

Please, no dogmatism, no absolute truths

Post by “michelepinto” of March 31, 2019 at 3:55 PM

With these words I hope not to offend anyone. Consider it my friendly reflection.

One of the things that I appreciate most in Epicurus's philosophy is moderation and one of the master's phrases that I like best is the Vatican saying 74: "In a scholarly dispute, he who loses gains more because he has learned something".

This is why I don't believe I have any truth in my hand.

As Epicurus, I believe that no divine being interferes in the life of men. But precisely "I believe". As it is not possible to prove the existence of God it is not even possible to prove its non-existence. At most we can argue about the possibilities of one thesis or another.

I believe that the teachings of Epicurus are a privileged way to happiness. The best I know. But I do not pretend that this is the case for everyone.

I have a friend who feels such a comfort in believing that there is a God to take care of him who, if denied, could hardly be happy.

I know people who follow a passion in their lives, a passion that drives them throughout their lives and makes sense of them.

I don't think this can make them happy, but why should I decide for them?

I believe that epicureanism is splendid, to find epicurean friends like you is something that makes me very happy. I am committed to spreading his teaching as best I can.

But I respect the ideas of others. I'll never find myself saying, I'm right, you're wrong. This is what religions say.

Epicurus is not a prophet, but a philosopher, his wisdom is human and perfectible.

Post by “Cassius” of March 31, 2019 at 4:47 PM

Here's my view on that:

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

This is why I don't believe I have any truth in my hand.

Taken to an extreme, that would make you a skeptic like Pyrrho, and I am sure you are not one of those! The key word there would be "ANY" truth -- because I know that you do have at least SOME truth 😊 And that is why the part of Lucretius book IV beginning as follows is one of my favorites:

Bailey: Again, if any one thinks that nothing is known, he knows not whether that can be known either, since he admits that he knows nothing. Against him then I will refrain from joining issue, who plants himself with his head in the place of his feet. And yet were I to grant that he knows this too, yet I would ask this one question; since he has never before seen any truth in things, whence does he know what is knowing, and not knowing each in turn, what thing has begotten the concept of the true and the false, what thing has proved that the doubtful differs from the certain?

Browne: Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards.

And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before to lead him into such a knowledge) whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what it was that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

As it is not possible to prove the existence of God it is not even possible to prove its non-existence. At most we can argue about the possibilities of one thesis or another.

That is very close to the formulation taken by Frances Wright in "A Few Days In Athens" -- but in the context of the general existence of gods such as the Greeks were familiar with, not supernatural gods which could have created the universe, on which I believe Epicurus was rightfully very firm.

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

I have a friend who feels such a comfort in believing that there is a God to take care of him who, if denied, could hardly be happy.

I too have such friends - and family members - and I do not attempt to engage them in these discussions for that same reason - it would destroy the happiness that they have created for

themselves, and they would not be able to reconstruct a substitute. But that does not mean that i do not engage people who are capable of handling the truth, hopefully which includes everyone who comes to this forum and reads the ground rules of what we are doing here - pursuing Epicurean philosophy.

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

I don't think this can make them happy, but why should I decide for them?

I absolutely agree that we have absolutely no right to decide for other people what they should choose to believe.

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

But I respect the ideas of others. I'll never find myself saying, I'm right, you're wrong.

This is what religions say.

Epicurus is not a prophet, but a philosopher, his wisdom is human and perfectible.

Saying "I am right and you are wrong" depends entirely on the subject matter at hand. Many many issues are matters of interpretation and discretion. But if someone tells me that they are never going to die, presuming that the person is someone with whom we have entered discussion in good faith, I tell them "you are wrong."

I say "presuming it is someone who enters discussion in good faith" to distinguish the situation of a conversation with a religious fanatic, with whom I would not choose to engage anyway, but with whom I would not want to talk unless I were sure that the fanatic were not capable of resolving the dispute by force.

So in general I think the issue of how to discuss things is one in which great discretion is required, with the full truth reserved to those with whom the full truth can really be shared.

But on core issues of fact, discussed among friends, I think Epicurus was certainly correct to have said, as [recorded by Diogenes Laertius, that](#)

"[The wise man] will be a dogmatist but not a mere skeptic;."

