

# Epicurean Views of "Teleology"

Post by "Joshua" of March 14, 2025 at 5:03 PM

OK, I am off work. You have raised a number of excellent points and I agree that we need to refine this mass of material down to something digestible.

## Relevant Texts

[All citations in this section are to translations by Cyril Bailey]

Epicurus, [Letter to Pythocles](#), sections 115-116;

### Quote

The signs of the weather which are given by certain animals result from mere coincidence of occasion. For the animals do not exert any compulsion for winter to come to an end, nor is there some divine nature which sits and watches the outgoings of these animals and then fulfills the signs they give.

[116] For not even the lowest animal, although 'a small thing gives the greater pleasure,' would be seized by such foolishness, much less one who was possessed of perfect happiness.

All these things, Pythocles, you must bear in mind; for thus you will escape in most things from superstition and will be enabled to understand what is akin to them. And most of all give yourself up to the study of the beginnings and of infinity and of the things akin to them, and also of the criteria of truth and of the feelings, and of the purpose for which we reason out these things. For these points when they are thoroughly studied will most easily enable you to understand the causes of the details. But those who have not thoroughly taken these things to heart could not rightly study them in themselves, nor have they made their own the reason for observing them.

- The animals do not migrate for the purpose of changing the seasons,
- The seasons do not change for the purpose of moving the animals,
- And no divine mind has set these things into motion.

Epicurus, [Letter to Herodotus](#), section 64;

### Quote

[64] Further, you must grasp that the soul possesses the chief cause of sensation: yet it could not have acquired sensation, unless it were in some way enclosed by the rest of

the structure. And this in its turn having afforded the soul this cause of sensation acquires itself too a share in this contingent capacity from the soul. Yet it does not acquire all the capacities which the soul possesses: and therefore when the soul is released from the body, the body no longer has sensation. For it never possessed this power in itself, but used to afford opportunity for it to another existence, brought into being at the same time with itself: and this existence, owing to the power now consummated within itself as a result of motion, used spontaneously to produce for itself the capacity of sensation and then to communicate it to the body as well, in virtue of its contact and correspondence of movement, as I have already said.

This passage (and the subsequent passages as well, to some extent) is relevant because of the pains Epicurus goes to to avoid teleological language;

- The body, having come into existence with the soul, affords opportunity to the soul to experience sensation.
- The body, having afforded this opportunity to the soul, acquires its own share in this "contingent capacity" from the soul - that is, the body acquires its share in sensation.
- We can summarize this ateleological view in the following way: **the use of any natural thing is afforded by its existence, not the other way around.**
- By contrast, the existence of any artificial thing could be said to be afforded by its planned use. A table is brought into being for the purpose of dining. The human hand is pressed into service (say, of transferring food from the table to the mouth) only after it is found to exist.

The most important text, as cited by [Cassius](#) above, is Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5;

#### Quote

[823] Herein you must eagerly desire to shun this fault, and with foresighted fear to avoid this error; do not think that the bright light of the eyes was created in order that we may be able to look before us, or that, in order that we may have power to plant long paces, therefore the tops of shanks and thighs, based upon the feet, are able to bend; or again, that the forearms are jointed to the strong upper arms and hands given us to serve us on either side, in order that we might be able to do what was needful for life. All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use. Nor did sight exist before the light of the eyes was born, nor pleading in words before the tongue was created, but rather the birth of the tongue came long before discourse, and the ears were created much before sound was heard, and in short all the limbs, I trow, existed before their use came about: they cannot then have grown for the purpose of using them.

[843] But, on the other side, to join hands in the strife of battle, to mangle limbs and befoul the body with gore; these things were known long before gleaming darts flew abroad, and nature constrained men to avoid a wounding blow, before the left arm, trained by art, held up the defence of a shield. And of a surety to trust the tired body to rest was a habit far older than the soft-spread bed, and the slaking of the thirst was born before cups. These things, then, which are invented to suit the needs of life, might well be thought to have been discovered for the purpose of using them. But all those other things lie apart, which were first born themselves, and thereafter revealed the concept of their usefulness. In this class first of all we see the senses and the limbs; wherefore, again and again, it cannot be that you should believe that they could have been created for the purpose of useful service.

[858] This, likewise, is no cause for wonder, that the nature of the body of every living thing of itself seeks food. For verily I have shown that many bodies ebb and pass away from things in many ways, but most are bound to pass from living creatures. For because they are sorely tried by motion and many bodies by sweating are squeezed and pass out from deep beneath, many are breathed out through their mouths, when they pant in weariness; by these means then the body grows rare, and all the nature is undermined; and on this follows pain. Therefore food is taken to support the limbs and renew strength when it passes within, and to muzzle the gaping desire for eating through all the limbs and veins. Likewise, moisture spreads into all the spots which demand moisture; and the many gathered bodies of heat, which furnish the fires to our stomach, are scattered by the incoming moisture, and quenched like a flame, that the dry heat may no longer be able to burn our body. Thus then the panting thirst is washed away from our body, thus the hungry yearning is satisfied.

- "All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but **what is born creates its own use.**"

### Further Reading

Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, page 67;

#### Quote

The limited teleology at which Epicurus finally arrived had nothing to do either with creationism or adaptation of organ to function. It had nothing to do with the universe at large, which was ruled by natural laws. It had nothing to do even with animals, although animal behavior afforded evidence that pleasure was the end or telos of living. It was recognized, to be sure, that animals possess volition and that certain kinds of animals are actuated by innate ideas to organize themselves into herds for mutual protection, but only the rational human being was believed capable of intelligent planning for living and for keeping steadily in view the fact that pleasure is

the end or telos ordained by Nature. This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

Ian Johnston, [Lecture on Lucretius](#);

Quote

The poem's influence, according to Stuart Gillespie and Donald Mackenzie, can be linked to a range of twentieth-century poets and philosophers. So pervasive is its presence in the intellectual climate that for one critic at least (Stuart Gillespie) Charles Darwin's claim that he had not read Lucretius is rather like Milton's claiming that he had not read Genesis.

John Tyndall, [Address at Belfast](#);

Quote

Trace the line of life backwards, and see it approaching more and more to what we call the purely physical [54/55] condition. We come at length to those organisms which I have compared to drops of oil suspended in a mixture of alcohol and water. We reach the protogenes of Haeckel, in which we have 'a type distinguishable from a fragment of albumen only by its finely granular character.' Can we pause here? We break a magnet and find two poles in each of its fragments. We continue the process of breaking, but, however small the parts, each carries with it, though enfeebled, the polarity of the whole. And when we can break no longer, we prolong the intellectual vision to the polar molecules. Are we not urged to do something similar in the case of life? Is there not a temptation to close to some extent with Lucretius, when he affirms that 'nature is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods?' or with Bruno, when he declares that Matter is not 'that mere empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who wrings forth all things as the fruit of her own womb?' Believing as I do in the continuity of Nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye. By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.

[Note: the following areas (and more) need work]

Why is the question of teleology in nature important?

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How has evolutionary biology on the one hand and Abrahamic monotheism on the other changed how we talk about purpose in nature?

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