

What holds me back from embracing EP

Post by "Cassius" of March 1, 2022 at 4:58 PM

Well I took the time to look at Sedley's article "On Signs" but it is of only limited use. He doesn't attempt to start from scratch and explain the basic issues in laymen's terms. We're generally talk about issues of how and why and when it is permissible to draw conclusions about that which cannot be observed from that which can be observed. DeLacey's book has a long set of commentaries (at the end of the book) that are much more clear about the basic issues. But Sedley is probably more up-to-date, and here are a couple of clips from Sedley that may be a little helpful:

12.14–31). The similarity between the two subjects is so strong that it becomes ‘inconceivable’ that an essential predicate of one should fail to belong to the other. This kind of inconceivability may lack strict logical force, but it is regarded as an entirely cogent criterion of inference,⁴⁶ and the best available (12.32–6; 33.1–9). Sometimes it establishes direct resemblances: to take a mathematical example, it is inconceivable that while the square of four in our world has an area equal to its perimeter its counterparts in other worlds should not (15.28–16.1). Sometimes the inference is analogical: it is inconceivable that while all phenomenal bodies have weight atoms should not (37.12–24).⁴⁷

The favoured example of a sign-inference based solely on the similarity method is ‘Since men within our experience are mortal, men outside our experience are mortal’, and it is instructive to follow its role in the debate. First of all, it illustrates the Epicureans’ grounds for defending the cogency of their method. The premiss that men within our experience are mortal embodies, they point out, extensive research and weighing up of evidence. Both historical records and current experience support it without

46. Strictly speaking, this inconceivability is the proper counterpart of ‘elimination’ in the elimination method, each functioning as the criterion of validity for its class of sign-inference; while ‘similarity’ matches Chrysippian *sunartēsis*, each of them describing the nature of the connexion between antecedent and consequent. Nevertheless, the ‘elimination method’ and the ‘similarity method’ of sign-inference are properly co-ordinate with each other, the apparent asymmetry resulting merely from the different shorthands used in naming them. ‘Inconceivability method’ would have restored symmetry but been too uninformative a title for the Epicureans to adopt.
47. This passage presumably gave one example of simple resemblance, one of analogy. The first is lost in the lacuna. The second is fragmentary, and it may be safer to discount the De Lacys’ ingenious restorations in 19–20 and to take the preserved words at their perfectly satisfactory face value (cf. Philippson, *Diss.*, 39).

that science could work purely by deduction from necessary truths the Stoics were failing to attach sufficient weight to the inductive element in the human learning process to which their epistemology paid lip service (*SVF* II 83; Cicero, *Ac.* II 21, 30). And one can see the point of their refusal to bow to Stoic pressure by reformulating the mortality argument into a deductively valid one: either way it rested primarily on the inductive similarity method, and nothing was gained by adopting a formulation which disguised this fact.

This leads us on to the central problem: why, in spite of all, do the Epicureans concede that some sign-inferences, including that of void from motion, do rely on the elimination method (12.1–14; 14.11–14; 35.29–36.7)? Jürgen Mau, following a suggestion by Bahnsch, interestingly argues that the object was to tease the Stoics by making the repugnant inference from motion to void look logically valid even on their own criterion.⁵² And the De

letter before εἰν appears to be δ or λ. In Epicurean usage συμβεβηκός is just 'property', with 'permanent property', or 'permanent concomitant', and σύμπτωμα, 'accident', as its two species (Demetrius Lacon ap. S.E. *M* x 219ff.; thus also Epicurus, *Ep.Hdt.* 68–71, contrary to the usual interpretation); that the latter species is intended at 34.11ff. can be inferred from the contrast with 33.35–34.5, and was presumably made clear by the καθ' ὃν τ[ό]σον clause qualifying it: 'that this is a property of that in the way in which . . .'

50. The De Lacys' punctuation may mislead: ὄν in 34.25 is resumptive after the long genitive absolute (Denniston, *op. cit.* (n. 25), 428–9), introducing the main clause. In 27–9 I would translate: 'We make sign-inferences according to each of them [viz. the meanings of 'insofar as'], whichever reason dictates' (see LSJ, *s.v.* αἰρέω A II 5).

51. λαμβάνομεν (34.33–4) = 'ascertain' (cf. 35.6), not 'understand'.

52. 'Über die Zuweisung zweier Epikur-Fragmente', *Philologus* 99 (1955), 93–111.

important to the twin principles of epimachism and *oikeiōtē* *turēsis*. I choose the almost literal translations 'attestation' and 'non-contestation', which provide the convenient cognate verbs 'attested' and 'uncontested'. (The verb 'contest' must be thought of here in the sense 'bring evidence against'.) Our only full account of these methods is provided by Sextus Empiricus at *M* VII 211–16 in the course of his historical survey of theories concerning the criterion of truth. It follows a very full and lucid summary of Epicurus' doctrine that all sensations are true (203–10).