Post by “michelepinto” of April 1, 2019 at 1:26 AM

In the scientific world everything is questioned, always.

Newton's laws on universal gravitation have been superseded by Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which in turn can be overcome by even broader laws.

In the same way I do not struggle to define "Truth" what Epicurus taught us and that we also experience every day. But I do not exclude that we can arrive at greater truths.

A good example could be the scientific studies done today on happiness with hundreds or thousands of volunteers and study methods not available at the time of Epicurus.

(The studies I know all confirm what Epicurus said).

On "Few days in Athen" you told me right away that I would like it. I bought the ebook, but I haven't read it yet.

When I say "I'll never find myself saying, I'm right, you're wrong" I mean before the discussion. Otherwise the debate would be useless, a dialogue between the deaf. Later, of course, I will draw my own conclusions.

Post by "Elli" of April 1, 2019 at 8:56 AM

Dogma = from the ancient Greek verb {δοκέω-δοκῶ} = dokeo-doko.



This verb has a number of different meanings and synonyms in the Greek language, such as:
"I believe, I think, I consider, I guess, I imagine, I hypothesize (=I suppose), I decide."

πιστεύω, νομίζω, θεωρώ, φρονώ, μαντεύω, φαντάζομαι, υποθέτω, αποφασίζω.

The same Greek verb is generally interpreted in religious discussion to mean: "I (strongly) believe, I guess, I imagine and I decide" (without evidence, due to an absolute revealed religious truth).

But this same Greek verb is generally interpreted in Greek philosophy as: "I think, I consider, I hypothesize (=I suppose) and I decide" (from a knowledge that I have acquired after observing evidence).

Thus, if some say to us that we are wrong to be dogmatists, we answer them by saying that they are making the mistake of using this verb according to its meaning in religion rather than in Greek philosophy, and that we are using the word as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus used it!

If some say to us that we are wrong to be orthodox, we answer them by saying that we are ortho = means right + doxes (=doctrines), which means we hold a system of teachings that we think,

Post by “Elli” of April 1, 2019 at 8:58 AM



ΕΠΙΚΟΥΡΟΥ ΠΡΟΣΦΩΝΗΣΙΣ XXIX (29)

Παρρησία γὰρ ἔγωγε χρώμενος φυσιολογῶν χρησιμαδεῖν τὰ συμφέροντα
πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις μᾶλλον ἢ βουλοίμιν, κἂν μηδεὶς μέλλη συνήσειν, ἢ
συγκατατιθέμενος τοῖς δόξαις καρποῦσθαι τὸν πυκνὸν παραπίπτοντα
παρὰ τὸν πολλῶν ἔπαινον. [Ancient Greek]

Διότι ἐγὼ βεβαίως θα προτιμούσα μελετώντας τη Φύση να ανακοινώσω
με παρρησία αυτά που είναι ωφέλιμα σε όλους τους ανθρώπους, ακόμη
και αν δεν συμφωνήσει κανείς μαζί μου, παρά να συμβιβάζομαι με τις
κοινότοπες δοξασίες και να καρπώνομαι τον συγνό έπαινο των πολλών.

[New Greek]

Post by “michelepinto” of April 1, 2019 at 11:28 AM

The Italian word "dogma" means: "Principle that is accepted as true or just, without critical examination or discussion: proclaim a dogma: in Catholic theology, truth revealed by God or defined by the Church as such, imposed on believers as an article of faith."

In English the meaning is: "A principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true."

This kind of "dogma" is the only one I do not want.

I'm sorry for the misunderstanding.

Post by “Hiram” of April 1, 2019 at 12:02 PM

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

The Italian word "dogma" means: "Principle that is accepted as true or just, without critical examination or discussion: proclaim a dogma: in Catholic theology, truth revealed by God or defined by the Church as such, imposed on believers as an article of faith."

In English the meaning is: "A principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true."

Epicurus said that the sage would be a dogmatist (in the English meaning, as we have nothing to do with the Catholic faith).

