

Episode 166 - The Lucretius Today Podcast Interviews Dr. David Glidden on "Epicurean Prolepsis"

Post by "Cassius" of March 24, 2023 at 7:06 AM

The chief ambiguities are also two in number. In the dictum of Epicurus that "all sensations are true" both terms are ambiguous. The English word *sensation*, like the Latin *sensus*, is employed to render various words and phrases in Greek, while the word *true*, like its Latin and Greek equivalents, may have any one of three meanings: first, absolutely true, as the statement that two and two make four is true, or second, relatively true, as the distant view of the tower is true, though

While Epicurus was adamant in his determination to defend the validity of the sensations as being the means of direct contact between man and reality and as possessing precedence over reason, he exhibits no desire to defend the individual sensation. The fallacies of those who impute to him belief in the infallibility of sensation lie partly in their failure to observe the ambiguity of the word *true* and in their confusion of "truth" with "value."

It is not difficult to differentiate the various meanings of *true* and it is essential to right understanding. For example, when Epicurus declared that "the phantasms seen by the insane and in dreams are true," he meant that they were "real" and existed independently of the madman or the dreamer, because "they act as a stimulus and that which does not exist does not deliver a stimulus."¹³ These phantasms, however, are not "true" in the sense that a sensation experienced by the waking observer is true. The dreamer may have a vision of a centaur but no centaurs exist in real life. If the waking man sees an ox, then the sensation is true because the stimulus is delivered by a living ox.

A still different meaning of *true* may be discerned when Epicurus denominates his system as "true philosophy." He means it is true in the sense that his Twelve Elementary Principles are true or in the sense that the modern scientist believes the accepted calculation of the speed of light to be true. This may be called absolute truth, if there is such a thing.

It remains to speak of the relatively true. The views of a tower at

various distances may be cited as examples. Each is true relative to the distance; its value as evidence of the facts is another matter. This distinction was no novelty to the ancients; Sextus Empiricus sets it forth at some length in a discussion of Epicureanism.¹⁴

Also worthy of mention is the sensation which is optically true but false to the facts. An example much brandished by the skeptics was the bent image of the oar immersed in the water.¹⁵ Epicurus made logical provision for this difficulty: "Of two sensations the one cannot refute the other,¹⁶ because we give attention to all sensations." This statement alone would acquit him of belief in the infallibility of sensation, because it is distinctly implied that some sensations are employed to correct others.

The example of the tower will serve as a transition from the topic of ambiguity to that of confusion. When modern scholars seize upon the saying "all sensations are true," which appears nowhere in the extant writings of Epicurus, and stretch it to mean that all sensations are reliable or trustworthy or "that the senses cannot be deceived," they are confusing the concept of truth with the concept of value.¹⁷ They overlook the fact that even a truthful witness may fall short of delivering the whole truth or may even give false evidence. The distant view of the square tower is quite true relative to the distance but it fails to reveal the whole truth about the tower.

To assume that Epicurus was unaware of these plain truths, as one must if belief in the infallibility of sensation is imputed to him, is absurd. It is because he was aware that the value of sensations, apart from their truth, varied all the way from totality to zero, that he exhorted beginners "under all circumstances to watch the sensations and espe-

Those clips are from the book. DeWitt's article on the subject - with very pithy summary paragraph - is here:

File

[Norman DeWitt - "Epicurus - All Sensations Are True"](#)



DeWitt's interpretation of the "all sensations are true" controversy.



Cassius

December 29, 2022 at 12:23 PM

II.—Epicurus : All Sensations Are True

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The aim of this article is to show reasons for believing that the statement in the heading is false as usually understood. It is absurd; the documentation is deficient, misleading, and from prejudiced sources; advocates of its validity go beyond their authorities. It is inconsistent with Epicurus' theory of perception, his terminology, his account of vision, his classifications, his treatment of the criteria in his Principal Doctrines, his account of heavenly phenomena in the letter to Pythocles, and his recommendations to students. Ancient proofs of it are polemical sophistries. Modern misinterpretations have arisen from the ambiguity of ἀληθής, which has three meanings in Epicureanism: 1. real or self-existent; 2. relatively true; 3. absolutely true. Sensations have been confused with judgments.