

Episode 160 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 14 - Chapter 8 - Sensations, Anticipations, And Feelings 01

Post by "Cassius" of February 7, 2023 at 4:17 PM

In this episode we spend a significant amount of time talking about how Epicurus stands apart from both (1) empiricism and (2) the "blank slate" theory that is associated with both Aristotle and (more recently) John Locke.

In regard to (2), during the episode I referenced the book entitled "Dialogues on Innate Principles" written in the late 1700's in response and in contradiction to the blank slate theory. (The major point of that book is that "ideas" and "principles" - or "principles of operation" are two very different things. John Locke argues against being born with innate ideas - which is true - but which does not go far enough in addressing the real issue: are we born with innate "principles of operation" in the way our minds and bodies work. Barwis makes deistic references which will need to be disregarded, but I think makes an excellent argument that - in my view - is compatible with Epicurus and gives us potent arguments against the "blank slate" from a more philosophic perspective that I would say remain valid today.

Here is a key part of the argument that stands alone, but the full book (which is short, and written in an entertaining dialogue form) gives many others:

Quote

When I take a general view of the arguments adduced by Mr. Locke against innate moral principles; and when I see what he produces as the most indisputable innate principles, "if any be so," I am inclined to think there must have been some very great mistake as to the true nature of the things in question: for he lays down certain propositions (no matter whether moral or scientific, so they be but true), and then proves that such propositions, considered merely as propositions formed by our rational faculty, after due consideration of things, as all true propositions must be, are not innate. Nothing more obvious! But surely those whom he opposes must, or ought to have meant, (though I cannot say I have read their arguments, nor do I mean to answer for anyone but myself) not that the propositions themselves were innate, but that the conscious internal sentiments on which such moral propositions are founded were innate.

He looked on me, interrogatively.

I said it might be so, and that I saw a great difference in those things.

Or perhaps, continued he, the mistake may have arisen from following too closely the mode, in which it is necessary to proceed, in order to acquire a knowledge of certain sciences, as in geometry: that is, by laying down some clear and self-evident axioms or rational propositions. But even here it should be remembered that, in the natures of things, there were principles which had existence anterior to the formation of these axioms or propositions, and on which they are founded, and on which they depend for their existence: as, extension and solidity.

I gave an assenting inclination of the head.

I cannot, therefore, conceive, added he, that what we ought to understand by innate moral principles, can by any means, when fairly explained, be imagined to bear any similitude to such propositions as Mr. Locke advances as bidding fairest to be innate, nor to any other propositions. That is, I cannot conceive that our innate moral principles, our natural sentiments, or internal conscious feelings, (name them how you please) which we derive, and which result, from our very nature as creatures morally relative, are at all like unto any propositions whatever. Who can discover any similitude to any conscious sentiment of the soul in these strangely irrelative propositions:

“Whatever is, is.”

“It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be?”

Nobody.

The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us, moral principles. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.

When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

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