The very first thing said in Epicurus' epistle to Herodotus is to make sure that words correspond to things clearly observed in nature. We can't use "dogmatism" the way that Catholics and other Platonic, superstitious sects use it. We have to (re-)define words according to nature, and this was done time and again by the founders of EP.

This is because the entire system is **based on the study of nature**, like science but in the realm of philosophy so as to include ethics. **The Nature of things has real, inescapable repercussions on human happiness.**

So that (while the God issue is a fair one to question, and I'm one who does), we do have reason to claim many truths if we use the canon (the senses and faculties) and the methods and checks and balances provided to us by nature itself. So we are dogmatists in the philosophical sense, because **we are based firmly on the study of nature--which is to say, reality**. While there's no need to be arrogant, we do believe people should philosophize with their feet on the ground 😊

Post by “michelepinto” of April 1, 2019 at 12:11 PM

Thanks for the important clarifications.

Post by “Cassius” of April 1, 2019 at 5:33 PM

[Quote from michelepinto](#)

"Principle that is accepted as true or just, without critical examination or discussion: proclaim a dogma

This form of "dogma" would be absolutely unacceptable to all of us, I am sure!

Michele you will see that Frances Wright does a very good job of campaigning against just this type of dogma. I recall she has Epicurus criticize the Pythagoreans on exactly this point.

I also think that one day when I am able to prevail on you to read the Norman DeWitt book that you will find that you agree with his take on it too.

The germ of an issue with which we do wrestle, of course, is the position taken by Pyrrho and the Sceptics that *nothing* is in fact "true," or the position by Cicero that all things are "merely probable."

Have you read the remaining fragments of Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference" as translated by DeLacy? There is an EXCELLENT explanatory essay by DeLacy at the end of that book about how Epicurus differed from Plato and Aristotle on the issue of what truth is and what things we should be confident of and which we should not.

For the moment we will just proceed "dogmatically" taking the position that you are not taking

sides with those "...trifler[s], who pervert all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards." 😊

Post by "michelepinto" of April 2, 2019 at 12:58 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I also think that one day when I am able to prevail on you to read the Norman DeWitt book that you will find that you agree with his take on it too.

I hope somebody will translate it in Italian!

Post by "Cassius" of April 2, 2019 at 6:12 AM

Elli and I have discussed getting it translated to Greek too, but so far have not made much progress. We contacted the University of Minnesota press about it and it remains in copyright for another decade or two.

Post by "michelepinto" of April 2, 2019 at 10:36 AM

I can try to read it in English... does an ebook exist?

Post by "Cassius" of April 2, 2019 at 11:44 AM

Yes it's available through Google books, and if you google some of the greyer sites you can find it online.

Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of April 20, 2019 at 3:31 PM

In logic there are no opinions, only conclusions. And there cannot be two equally valid conclusions based on the same data.

If two persons disagree, then either a logically fallacy was committed in the deduction from the data or one person has data that the other one does not have. The purpose of a dispute among rational people is therefore to exchange these relevant data, so that they will necessarily agree on the conclusion. There is no place left for opinions.

Even the statement that a question is inconclusive based on the available data is a conclusion in itself. To be inclined either one or the other way, while the available data is inconclusive, would already be a fallacy.

Post by “Cassius” of April 20, 2019 at 4:23 PM

Good to hear from you again Florius - I hope you are doing well!

Post by “michelepinto” of April 23, 2019 at 1:11 PM

[Quote from C. Florius Lupus](#)

In logic there are no opinions, only conclusions...

In the pursuit of happiness may be the difference can be in the people itself. Not everybody can be happy of the same thing.

Post by “C. Florius Lupus” of April 24, 2019 at 8:38 PM

Good point! I did not think about this.

But is not the ability to distinguish pleasure and pain the second faculty of Epicurus' "tripod of truth"? This would suggest that Epicurus assumed that pain and pleasure are more or less the same for all humans.

But I understand that people have indeed different desires that make them happy, but it is probably such a specific issue that only affects one individual without the need to achieve an agreement with others. Agreements are only necessary, when we make a common effort to understand the world (science) or need to establish a social contract to coexist without violence. The question whether to have a pizza or a steak for dinner does not really require a debate. Each individual can decide this for himself.