I shall begin with some speculation about the historical credentials of this account, based on a close look at 213–14, which reads as follows:

Non-contestation is the following (*akolouthia*) from that which is apparent of the non-apparent thing posited and believed. For example, Epicurus, in saying that there is void, which is non-apparent, confirms this through the self-evident fact of motion. For if void does not exist there ought not to be motion either, since the moving body would lack a place to pass into as a result of everything's being full and solid. Therefore the non-apparent thing believed is uncontested by that which is apparent, since there is motion. Contestation, on the other hand, is something which conflicts with non-contestation. For it is the elimination (*anaskeuē*) of that which is apparent by the positing of the non-apparent thing. For example, the Stoic says that void does not exist,

57. This seems to be the gist of the difficult 31.1–8: there are three species of 'antecedent' sign (cf. 32.11–12), that is, in addition to 'similar' signs, also 'dissimilar' signs (presumably as in most inferences by the elimination method, e.g. motion as a sign of void) and even 'opposite' signs (e.g. going up as a sign of imminent coming down, or night of day?); but if these latter two 'are to be demonstrative of anything, they must necessarily receive the addition of signs which proceed [retaining *πορευομένων* at 31.5–6] on the principle of similarity'. If that is the correct interpretation, the Epicureans apparently deny that an inference by the elimination method is in itself a sign-inference, yet allow that its premiss may be a sign: a delicate position, which the Stoics are said not properly to appreciate (32.8–13). The point, I imagine, is that although the sign-inference which leads us from motion to void is incomplete without its similarity method stage, so that the elimination method stage does not on its own qualify as a sign-inference, nevertheless, *within* the two-stage inference it is motion that operates as the sign of void; and motion is a 'dissimilar' sign operating by the elimination method.

Letter to Pythocles that a good many of the alternative explanations listed are those propounded by Presocratic philosophers, for whom Epicurus had considerable respect.⁷¹ Epicurus recognises that nearly all the theories under consideration have sufficient explanatory force, and knows no way of choosing between these except by testing them for consistency with more familiar phenomena. Unfortunately most pass that test too, and all of those must therefore be accepted as true, if not in our world then at any rate in some part of the universe, whose infinity guarantees that all possibilities are realised (Lucretius v 526–33).⁷² If, then, the multiple-explanation principle is an answer to the problem of choosing between existing cosmological doctrines of equal explanatory power, it may well be that a similar motivation lies behind the claim that for the basic laws of physics only one theory is consistent with phenomena. For Epicurus did not regard his own system as definitively established until he had shown rival physical theories to fail the test of consistency with phenomena. Books XIV and XV of his work *On Nature* were probably devoted to this enterprise,⁷³ and are represented for us in Lucretius by the refutations of Heraclitus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras (l 635–920).⁷⁴ Thus Epicurus' methodology arises from something re-

...sioning the celebrated sceptical *anaptonia* argument. Many philosophers have equally satisfactory explanations of the phenomenal world, but since they cannot all be true why accept any of them? Epicurus' answer is twofold. Sometimes there is indeed no way of choosing between them, but in that case we are not compelled to take the self-destructive step of disbelieving them all. Instead, thanks to the infinity of the universe, we can believe them all.⁷⁵ Sometimes, on the other hand, there is ground for choosing between them, for despite their equal explanatory power there may only be one of them which is consistent with the entire range of phenomena.

What emerges, then, is the very close dependence of Epicurus' 'non-contestation' and 'contestation' on the problems which faced him as a cosmological theorist establishing his own system. He can be congratulated on his insight that scientific theories lend themselves to falsification more readily than to verification, and it is a pity to resort to an interpretation which robs him of it. A wide gulf lies between his methodology and Antiochus' interpretation of it. Antiochus clearly started with some general information about Epicurus' terminology and usage, and, in characteristically unhistorical fashion, delved into contemporary Epicurean tracts for further elucidation. Not finding there the crucial term 'non-contestation', he mistakenly identified it with the current Epicurean preoccupation *sēmeiōsis*, of which he had achieved a rather superficial understanding. He thus confused a method of confirmation with a method of discovery. If he had read more carefully, he would have found his Epicurean contemporaries perfectly well aware of the purely confirmatory role of non-contestation:

They are also mistaken not to see that we ascertain that there is no obstacle resulting from appearances. For it is not enough to accept the minimal swerves of atoms on the grounds of chance and free will, but it

I think we can find a link where people can read the full article if they are interested. Email me if so. But I think that [the DeLacey commentary](#) is really the place to start, and probably a lot less discouraging than starting with Sedley's article.

Again, the real challenge is bringing all this down to earth and explaining it in layman's terms, and that work has not yet been done and is calling out to us to do it! 😊