distinct smell and soundscape, an aesthetic impact that makes you feel small.
 - Remove one tree? Still a forest.
 - Remove every tree one by one? At some point the forest objectively ceases to exist, even if the last tree is still standing.
So the forest is real, but it is not a separate material object floating above the trees. It's an emergent pattern that arises from the trees + their relationships + time + space.
2. The forest also exists as a concept in your mind.
 - You can burn every tree to the ground and the idea of "Black Forest" or "Amazon Rainforest" still exists in culture, maps, satellite photos, memories, legal codes, and carbon-credit markets.
 - In that sense, the forest can outlive its trees entirely.
3. But if you're a strict reductionist ("only atoms and the void"), then no, the forest does not "exist apart" from its trees — it's just a convenient label we slap on a large collection of trees that happen to be near each other.

Most useful answer:

The forest is real the same way a marriage is real, or a city is real, or a song is real.

It cannot be reduced to the individual components without losing something essential, yet it has no existence completely independent of them either. So:

A forest both is, and is not, its trees — depending on whether you're wearing the hat of a poet, an ecologist, a philosopher, or a chainsaw salesman.