

Episode One Hundred Fifteen - Letter to Herodotus

04 - Atoms, Void, and Basic Epistemology Issues

Post by “Cassius” of March 30, 2022 at 2:50 PM

Rather than add too many more posts to this thread prior to posting the episode, I want to make several points that I will update in this single post:

1 - I think that most all of what we say in this episode is accurate, yet I have a sense that the big picture is still lacking in clarify, especially if someone listens to the first half alone and doesn't go all the way to the end. We're working over some very difficult territory here and this comes across as more of a preliminary discussion rather than a fully-formulated presentation of conclusions.

2 - We make the point that Plato's perspective is much more elitist than Epicurus's. That's a fair and good point, and yet if we were answering the question "List in order of priority the ways that Plato's approach to knowledge differs from that of Epicurus?" I doubt this would be at or even near the top. It gives us some comparative information but doesn't really strike at the heart of the actual process differences.

3 - What I find most at fault at this episode is that I tended to follow a more "Socratic" approach and asked questions in tones that may have been difficult to follow, and that weren't appropriate for this difficult material. I probably created more confusion by using irony when I should have been totally direct. I will work to avoid that problem in the future, but the best way to solve the problem will be to start with some direct and important quotations from each source (Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus). We can then have those quotes fresh in our minds and use them to be sure we are on the same page as to each philosopher, rather than look for differences before we have identified at least the broad outlines of each.

4 - One of several quotes that should definitely have been used early in this podcast, but was not, was this from Diogenes of Oinoanda:

Quote

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

5 - I am beginning to assemble some of the key epistemology quotes here, and these need to be part of the discussion as we get into the details:
<http://epicuruscollege.com/coursematerial/Canonics/>

6 - Although we probably don't have the time it deserves to include it as part of the Letter to Herodotus, it would be very valuable to find and review some kind of text material on basic Epicurean Epistemology. We need to look for a single article to see if we can find a starting point. Lacking a better one at this moment, my best suggestion remains the Appendix to DeLacy's translation of Philodemus "On Methods of Inference" (I go back and forth on whether to refer to this with DeLacy's title, or with Sedley's "On Signs." Sedley's title is probably more direct, but sounds in English like an Astrological Matchmaking Book. "On Methods of Inference" is probably a more accurate description of what is actually being discussed:

Appendix Chapters:

- [The Sources of Epicurean Empiricism](#)
- [Development of Epicurean Logic and Methodology](#)
- [The Logical Controversies of The Stoics, Epicureans, and Skeptics](#)

Those titles of chapters are right on point with what we need to explore further and get a command over. Unless we can come up with a better set of material to use for review, I think I am going to have to propose that we find a way to focus on this material as soon as possible, possibly with a special series of panel discussions.

The first step is to identify where there is any better "course material" than these three Appendix Chapters from DeLacy. These chapters have the great advantage as well that they are public domain and easily accessible to everyone, but if someone knows of something better (focusing on Epicurus) then please comment below.

I know these topics are covered in Chapters 7 and 8 of DeWitt, such as in the excerpt below from page 122. This is good general material and needs to be referenced as well, but DeLacy's material is probably more directly on point with what we need at this point in our discussions. DeWitt doesn't give us citations to Aristotle and Plato and the other key figures, and we need those to confirm our positions.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2442-episode-one-hundred-fifteen-letter-to-herodotus-04-atoms-void-and-basic-epistemo/?postID=17375#post17375>

John Locke, in turn, set out as the founder of modern empiricism. Thus a misunderstanding of Epicurus underlies a main trend of modern philosophy. This astonishing fact begets an even greater concern for a correct interpretation, which may cause Locke to appear slightly naïve.

The institution of the Canon reflects a contemporary striving for an increase of precision in all the arts, sculpture, architecture, music, and mathematics, but the immediate provocation is to be found in the teachings of Pyrrho the skeptic and of Plato. Pyrrho's rejection of both reason and the sensations as criteria rendered acute the need of establishing a canon of truth. In the judgment of Epicurus Plato also ranked as a skeptic, because he belittled the sensations as undependable and phenomena as deceptive, the only real and eternal existences being the ideas. Thus in his system reason became the only contact between man and reality, and human reason was crippled by the imprisonment of the soul in the body.

Epicurus denied the existence of Platonic ideas on the ground that the only existences were atoms and empty space. Thus to his thinking man stood face to face with physical reality and his sensations constituted the sole contact with this reality. Had he stopped at this point he would have been an empiricist, but he did not. He made room also for a kind of intuition, which is incompatible with empiricism. He postulated that man was equipped in advance by Nature for living in his prospective environment, and not in his physical environment alone but also in his social environment. In addition to the five senses this equipment included innate ideas, such as that of justice, and these ideas, because they existed in advance of experience, were called Anticipations. Moreover, as Epicurus postulated, each experience of the individual, the sensations included, is accompanied by a secondary reaction of pleasure or pain. These pleasures and pains are the Feelings, which also rank as criteria, being Nature's Go and Stop signals.