

# Epicurus' Favorite Insults

Post by “Cassius” of April 29, 2021 at 1:17 PM

As to **Nausiphanes** ‘The mollusk,’ ‘The illiterate,’ ‘The cheat,’ ‘The harlot,’ we have the following from DeWitt's EAHP chapter three:

How long Epicurus sojourned with Nausiphanes it is impossible to say, but the duration of the discipleship was certainly long enough to engender exceptional bitterness of feeling. Cicero records in a malicious moment that being "on the spot," as it were, and unable to deny obligation, Epicurus assailed his teacher with all sorts of insulting epithets. This statement can be documented, thanks to the researches of later Platonistic adversaries, who rummaged the records for damaging items of evidence. From a single list we learn that among the opprobrious epithets were "lung-fish," "dumb animal," "imposter," and "prostitute." These insults call for comment. Of the four words the first two and the second two constitute pairs.

The word here rendered "lung-fish" has been erroneously translated "mollusc" and "jelly-fish." The Greek is *pleumon*, "lung," and Pliny describes the creature as having no more sensation than a block of wood, while Sextus Empiricus explains the word as equivalent to "insensate."<sup>30</sup> The word rendered "dumb animal" above is usually translated "illiterate." To so describe Nausiphanes would be absurd. The Greek is *agrammatos* and when used of animals it signifies "dumb," just as the psalmist speaks of the horse and the mule "which have no understanding." Just what justification Epicurus may have had for so characterizing his teacher can only be surmised. In their opposition to skepticism and acceptance of dogmatism they were agreed. It is conceivable therefore that the bitterness of Epicurus arose from his inability to bring his teacher around to his own views on the topics of free will and determinism and the function of philosophy, which were the chief grounds of his rupture with the teachings of Democritus. At this stage of his career he was litigious and shunned no controversy.

This is not the whole story, however. The imperturbability of Pyrrho was indifference and a sort of resignation to belief in the impossibility of knowledge. With this sort of resignation it is clear that neither Nausiphanes nor Epicurus had any patience. The distinction of becoming the first dogmatists may perhaps be claimed for them. Nausiphanes admired only the disposition of Pyrrho and rejected his skepticism. He erected a canon of knowledge, which means that he asserted the possibility of knowledge. He called his canon the Tripod, though information is lacking us concerning the three legs of this triad. The astute Epicurus did not take over this name, but he did set up three criteria of knowledge, the Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings. These he chose to call his Canon. That it was in reality filched from Nausiphanes is expressly stated by a reliable writer.<sup>31</sup> If there be truth in this report — and such charges were often made with little justification — the achievement of Epicurus was to bring the idea to universal knowledge; his gifts as a publicist were of a high order.

There remain the epithets "imposter" and "prostitute." For these it is the most plausible explanation that Epicurus discovered his teacher to be living a double life, preaching virtue, as all philosophers did, and at the same time practicing vice. Cicero informs us that most philosophers condoned the practice of homosexuality, and for once he agreed emphatically with Epicurus in condemning it as against Plato.<sup>32</sup> The latter, as is well known, had essayed in his *Symposium* to sublimate this passion into a passion for knowledge. Epicurus also wrote a *Symposium*, in which he retorted: "Intercourse never was the cause of any good and it is fortunate if it does no harm."<sup>83</sup> In the case of Nausiphanes there is another item of evidence from the pen of Epicurus: "As for my own opinion, I presume that the high-steppers (Platonists) will think me really a pupil of the 'lung-fish' and that I listened to his lectures in the company of certain lads who were stupid from the night's carousing. For he was both an immoral man and addicted to such practices as made it impossible for him to arrive at wisdom."<sup>34</sup> The practices here referred to have been interpreted as the study of mathematics,<sup>35</sup> but the mention of adolescent lads, of drinking, and of immorality make the true reference unmistakable to any reader conversant with the shadier side of student life among the Greeks.

As for Epicurus himself, even if strict in his views about chastity, there is no doubt that he was an irritating pupil. It will be recalled how he put his early instructor in a corner over the topic of chaos. The following extract reveals no more the irritable teacher than the irritating pupil; the reference is to Nausiphanes: "Well, good riddance to the braggart, for that rotter, when in a temper, would have a torrent of the sophistic bluster at the tip of his tongue, like many another of the servile creatures."<sup>3e</sup> It may be mentioned that Epicurus classified all men as slaves who, like the physicists, believed in Necessity, or, like the poets, in Fate, or, like Theophrastus, in Fortune, or, like the people, in divine interference, or like the Platonists, in astral deities, or those who, by pursuing the conventional education, surrendered their freedom for the pursuit of power, fame, or wealth.