Tactical Question for the Group Re Terminology In Discussing Reason and Logic

Post by “Cassius” of January 20, 2021 at 5:59 PM

We don't want to turn this into a debate on DeWitt's reliability, because I think that what he's saying here is probably agreed with by the commentators - this isn't (to my understanding) an area of controversy.

So to repeat, we need to figure out if Epicurus did indeed consider these principles of physics to be the equivalent of axioms which are to be considered the ultimate building blocks of the philosophy. I will go ahead and say that that is indeed the way I view the Epicurus' take on this subject. These principles of the nature of things are ultimately something that can be converted into the methods by which the universe is concluded to be natural and not supernatural, so I see room for latitude in updating them. But I think Epicurus considered them to be so well established as to be "certain" and that reasoning based on them would be among the most certain of truths that we can be confident of.

That's the way I treat them and to the extent that we part of what we have to do is to report what it is that Epicurus held, I would think this is a central part of the philosophy.

IN THE Epicurean scheme of knowledge the Physics takes precedence over the Ethics because it furnishes the major premises from which the nature of the soul is deduced and the proper conduct of life is formulated. The Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings, that is, the Canon, are not represented as furnishing the content of knowledge but as being instruments of precision by which the certainty of knowledge is tested at all times.

The topic of physics was given encyclopedic treatment in the famous thirty-seven books entitled *On Nature*, which Lucretius rendered *De Rerum Natura*, "On the Nature of Things." By implication this title signified "the true nature of things," because Epicurus styled his system "genuine physiology," plainly indicating that all other systems were false.[1] Consistently with this assumption Lucretius incessantly employed the phrase *vera ratio*, "true reason." Similarly Lucian speaks of "the truth and the philosophy that is invariably right," [2] referring to Epicureanism, and his friend Celsus published his slashing attack upon Christianity under the caption *alethes logos*, which is usually rendered "true account," but its equivalence to the Epicurean "true philosophy" ought to be manifest. It implies that Christianity is a body of false doctrine.

For the use of younger pupils the contents of these thirty-seven books on physics were subsequently reduced to a single roll. This bore a title which means "the twelve simplifications" or "the twelve principles reduced to elementary form." [3] A single mention of this has survived, but the twelve principles themselves may be readily assembled from the first two books of Lucretius and the extant Little Epitome addressed to Herodotus. These two accounts are in essential agreement in respect of both content and arrangement. The chief difference is that the Little Epitome omits mention of the doctrine of the swerve of the atoms, manifestly for the reason that in the judgment of Epicurus this principle was a topic more suitable for the advanced student.

Twelve Elementary Principles. The greater interest attaches to this lost work because its importance has been overlooked down to the present time; the very title of it suggests a more orderly and coherent statement of the principles of physics than is elsewhere known to us from classical antiquity. It calls attention to the talents of Epicurus as a teacher and an organizer of knowledge and ought to be somewhat disconcerting to those who dismiss him as a muddled thinker. It also deserves attention from those who call him an empiricist, because these principles are treated as major premises from which the rest of knowledge is derived by deductive reasoning.

Before listing these Twelve Principles it will be well to recall that Epicurus was averse to the use of technical terminology and declared clearness the sole requisite of style. As a substitute for technical terms he resorted often to the use of synonyms and paraphrases as a means of attaining the desired clearness. To illustrate, in the foreword to the Little Epitome, as a preparation for the tabulation of the Twelve Principles he refers to them in seven different ways: the most comprehensive doctrines; the outline of the whole system; the panoramic view; the most commanding view over the universe of things; the most general outlines; truths condensed to elements and succinct statements; the condensed view of the integrated survey of the whole.

THE TWELVE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES

The arrangement of the principles is orderly and easily discerned. The first six tell us what can be predicated of the universe, the next four deal with motion, and the rest with the qualities of matter, whether in the form of atoms or compounds of atoms. It is worthy of notice that space is called void as something self-existent and that time is not mentioned; discussion of the latter is found later as a rider to the third principle. In the ensuing list the items have been simplified in the direction of modern terminology:

1. Matter is uncreatable.
2. Matter is indestructible.
3. The universe consists of solid bodies and void.
4. Solid bodies are either compounds or simple.
5. The multitude of atoms is infinite.
6. The void is infinite in extent.

8. The speed of atomic motion is uniform.

9. Motion is linear in space, vibratory in compounds.

10. Atoms are capable of swerving slightly at any point in space or time.

11. Atoms are characterized by three qualities, weight, shape and size.

12. The number of the different shapes is not infinite, merely innumerable.

The first two principles deal with the indestructibility and uncreatability of matter. If the question be raised how the truth of these propositions is established, the answer is by deduction. It must be observed that Epicurus makes no show of his logical procedures and, like the layman, employs the enthymeme or elliptical syllogism. Nevertheless, if his omissions be discerned and then supplied, the procedure is as follows. The purpose is to demonstrate the uncreatability of matter. Let it then be assumed for the purpose of the argument that the reverse is true: Matter is creatable. This assumption becomes the major premise and the method becomes deductive. The deductions would be that there would be no need of seeds of plants, no limits of size, no geographical distribution, no part for the seasons to play, and no necessity for fish to be born in the sea nor animals on the land.[4] These inferences are all contrary to observed phenomena. Therefore, the assumption is false and the contrary must be true: Matter is uncreatable.

Again, let us assume that matter is destructible and that material things can be reduced to nothingness. Why, then, should they not vanish before our eyes instead of weakening and declining and decaying as we actually see them do? Again, whence would come the substance of the fruits that the earth produces, the waters that feed the springs and the rivers, or the fuel that feeds the stars? To such questions the only true answer can be that the death of one thing is the birth of another. The turnover of material is perpetual in nature. Otherwise all things in the long lapse of time would have passed into nothingness.[5] It then follows, as in the previous instance, that the assumption of the major premise is false. Therefore the contrary is true: Matter is indestructible. It is not to the point to inquire here whether this logical method is sound in this particular application. The point is that the method should be recognized as deductive, not inductive.