

# Episode One Hundred Four - More Torquatus and a Question: Was The Ancient Epicurean Movement A Cult?

Post by "Cassius" of January 15, 2022 at 6:18 AM

DeWitt's main argument is here:

Quote

EPICURUS NOT AN EMPIRICIST

In the chapter on the New Physics it will be shown that Epicurus set up Twelve Elementary Principles, which he demonstrated like theorems of geometry, thus classifying himself as a deductive reasoner. The presumption that he was an empiricist has been based in large part upon the zest with which he brandished certain arguments in refutation of the skeptics, who denied the validity of sensation. These arguments are succinctly recorded by Laertius and more amply by Lucretius. The succinct account begins: "Nor does anything exist that can refute the sensations, for neither can a sensation in a given class refute the sensation in the same class, because they are of equal validity, nor can the sensation in a given class refute the sensation in another class, because they are not criteria of the same phenomena." \*1\* The first limb of this statement has reference to the objection urged by the skeptics that one drinker reports the wine to be sour and another sweet or one bather reports the water to be warm and another cold. The answer of Epicurus was sensible, that the difference was in the observers.<sup>2</sup> Neither does the one judgment cancel the other, because each has validity for the observer, nor does the contradiction prove the fallibility of sensation, because the sensation in each instance performs its function as a criterion.

The second limb of the statement means that the ears cannot contradict the nose if the latter registers the smell of peppermint, which calls for no comment.

A subsequent item in the list of Laertius may seem to support the advocates of empiricism: "nor again can reason refute the sensations, because it depends upon them entirely." However, to interpret this as meaning that the whole content of consciousness is derived from the sensations would be in violation of the Canon, which makes no mention of reason, and would also be contrary to the belief in Anticipations, that is, innate ideas, which is a kind of intuitionism and incompatible with empiricism. The meaning is rather that bereft of the sensations a human being is virtually dead, which, as already mentioned, we know to have been an argument of Epicurus.<sup>8</sup>

There is still another item in the list of Laertius that has been so translated as to lend plausibility to the charge of empiricism. One version runs, "For all thoughts have their origin in sensations," and another, "For all our notions are derived from perceptions." 4 The source of the error is an imprecision. The Greek noun translated above as "thoughts" or "notions" is \*epinoiai,\* which by virtue of its prefix signifies accessory, derivative or inferential ideas. These secondary ideas are not to be confused with others which to them are primary, \*ennoiai\* or \*ennoemata.\* For instance, Epicurus in the Little Epitome outlines seven of his Twelve Elementary Principles and then adds: "Even this brief statement affords an outline of the nature of the real existences sufficient for inferential ideas \*(epinoiais\)."\* 5 To illustrate: the principle that the universe consists of atoms and void is a primary idea; the knowledge that the soul is distributed over the whole organism is secondary; it is inferred from the sensation of touch and other phenomena. 6

Other plausible reasons for ascribing empiricism and belief in the infallibility of sensation to Epicurus will disappear if the ambiguities be cleared up that inhere in the statement "[all sensations are true.](#)" If "sensation" and \*sensus\* be a rendering of \*aisthesis,\* which means the perception of particulars such as color and shape, then it was idle for Cicero to be arguing against Epicurus, because Aristotle often enough declared the perception of particulars to be always true.7

It consequently follows that \*sensus\* must correspond to "phantasia," an inference confirmed by the evidence of Plutarch and Sextus Empiricus.8 This term was employed in the same sense by Aristotle and Epicurus; it signifies the composite image of particulars. Both recognized the possibility of error, but Epicurus was more keenly interested in this factor because by his time the vogue of skepticism had made the erection of criteria a vital necessity. He was consequently at pains to locate the source of error, and he found it in the hasty action of the automatic mind. For example, the boat on which the observer is a passenger is standing still but it seems to be moving when a second boat is passing by. In such an instance the eyes are not playing the observer false; it is the hasty judgment of the automatic mind that is in error. However odd it seems in English, Epicurus called this "the addition of opinion." In explanation of this the statement should be recalled, that "sensation is irrational and incapable of adding or subtracting anything." It is the automatic mind that adds motion to the standing ship and subtracts it from the moving ship. Lucretius cites several examples of similar errors.9

In order to follow this topic through it is necessary to elucidate a point of terminology and semantic development. In all ages of the Greek language terminology was plastic. Thus Aristotle could employ \*phantasia\* to denote the imaginative faculty while using \*phantasm\* of the individual appearance, whether true or false.10 Epicurus, having a different concern, truth and error, restricted \*phantasia\* to true and real appearances, using \*phantasm\* only of the false visions of the insane or of dreamers and also of the

phenomena of the heavens, which he declared too remote for clear observation.<sup>11</sup> He even urged his disciple to scorn "those who concede dependable vision *\*(phantasia)\** from distances," where the best scholars emend with misplaced ingenuity.<sup>12</sup>

