

General View vs Detailed Exposition of Natural Physics

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 18, 2025 at 8:26 AM

I've been thinking about how the following quote from Herodotus was said with regard to Epicurean natural physics -- but not with regard to ethics.

So each of the Epicurean natural physics principals could be summed up in one phrase (or short sentence)-- and which DeWitt gathered from Lucretius into the 12 principals.

Here is the quote I am referring to.

"For we have frequent need of the general view, but not so often of the detailed exposition. Indeed it is necessary to go back on the main principles, and constantly to fix in one's memory enough to give one the most essential comprehension of the truth. And in fact the accurate knowledge of details will be fully discovered if the general principles in the various departments are thoroughly grasped and borne in mind; for even in the case of one fully initiated the most essential feature in all accurate knowledge is the capacity to make a rapid use of observation and mental apprehension, and this can be done if everything is summed up in elementary principles and formulae. For it is not possible for anyone to abbreviate the complete course through the whole system, if he cannot embrace in his own mind by means of short formulae all that might be set out with accuracy in detail."

I am wondering if this isn't possible to do for Epicurean ethics because of word usage such as "pleasure" "gods" etc. -- so therefore it would be difficult to boil down much of the ethics to single short phrases -- and the attempt to do so has likely been the origin of incorrect interpretations (such incorrect interpretations as ataraxia being more important than eudaimonia) -- one error in reasoning causes incorrect conclusions.

Perhaps one way to deal with this could be similar to how in our time we have legal documents which often have a long list of word definitions given before the main part of the legal explanation.

Also to consider how the physical world is different than the mental world -- you can point to physical objects and observe their behavior -- but you can't physically point to internal states of pleasure and pain since they are internal and subjective.

I'm starting a separate thread regarding the idea of defining and summarizing Epicurean ethics [over here](#).