

A Useful Analogy: The Preflight Checklist

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2019 at 9:40 PM

Here's another particular important passage that has always to me had a troublesome translation, from Book 4. Munro and Bailey seem fairly understandable, but awkward. Humphries (as we referenced before) seems to go over the top with his "idiotic" comment.

But maybe the most difficult of the phrasing is the reference to "false senses" at the end of the line. "False senses" or any phrase similar to that jumps out at me as a huge red flag of possible confusion. Once again it seems to me that the Daniel Browne translator feels the same concern I do, and his "false representation of the senses" gives us a limiting word that helps explain that it is not the senses that are false, but our conclusions based on them. And to me that is a HUGE point of clarification which even Munro, who I think is the considerably more sympathetic to Epicurus than Bailey or Humphries, fails to make. So my practice nowadays is to compare any translation that I find to any degree questionable against the Daniel Browne version.

Quote

Munro:

And if reason shall be unable to explain away the cause why things which close at hand were square, at a distance looked round, it yet is better, if you are at a loss for the reason, to state erroneously the causes of each shape than to let slip from your grasp on any side things manifest and ruin the groundwork of belief and wrench up all the foundations on which rest life and existence. For not only would all reason give way, life itself would at once fall to the ground, unless you choose to trust the senses and shun precipices and all things else of this sort that are to be avoided, and to pursue the opposite things. All that host of words then be sure is quite unmeaning which has been drawn out in array against the senses. Once more, as in a building, if the rule first applied is wry, and the square is untrue and swerves from its straight lines, and if there is the slightest hitch in any part of the level, all the construction must be faulty, all must be wry, crooked, sloping, leaning forwards, leaning backwards, without symmetry, so that some parts seem ready to fall, others do fall, ruined all by the first erroneous measurements; so too all reason of things must needs prove to you distorted and false, which is founded on false senses.

Bailey:

Therefore, whatever they have perceived on each occasion, is true. And if reason is unable to unravel the cause, why those things which close at hand were square, are

seen round from a distance, still it is better through lack of reasoning to be at fault in accounting for the causes of either shape, rather than to let things clear seen slip abroad from your grasp, and to assail the grounds of belief, and to pluck up the whole foundations on which life and existence rest. For not only would all reasoning fall away; life itself too would collapse straightway, unless you chose to trust the senses, and avoid headlong spots and all other things of this kind which must be shunned, and to make for what is opposite to these. Know, then, that all this is but an empty store of words, which has been drawn up and arrayed against the senses. Again, just as in a building, if the first ruler is awry, and if the square is wrong and out of the straight lines, if the level sags a whit in any place, it must needs be that the whole structure will be made faulty and crooked, all awry, bulging, leaning forwards or backwards, and out of harmony, so that some parts seem already to long to fall, or do fall, all betrayed by the first wrong measurements; even so then your reasoning of things must be awry and false, which all springs from false senses.

Humphries:

And if your reasoning faculties can find

No explanation why a thing looks square

When seen close up, and round when farther off,

Even so, it might be better for a man

Who lacks the power of reason, to give out

Some idiotic theory, than to drop

All hold of basic principles, break down

Every foundation, tear apart the frame

That holds our lives, our welfare. All is lost

Not only reason, but our very life,

Unless we have the courage and the nerve

To trust the senses,

If a building

Were planned by someone with a crooked ruler

Or an inaccurate square, or spirit-level

A little out of true, the edifice,
In consequence, would be a frightful mess,
Warped, wobbly, wish-wash, weak and wavering,
Waiting a welter of complete collapse -
So let your rule of reason never be
Distorted by the fallacies of sense
Lest all your logic prove a road to ruin.

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So here again I like Browne, which seems to me at least a little more clear:

And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power, to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.

Lastly, as in a building, if the principle rule of the artificer be not true, if his line be not exact, or his level bear in to the least to either side, every thing must needs be wrong and crooked, the whole fabric must be ill-shaped, declining, hanging over, leaning and irregular, so that some parts will seem ready to fall and tumble down, because the whole was at first disordered by false principles. So the reason of things must of necessity be wrong and false which is founded upon a false representation of the senses.