

Happy Twentieth of May: Don't Surrender - Instead Retreat, Regroup, Advance!

Post by "Cassius" of May 19, 2018 at 4:37 PM

Happy Twentieth of May!

Epicurus is famously known to written: *"To sea with your swift ship, blessed boy, and flee from all education (paideia, also translated as culture)."* This remark come to us with no context, as our only source is D.L. 10.6, which combines it with a slam from Epictetus, translated at [Perseus](#) this way: *"And in his letter to Pythocles : "Hoist all sail, my dear boy, and steer clear of all culture. Epictetus calls him preacher of effeminacy and showers abuse on him."*

Because the traditional commentaries since the Epicurean age have been written by Stoics and other anti-Epicureans, this passage has been used to bolster the argument that Epicurus advised that we should live in isolation, figuratively (if not literally) walling ourselves off from the outside world.

Norman DeWitt rejected that argument as follows, concluding that it was Epicurus goal - not to retreat - but to establish a **new** culture which would compete with the **prevailing** culture:

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DeWitt continues with his analysis in Chapter Two of his book, but for purposes of this post I just want to emphasis the ramifications. Epicurus devoted his life to an extensive campaign of book-writing, letter-writing, and lecturing. We know little about the personal life of Lucretius, but what we do know is that his "On The Nature of Things" was a monumental effort. Of the other Epicurean lives we know enough about to cite, we know that Titus Pomponius Atticus was extensively involved in the cultural affairs of his time, and we know that Gaius Cassius Longinus was intimately involved in the political affairs of his time. One could argue that the absence of knowledge of the details of the lives of the greater number of Epicureans is evidence of their choice to live obscurely, but there is nothing in the surviving literature to indicate that an isolated or uneducated or hermetic lifestyle was extolled as an example for Epicureans to follow.

What we have instead is the great body of Epicurean philosophy, which when taken seriously leads to the **opposite** conclusion. Those who took Epicurus seriously will also take their own lives seriously, and lived those lives to the fullest extent possible. If we start with first principles, how can we **not live our lives as vigorously as possible**? Consider just a few of the Epicurean starting-points:

1. There are no supernatural gods steering the universe for us or against us – neither the universe, nor we ourselves – are slaves to inexorable fate.
2. To the contrary, like the universe itself, we are ourselves composed of combinations of elemental particles which are controlled only by natural principles, much of which is within our power to understand and to shape.
3. What is not within our power is to stop the motion of these particles, and there is no final place of rest for them, or for us – so we know that our lives must be lived and our goals must be achieved during the limited time when we can sustain our own individual combination of particles.
4. Not only are the elemental particles always in motion, but the universe itself is not only eternal in time but infinite in space, so we know that there can be no central point, no overarching creating god, from which any perspective can be viewed as permanent or final. It is therefore absurd to suggest that there is any “absolute truth” or “universal reason” or realm of “ideal forms” against which our own feelings of pleasure and pain may be compared and found invalid.

As Seneca recorded: Sic fac omnia tamquam spectet Epicurus! So do all things as though watching were Epicurus!

And as Philodemus wrote: “I will be faithful to Epicurus, according to whom it has been my choice to live.”

Additional discussion of this post and other Epicurean ideas can be found at EpicureanFriends.com.

Post by “Cassius” of May 20, 2018 at 8:06 PM

A reply to the above post at [Facebook](#):

“Not only are the elemental particles always in motion, but the universe itself is not only eternal in time but infinite in space, so we know that there can be no central point, no overarching creating god, from which any perspective can be viewed as permanent or final. It is therefore absurd to suggest that there is any “absolute truth” or “universal reason” or realm of “ideal forms” against which our own feelings of pleasure and pain may be compared and found invalid.”

While I agree that the universe is eternal and that there are no supernatural gods or

supernatural elements at all, what, if anything would change if it was "proven" that the universe had a definitive starting point?

Also, if the big bang is ever proven to how the universe came into being,, do we still consider the universe eternal because it existed in a different form before it became as it is now? On my first question I mean, how much do our views change if the universe isn't eternal?

And my response:

Cassius:

There is a lot of disagreement on that _____. Just to be clear, in what follows I speak only for myself. Let's first be very clear that when we use the word "universe" I mean EVERYTHING that exists. I know that there is a modern scientific trend (which I find to be perverse, in destroying a perfectly good existing definition) to use other terms like "multiverse" to describe "everything" - but when I say universe I mean "Everything."

