

"The Canon of Epicurus In Everyday Life" - An Article by George Kaplanis

CHARACTER OF WORDS. ...
While Epicurus, as we saw, finds no merit in the formal definition of man as 'rational mortal animal', he is reported to have advocated his own alternative formula: man is 'such and such a formation, plus animateness' (τὸ τοιούτονι μὀρφωμα μετὰ ἐμψυχίας, *PH* 2.25, cf. *M* 7.267). We might say that, whereas the traditional definition is achieved from the top down, by division within a genus, Epicurus' preferred alternative is accretive in nature: it starts with the most familiar identifying feature of a human being, the shape (difficult if not impossible to capture fully with a verbal formula), then adds animateness in order to differentiate man from other bearers of that shape,⁹⁹ such as statues and corpses.¹⁰⁰ Since 'such and such a formation' invokes ostensibly, without describing it, what is presumed to be an already familiar mental image of the human form, Epicurus' formulation is evidently not pretending to be a definition;¹⁰¹

enable human beings to be recognised as such.

In mentioning body, alongside man, as another item whose mere name should be enough to evoke its primary notion, I had in mind a particular testimonium. Comparably to his formula for man ('such and such a formation, plus animateness'), Epicurus is reported to have listed size, shape, resistance and weight as the conceptual components of body.¹⁰⁵ As a difficult but important passage at *Letter to Herodotus* 68–71 confirms, Epicurus is in fact a 'bundle' theorist,¹⁰⁶ analysing each *per se* existent in terms, not of its underlying atomic composition, but of its inventory of ineliminable properties.¹⁰⁷ There can be little doubt that the bundle of ineliminable properties constituting each thing corresponds to the set of predicates that make up its primary notion.

To put it another way, Epicurus does not for a moment deny that precise, clear and fixed natural conceptions, or *prolēpseis*, of natural kinds are at our disposal, including those of animal species like man, horse and cow (DL 10.33). Such conceptions are indeed basic tools of his epistemology. His objection is rather to the assumption, fostered by practitioners of dialectic, that these natural kinds can be coherently explained by reference to each one's position in some taxonomic tree. There is not, as Plato and his followers maintained, an intelligible realm in which such a structure might be located and studied.