Yet this is only part of the story. With Aristotle the term *\*phantasia,\** not being restricted to true presentations, readily serves to denote visions of the imagination as a faculty. It is from this use that the English language has been enriched by the derivatives *\*fancy\** and *\*fantasy,\** which denote the absolutely unreal. From this same drift of semantic change we have the word *\*fantastic.\** Epicurus, on the contrary, having chosen *\*phantasia\** to denote a true presentation, employed *\*fantastic\** to describe the objectively true or real. It becomes a synonym of *\*immediate\** and opposed to the remote. For instance, it makes no difference whether he writes "the immediate perceptions" or "the fantastic perceptions." Both alike pertain to the joint activity of the senses and the mind, by which it is recognized that the animal standing over there is an ox or that the man approaching is Plato. These perceptions are "fantastic," strange as the usage seems, because they result in recognitions. The imagination is not involved.

While Epicurus was adamant in his determination to defend the validity of the sensations as being the means of direct contact between man and reality and as possessing precedence over reason, he exhibits no desire to defend the individual sensation. The fallacies of those who impute to him belief in the infallibility of sensation lie partly in their failure to observe the ambiguity of the word *\*true\** and in their confusion of "truth" with "value."

It is not difficult to differentiate the various meanings of *\*true\** and it is essential to right understanding. For example, when Epicurus declared that "the phantasms seen by the insane and in dreams are true," he meant that they were "real" and existed independently of the madman or the dreamer, because "they act as a stimulus and that which does not exist does not deliver a stimulus." <sup>13</sup> These phantasms, however, are not "true" in the sense that a sensation experienced by the waking observer is true. The dreamer may have a vision of a centaur but no centaurs exist in real life. If the waking man sees an ox, then the sensation is true because the stimulus is delivered by a living ox.

A still different meaning of *\*true\** may be discerned when Epicurus denominates his system as "true philosophy." He means it is true in the sense that his Twelve Elementary Principles are true or in the sense that the modern scientist believes the accepted calculation of the speed of light to be true. This may be called absolute truth, if there is such a thing.

It remains to speak of the relatively true. The views of a tower at various distances may be cited as examples. Each is true relative to the distance; its value as evidence of the facts is another matter. This distinction was no novelty to the ancients; Sextus

Empiricus sets it forth at some length in a discussion of Epicureanism.<sup>14</sup>

Also worthy of mention is the sensation which is optically true but false to the facts. An example much brandished by the skeptics was the bent image of the oar immersed in the water.<sup>18</sup> Epicurus made logical provision for this difficulty: "Of two sensations the one cannot refute the other,<sup>16</sup> because we give attention to all sensations." This statement alone would acquit him of belief in the infallibility of sensation, because it is distinctly implied that some sensations are employed to correct others.

The example of the tower will serve as a transition from the topic of ambiguity to that of confusion. When modern scholars seize upon the saying "[all sensations are true](#)," which appears nowhere in the extant writings of Epicurus, and stretch it to mean that all sensations are reliable or trustworthy or "that the senses cannot be deceived," they are confusing the concept of truth with the concept of value.<sup>17</sup> They overlook the fact that even a truthful witness may fall short of delivering the whole truth or may even give false evidence. The distant view of the square tower is quite true relative to the distance but it fails to reveal the whole truth about the tower.

To assume that Epicurus was unaware of these plain truths, as one must if belief in the infallibility of sensation is imputed to him, is absurd. It is because he was aware that the value of sensations, apart from their truth, varied all the way from totality to zero, that he exhorted beginners "under all circumstances to watch the sensations and especially the immediate perceptions whether of the intellect or any of the criteria whatsoever." <sup>18</sup> Obviously, so far from thinking the sensations infallible, he was keenly aware of the possibility of error and drew sharp attention to the superior values of immediate sensations.

When once these ambiguities and confusions have been discerned and eliminated, it is possible to state the teaching of Epicurus with some of that precision by which he set high store. In the meaning of the Canon, then, a sensation is an *\*aisthesis\**. All such sensations may possess value; otherwise there would be no sense in saying, "We pay attention to all sensations." Their values, however, range all the way from totality to zero. The value is total only when the sensation is immediate. For example, when Aristotle says, "The sense of sight is not deceived as to color," this is true only of the close view, because colors fade in more distant views.

Sensations, however, usually present themselves in combinations of color, shape, size, smell, and so on. An immediate presentation of such a composite unit is a *\*phantasia\**. All such presentations are true, but they do not rank as criteria in the meaning of the Canon, for the reason that the intelligence has come into play. An act of recognition *\*\(\epaisthesis\)\** has taken place in the mind of the observer, which is secondary to the primary reaction that registered color, shape, size, smell, and so forth.

That Epicurus did not regard these composite sensations as criteria is made clear by a statement of his own: "The fidelity of the recognitions guarantees the truth of the sensations." 19 For example, the animal standing yonder is recognized as a dun-colored ox. This is a secondary reaction. Only the primary perceptions of color, shape, size, and so on constitute a direct contact between man and the physical environment. The truth of these perceptions is confirmed by the fidelity of the recognition.

