

On Nature Book 28 - Reconstruction By David Sedley - 1973 Article (Discussion)

Post by "Hiram" of April 17, 2019 at 2:43 PM

Previous commentary

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This reminds me of Nietzsche's treatment of words as both authority or power upon creation / the world, as well as with the insistence among Epicureans in a careful choice of words, something on which we today and in the English language have not focused enough. We have instead been careful to avoid certain words (like faith, God or gods, hedonism) because of their conventionally understood meanings, instead.

Further up from this passage it suggests the need for "adapting certain conventional usages"-- which reminds me of the practice (which is mentioned in the recent "against empty words" video) of re-defining words according to nature, and Polyaeus insistence on this in his scroll "on definitions".

In p. 47 Epicurus here mentions that he has recently learned about the "difficulties of using the correct names for individual things". This resonates with my observation that the ancient Epicureans preferred to move away from speaking in the abstract (man) and trying to align their speech as clearly as possible with the concrete examples of categories (humans, men in the plural) to accentuate the individual specimens.

There seems to have been a more complete, comprehensive Epicurean theory of speech, rhetorics, and linguistics than most of us today are aware of (which would make sense in light of the insistence on clear speech).

P. 48 again confirms what we know, that the Epicureans used conventional words and did not disregard conventional meaning ("our own usage does not flout linguistic convention") but yet assigned new and particular meaning to them, keeping in mind their distinct, clear meaning.

p. 49 mentions a work titled "On Ambiguity" as a source that explained why it's an error to transfer words that design the knowable to things that belong in the category of the unknowable. Here, Metodorus and Epicurus are also discussing who is and who is not a worthy intellectual opponent enough to dedicate time to them in light of the goal of benefiting sincere, committed students who want to be happy. Maybe we should discuss these matters more in detail in order to try to imagine what was discussed in that work.

p 50 contains a great quote in defense of empirical thinking, and the idea that false opinions can find themselves into the words of a language "through a non-empirical process, not

following one of our current divisions, but simply arising from an internal movement". This is below called a "trace of suspicion" and a call is made to "turn to the entire faculty of empirical reasoning". This passage is beautiful and of great value!

p. 51: "for the opinion which he holds is, I know, by no means empirically based on current evidence ... every opinion to which we had not yet at the time applied an empirical assessment should be referred to the following rule: it is not possible, in my view, to subject every opinion immediately to an empirical assessment, but it is sufficient that a man will be ready merely to display a capacity for reasoning empirically when the opportunity allows. For someone who examines it with this lack of empirical reasoning and in an utterly inadequate fashion, will nevertheless be able to assess it empirically, (if it is an opinion that concerns actions, when he has the opportunity to observe someone who proceeds to action on the basis of it; he will see with what results the person performs this action and under its guidance he will arrive at the truth just as much in the category of avoidance as in that of choice".

The above passage re: how to think empirically about action is mentioned in the video on empty words. Concerning theoretical and unempirical opinions, they can be considered false if an empirical opinion based on them is untrue, or if when acted upon they lead to disadvantageous action (meaning that, here, the definite existence of "moral truths" is posited based on disadvantage).

p 55 Epicurus mentions the importance of the canon ("keeping at his side a yardstick with the help of which ... he will not proceed in the direction of falsehood"), and of being careful to await for confirmation (that is, empirical evidence) before we declare something to be true.

p 56 closes by citing how important this discourse is: "... try 10,000 times over to commit to memory what I and Metrodorus here have just said".