So having said that, my personal view is that we have to look beyond the current state of physics to the larger philosophical question that physics has not answered in the past, cannot answer today, and will not answer in the future. Physics can always look further outward, it can go in deeper and look further inward, but as we see there always seems to be another step further out, and another step further in. In the meantime, we have to live our lives, and decide what we think physics is telling us about "our" reality.

And that was the purpose of Lucretius' Javelin analogy, which doesn't provide a real "answer" to anything, but points out the problem: We are always going to be left with that undefined "next step" about which we don't have a "final" solution. And what position are we going to take about that, in the absence of absolute final knowledge of the entire universe, which is by definition an impossibility?

And that is where I think Epicurus would say - and did say - that we have to look at the world around us that IS clear to us, and look to see how it operates. Do we see random things popping into existence out of the air? Do we see birds rise out of the sea? People grow to adulthood in an hour, oranges come from apple trees?

The answer is we don't, and as we make similar observations over and over we gain confidence that there are no gods behind the curtain pulling strings, and that things don't truly happen "at random" but by natural processes.

So how does that apply? The answer to Epicurus is that we have to make our decisions based on observable facts, and in the absence of observable facts we work from analogy, and

comparison, and even with an assist from "reason" (which has to be defined carefully). And from that sequence we conclude that we have never seen ANYTHING ever rise up from totally nothing, or go to totally nothing, and that we therefore take confidence that what has never happened in the past of such a dramatic nature is not going to happen in the future. Sure the frontiers of science are always expanding, and even now we can't predict earthquakes and volcanoes and lots of other things with certainty. But we have confidence at this point that even these operate by totally natural processes, and that they aren't totally at "random," and that they aren't generated from totally "nothing."

So for the above reasons I personally don't even entertain the possibility that science will ever give any indication that everything we see in the universe spontaneously arose from nothing in an instant, as if at the whim of a god, or at random. Sure there are natural processes that create and destroy suns and solar systems and galaxies, etc. But even though we can't explain and predict them with true specificity, we have confidence that they are the result of natural processes.

The suggestion that "everything" can come from "nothing" is very close to a religious assertion. It has NO evidence in anything we can actually see happening. It is THEORIZED without practical evidence in the same way that preachers speculate about heaven and hell - totally without evidence and totally without credibility.

I consider myself a "fan" and a proponent of science every bit as much as anyone, and that includes geometry and math, and I believe that Epicurus was too. I believe it is a malicious slander of anti-Epicureans to suggest that Epicurus denied the practical benefits of any science, but I believe that Epicurus drew the same line we are talking about here: that the use of ANY scientific technique to obtain practical knowledge and employ it for practical benefit is to be applauded, and that applies to every field of science including "logic." But no tool can be allowed to mutate into something more than it really is, and no tool of the human mind is capable of exceeding the factual evidence that we can put into it.

So "the universe" is as much a logical concept as it is a set of stars and galaxies. And while all the stars and all the galaxies are constantly changing and moving and growing and dying and exploding into new ones - all of that is local. As a WHOLE, "the universe" cannot logically have had a beginning based on any of the evidence available to us, or for which we can give any reason to think may possibly ever be available to us.

Post by "Cassius" of May 20, 2018 at 8:18 PM

Another point: When I refer to not everyone agreeing, I think there are two classes-

Group (1): There are those who really are faithful to the core Epicurean teachings that everything is Natural, and they just presume that whatever happened to "create" the universe in an instant from nothing is also natural, and they don't think it's that big a deal - they don't think that undercuts the basic premise that there are no supernatural gods or total "chaos" that should be of any concern. I think most people here in this group who don't take my position are like that, and I don't have any problem with that at all. The reason I am not in that camp is that I think that there is another group -

Group (2) thinks (rightly or wrongly, as you prefer) that the possibility that the universe was created at random from nothing IS a really big deal. They think that we should be concerned that just as the universe as a whole rose up in an instant, it could disappear in an instant, and that as a result we really shouldn't be certain or confident of anything. These people are very likely in my view to combine this opinion with militant anti-dogmatism. They are the true crusading skeptics who see Epicurus' concern and take up the position he wanted to rule out. And in fact some/many of them also what to do it for precisely the desire to keep open the gnawing doubt that there IS something "supernatural" and maybe even "spiritual" that explains the universe. That's the group that I DON'T think is Epicurean - they are basically Aristotelian prime movers or Stoic divine firers or pure religious nuts (spoken fondly, of course) - and they know it and they argue their positions to shake our confidence in Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 6:40 AM