Again, let it be assumed that the quality of sweetness is registered by sensation. It is not, however, sensation that says, "This is honey"; a secondary reaction in the form of a recognition involving intelligence has taken place. This, in the terminology of Epicurus, is "a fantastic perception of the intelligence." These were not given the rank of criteria by Epicurus for the reason already cited. It is on record, however, that later Epicureans did so.<sup>20</sup>

So far is Epicurus from believing all sensations to be true in the meaning of the Canon that he guards against error in various ways. In the first place, attention must be paid to all sensations, as already mentioned. Next, the sensations of the individual must be checked by those of others: "Consequently attention must be paid to the immediate feelings and to the sensations, in common with others in matters of common concern and individually in matters of private concern and to all clear presentations of every one of the criteria." 21 This guardedness was imperative, because contemporary skepticism was flourishing.

The problem of skepticism is attacked disjunctively in the Authorized Doctrines: either all sensations are rejected as valid evidence or some are admitted and some rejected. The former procedure is dealt with in Doctrine 23: "If you are going to make war on all the sensations, you will not even have a standard by reference to which you shall judge those of them which you say are deceptive." This makes it plain once more that not all sensations are true but the validity of some must be checked by the evidence of others.

The Doctrine above is directed at the outright skeptics. The second limb of the disjunctive approach deals with the Platonists, who rejected terrestrial phenomena as deceptive while accepting the evidences of celestial phenomena. Epicurus denied "clear vision \*(phantasia)\* from distances," if only the text be not emended.<sup>22</sup> He wrongly insisted that heavenly phenomena could be explained from the terrestrial. This betrayed him into committing his most notorious blunder; for the reason that the magnitude of a fire does not seem to diminish with distance as does that of concrete objects he declared the sun to be no larger or only a little larger than it appears to be.<sup>23</sup> This ridiculous judgment calls for no comment, but it may be mentioned that Plato's belief in astral gods, however grandiose, is no more acceptable. Epicurus not only censured Plato for accepting the evidence of celestial phenomena while rejecting that of terrestrial phenomena but also condemns him as a mythologer: "Whenever a man admits one phenomenon and rejects another equally compatible with the

phenomenon in question, it is manifest that he takes leave of all scientific study of nature and takes refuge in mythology." \*2i \*Hostility to Plato was combined in this case with contempt of mythology.

Nevertheless Doctrine 23 throws light upon the working of the mind in respect of the criteria. Mental activity may be automatic or volitional. It is the automatic mind that errs; it may judge the distant tower to be round; this is the error of "opinion." The discreet observer knows the distant view to be deceptive and suspends judgment until the tower is observed at close hand. A tentative judgment is then confirmed or disproved.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the size of the sun, which is visible but never at close hand, the judgment held good, as Epicurus believed, because not contradicted.

The sensations are consistently regarded as witnesses in court.<sup>28</sup> Their evidence may be false, as in the case of the oar half-immersed in the water, which appears to be bent. False evidence is to be corrected by that of other sensations. The evidence of all witnesses must receive attention. The volitional mind, as opposed to the automatic mind, which errs, functions as judge.

By way of concluding this account of the Sensations as criteria it is well to present a synoptic view of the evidence. Nowhere in our extant Little Epitome or the Authorized Doctrines do we find the statement "that [all sensations are true](#)." On the contrary, the Epitome begins by urging the student "to give heed to the sensations under all circumstances and especially the immediate perceptions whether of the intelligence or of any criterion whatsoever," which manifestly allows some value to all sensations and special value to immediate sensations.<sup>27</sup> At the end of the Epitome the student is warned to check his own observations by those of others.<sup>28</sup> These authentic statements are incompatible with belief in the infallibility of sensation. They presume belief in gradations of value among sensations and also the need of perpetual caution against error.

Of three Authorized Doctrines devoted to the topic, 23, 24, and 25, the first urges attention to "all the clear evidence"; the second warns that the rejection of all the sensations leaves the observer without the means of checking sensation by sensation; the third warns of the confusion resulting from rejecting any particular sensation. All of these are of the nature of warnings and completely belie the reckless verdict of an otherwise meticulous scholar "that the Epicureans boldly said that every impression of sense is true and trustworthy." <sup>29</sup>

Lastly, in every instance above mentioned the word for sensation is \*aisthesis \*and not \*phantasia.\* That somewhere Epicurus had actually written "all phantasias are true" seems certain; in which of his writings it is unknown, but the evidence is sufficient.<sup>30</sup> This statement, as being assailable, was pounced upon by his detractors and zealously ventilated. If, however, the extant texts of Epicurus be taken as a guide, the phantasia or "fantastic" perception is merely the highest grade of evidence; the \*aisthesis, \*the

perception of particulars, is the criterion.

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