

Ongoing Discussion of Jack Gedney's "Untroubled" Substack Blog

Post by "Joshua" of May 16, 2026 at 1:48 AM

I quite like DeWitt on this point;

In respect of his teleology he was also independent of his teachers. It is true that he may have learned of the teleology of Plato from his first teacher Pamphilus, but this brand of teleology became an abomination to him. In his view the universe was eternal and had always been an orderly cosmos. All creationism was thus ruled out and along with creationism all arguments drawn from evidences of divine design or superintendence. As for Praxiphanes, if he took time off from literary criticism to expound the biological teleology of Aristotle, the mind of Epicurus was closed to it, because it was not the Epicurean view that ears had been created to hear with or eyes to see with.⁴⁹ From Nausiphanes, in turn, if he was an orthodox Democritean, no teleology could have been learned at all, because it was inconsistent with a universe of non-purposive atomic motion.

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,⁵⁰ 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.

That's from pages 66-67 of *Epicurus and his Philosophy*. Lucretius had indeed written ([Book IV, line 823](#)) that sight did not exist before the eyes, or language before the tongue; these organs were not created to fulfill a purpose. Rather, their existence afforded the opportunity to be adapted by the organism for the uses with which we now associate them.

In this way the early Epicureans prefigured Charles Darwin, who also wrote about the eye in a well-remembered passage that is often abused by creationists:

Quote

To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree. Yet reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a perfect and complex eye to one very imperfect and simple, each grade being useful to its possessor, can be shown to exist; if further, the eye does vary ever so slightly, and the variations be inherited, which is certainly the

case; and if any variation or modification in the organ be ever useful to an animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, can hardly be considered real. How a nerve comes to be sensitive to light, hardly concerns us more than how life itself first originated; but I may remark that several facts make me suspect that any sensitive nerve may be rendered sensitive to light, and likewise to those coarser vibrations of the air which produce sound.

But if Epicurus rejected the Platonic and Aristotelian view of teleology, what justification can we make for his continued use of the word *telos* (τέλος)? DeWitt resolves the problem by suggesting that, while Epicurus did throw out creationism and intelligent design, he *did not* wholly reject teleology.

Quote

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He enlarges on this theme with a discussion of the word *nature* as opposed to reason on pages 127-132, and here is a relevant excerpt:

Quote

The priority of Nature was also insisted upon in establishing the identity of the end or *telos*. Aristotle had furnished a precious hint in this connection; he wrote "that perhaps even in the case of the lower animals there is some natural good superior to their scale of intelligence which aims at the corresponding good." To this principle Epicurus adapted his procedure. By the promptings of Nature alone, apart from reason, every animate thing, the moment it is born, reaches out for pleasure and shrinks from pain. Consistent with this reasoning is the steady practice of referring to pleasure as "the end of Nature," which occurs five times in our scant remains. As analogous phrases may be cited "the good of Nature" and "the pleasure of Nature," all of them implying that reason played no necessary role in establishing the truth. Similar is the implication of parallel phrases such as "the wealth of Nature," signifying that Nature and not reason reveals the true meaning of wealth; and also "the limits of Nature," implying that Nature and not reason teaches the true limits of the desires.