Thinking about my answers to this question last night, I think I probably wasn't clear on what is in my view of greatest practical importance. If there is anything unique about Epicurean philosophy, that gives body to the Epicurean way of thinking, and that represents what it is that the ancient Epicureans would have "gone back to" whenever they were challenged or had personal doubts, it is "nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing." And the reason is that THAT is the personally verifiable observation that serves as the starting point for everything else. Without that observation, that you can test for yourself and use to check all your other premises against, then all the rest of the framework that we talk about are simply arbitrary assertions with no way to "prove" their correctness. Opinions have no standards of correctness - and no reason for us to have confidence in their truth - unless we can compare them to observable, repeatable, facts - essentially the scientific method. Unless we have something by which to say "the idea of supernatural gods is wrong" and "the idea that there are eternal ideas/forms floating in the universe is wrong" then we have no ability to have confidence in our conclusions. On every streetcorner people are saying "My god reigns" and

"Allah is great," and we can shake our heads and look down on their "lack of education," the ultimate answer is not how many books on Nature we can stack against their books on religion. The answer is "Show me your magic - Show me your God creating something from nothing. Show me your Allah destroying something to totally nothing." THAT is how we have confidence that the world operates on Natural principles - not because Einstein or a string of physicists said so.

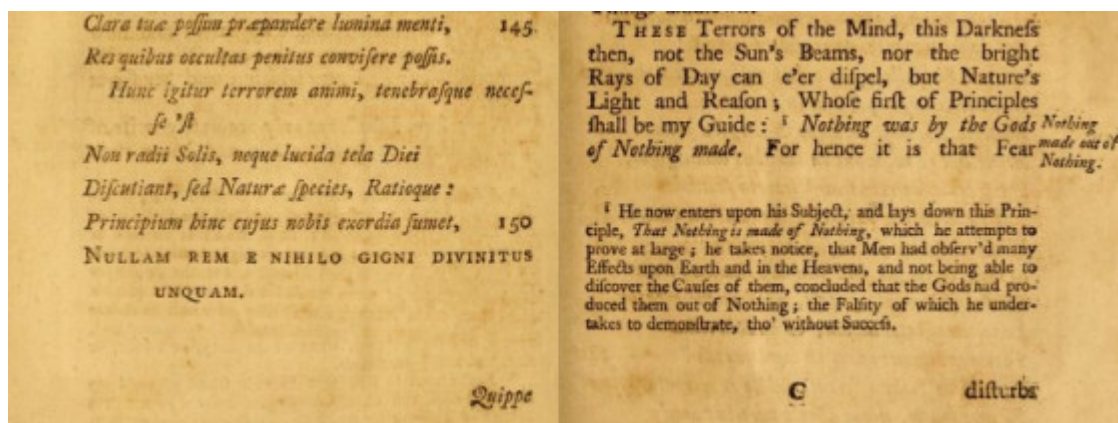
I could go on and on about this but I think the essential point is clear. Without "nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing" Epicurean philosophy is nothing more durable than the latest fad self-help book at the local bookstore, and it's a lot less memorable than most of them. Nothing from nothing and nothing to nothing is our essential statement of commitment to and reliance on evidence - on science, rather than on wishful thinking.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 8:43 AM

I am going to make another post on a book I found as a result of your question E., so I REALLY am glad you posted this question. But in THIS thread I want to cite the text from Lucretius, who introduced the subject of nothing from nothing in a way that shows how tightly it is connected with fighting false religion. The text is:

NULLUM REM E NIHILO GIGNI DIVINATUS UNQUAM.

I wish we could bold and highlight here, but one translation (not particularly literal or following the word order, is:





We aren't talking here abstract science - we are talking at the argument - from their lack of proof - that we throw at the god-mongers.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 9:29 AM

Poster: This is a lot to digest, so please bear with me. The main points it seems are that 1. Everything has some cause and effect that can be located within the natural limits of the universe. 2. To say that something can be created from nothing or appear out of nowhere is on the same ludicrous level of people believing God made everything. 3. Point 1 can be observed in science but point 2 is speculation and theories with no grounding. 4. The central maxim to remember is that "nothing comes from nothing and nothing goes to nothing" meaning that everything that exists in this moment came from something else and was not "created" randomly or supernaturally and everything which exists right now will not disappear but simply become something else perhaps. Am I correct thus far or have I misinterpreted?

