

An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2022 at 8:04 PM

Lots of interesting stuff in the Sedley article. Samples:

anyone could have realised the usefulness of names.

However, Epicurus' other writings, and especially *Περὶ φύσεως* Book XXVIII, show that also on the more important question of the epistemological value of language his sympathies lie with the naturalist view. Throughout our text we see the fundamental principle of the naturalist that to apply a name to an object is to express an opinion, and that language can represent true or false opinion.¹⁰¹ We also find polemical references to the conventionalist doctrine of the school

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has a correct understanding of its history.

How does Epicurus' attitude to language compare with those of contemporary Megarians?¹⁰⁷ The view that a fixed meaning naturally underlies every word puts him much closer to the extreme naturalist standpoint of Stilpo than to the extreme conventionalism of Diodorus Cronus, to which polemical references are made in *Περὶ φύσεως* Book XXVIII. As for Stilpo's theory that only identical predication is admissible, the obvious Epicurean objection to it is the practical one voiced by the Epicurean Colotes,¹⁰⁸ 'How shall we live without saying that a man is good or a general, but only that a man is a man, good is good, and a general is a general...?' On the other hand, Epicurus himself is no great defender of predication as a tool of the philosopher. He wants concepts to be clarified by reference to the data of perceptions and feelings, not through mere verbal predication. Thus he shows strong doubts about the usefulness of definitions,¹⁰⁹ and, when dealing with the special case of the concept of time, he specifically rejects the view that anything else should 'be predicated of it as sharing the same essence as it'.¹¹⁰ This attitude falls far short of the dogmatic denial of predicability expressed by Stilpo, but may nevertheless be thought to show the influence of the Antisthenean school of thought, and in general of the naturalist's quest for one and only one name for every object.

One thing I have always liked about David Sedley is that he is very free in his criticism of Cyril Bailey:

In our text, this 'empirical' thought is distinguished from 'theoretical' thought about sensible entities (especially in 35 VIII 23 16f.); is characterized as thought about particulars by contrast with inductive thought about universals (13 X 9 inf. 2); and is included in a list of all the chief thought-processes recognized by Epicurus (13 VI 1 inf. 8). It is antithetical to all abstract forms of thought.¹⁰⁷ Bailey¹⁰⁸ argues that an ἐπιπένη τῆς θεωρίας can be used to appertain not only the objects of perception, but also scientific concepts. This is done, he suggests, by juxtaposing already established facts about atoms and void and then 'intuitively' drawing from them an inescapable conclusion. The ἐπιπένη τῆς θεωρίας is thus the ultimate criterion in the investigation of the *κοσμήματα*. If there were any truth in this account, it would be fatal to my explanation of ἀπείρητος, as 'empirical', but fortunately there is none. Bailey bases himself chiefly on the mention of the *κενὸν ἀσώματα*¹⁰⁹ in which the motion of atoms in a moving body is discussed. A distinction is made between the 'smallest period of continuous time' and 'periods of time imaginable in thought'¹¹⁰ and we are told that although within the former kind of time not the atoms in a moving body move in one direction, within the latter kind they move in all directions, but because of such other at such a high rate as to give the visual impression of moving in one only. He adds the explanation: 'ὅτι γὰρ ἀπείρητος ἐπίπετος καὶ τὸ ἀσώμα, ἀπὸ αὐτοῦ τῶν ἀτόμων ἀσώματων ἔστιν ἡ συνεχὴς τῆς κινήσεως, οὗ ἀπείρητος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀτόμων ἀσώματων ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπείρητης κινήσεως καὶ τῆς ἀπείρητης ἀπείρητης τῆς ἀπείρητης κινήσεως'. Bailey's interpretation of this final phrase ['...'] is that '... ἀπείρητος' alludes back to the observed fact that in a continuous period of time the parts of a moving body move in one direction only, and that 'not' ἐπιπέτη ἀπείρητος τῆς ἀπείρητης κινήσεως refers to the smallest *διαιρέσις* that this same rule does not apply in an atomic period of time. Thus he makes these words explanatory not just of the immediately preceding sentence ['... ἀπείρητος ἀπείρητος...'], but of two separate points in the whole argument that goes before. Any reader with a healthy scepticism that the text as it stands cannot be understood in this way. The clause beginning 'ὅτι...' can only be explanatory of