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 9:29 AM

Whether you are "correct" or not from a wider perspective is for you and others to judge. But whether you are correctly following the argument that I personally think Lucretius and Epicurus were making, yes you are doing so very well.   type unknown

However as to (1) when you say "natural limits of the universe" the phrasing might be improvable, because I think the context is that the universe itself has no limit in space or time, so we're always talking about "Nature" or "the universe" as the ultimate name for everything that exists. There's nothing "outside" or "beyond" or "higher than" the universe and nature.

Also when you say "everything that exists in this moment" the wider context is everything that has ever existed or will ever exist. You are right to focus on "the moment" as the focus of what we are able to verify now, but I think the ancient Epicureans automatically translated that mentally into confidence not only about the present, but everything that has ever existed or will ever exist. God did not exist in the past to create the universe and go away, not will God come into existence to start creating universes tomorrow.

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 9:33 AM

This graphic is from page 4 of Epicurus And His Philosophy. I think DeWitt is right, and I think that Epicurean Philosophy is essentially one long chain argument that stands or falls with the foundational links in the chain. And one of the very first links in the chain, if not THE first link in the chain is NULLUM REM E NIHILO GIGNI DIVINATUS UNQUAM.

From the point of view of logic this progression from the general to the particular constituted a sort of **chain argument**, a device in which Epicurus had great faith. He looked upon truth in terms of the whole and the part, the integer and the details. The details seemed to him so linked with one another that, if only the beginning was rightly made, one truth after another would infallibly reveal itself until perfection of knowledge should be attained. As Lucretius expressed it: "One point will become clear from understanding another; nor will blind night ever

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A SYNOPTIC VIEW OF EPICUREANISM

rob you of the path and prevent you from peering into the ultimate realities of nature; so surely will understanding of one thing kindle a gleam to illuminate the next."

Post by "Cassius" of May 21, 2018 at 11:33 AM

Poster: Before these conversations and your explanations, I just looked at the ethics part of Epicurean philosophy but it seems I am beginning to agree that the physics of Epicurus is just as important and perhaps is needed for the ethics to make sense and not just be an abstraction such as Virtue as an end. There is no natural law or nature that dictates that virtue is some end of human nature, it is simply an abstraction but it can be a useful one if used for the tool of the true end, pleasure.

Cassius Amicus And it is not necessary to get caught up in "atoms" vs "molecules" vs subatomic particles and all those details. The point of the physics is to provide ONE rational explanation of the universe operating on natural principles, but they knew that the details were uncertain, just as they said that the planets and star movements could be caused for a number of reasons. The important thing is to find at least one explanation that is consistent with the facts, explains them adequately, and shows that it is not necessary to presume that a supernatural god is behind everything. That is the starting point for all the rest of the chain argument which then provides the presumption that there are no gods or "ideas" which set out what "virtue" really is. If you don't have that starting point you're blowing in the wind to talk about anything (ESPECIALLY ethics), and nothing can ever be 'resolved' to anyone's satisfaction.

If abstractions without evidence are just as valid as reasoned conclusions based on evidence,

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/447-happy-twentieth-of-may-don-t-surrender-instead-retreat-regroup-advance/>

then there's no way to ever be sure of anything. And of course if there COULD be a god and there COULD be a heaven and hell, then any prudent person is going to take that possibility into account and hedge his / her bets, and pay homage to the gods (which is not nearly so important to them as that you pay homage and your money to the PRIESTS - both of the church and of Academia). Only an understanding of the universe that frees your mind from these obligations can really provide freedom from them.

As to: ".....the true end, pleasure." Yes, that is the conclusion. But it is OH so critical to understand the sweeping mental and physical scope of the word "pleasure" so that you aren't intimidated into equating it with sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll! Edit: to continue the sentence: " or - to "absence of pain"! 1f609.png 😊 [Rewrite: But it is OH so critical to understand the sweeping mental and physical scope of the word "pleasure" so that you aren't intimidated into ****equating**** the word "pleasure" with sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll - or, to 'absence of pain'!]