

# On Syllogisms And the Differences Between Aristotle/Plato and Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of April 8, 2020 at 8:54 AM

There was a major disagreement between Epicurus and Aristotle/Plato as to the role of "reason" and "logic" in the determination of "truth."

This is described clearly in the following excerpt written by Phillip DeLacy in his book "Philodemus - On Methods of Inference." I have underlined in red the critical parts, in which DeLacy concludes that Aristotle held that "knowledge can be obtained only through a combination of observation and reason" and "inferences from signs are not reliable except in cases where the inferences may be converted into valid syllogisms."

Compare that to the position of Epicurus as stated by Diogenes Laertius, in which "reason" is not a part of the "Canon of truth," and "it is the reality of separate perceptions that guarantees the truth of our senses," as well as "For all our notions are derived from perceptions, either by actual contact or by analogy, or resemblance, or composition, with some slight aid from reasoning."

You can decide for yourself whether you agree with Epicurus and how to apply this distinction, but this difference in viewpoint has huge implications in seeing how far Epicurus diverged from the other Greek philosophers.

References:

Here is the appendix of [Philodemus: On Methods of Inference by Phillip and Estelle De Lacy](#)

[Here is a direct link to its location in the PDF.](#) The basic point De Lacy is making is that Aristotle (and even more strongly, Plato) held that "truth" can only be established "where the inferences may be converted into valid syllogisms." This leads to the conclusion that "knowledge can be obtained only through a **combination** of observation and reason.

But first before reading DeLacy remember [the position of Epicurus, as stated by Diogenes Laertius, here in the RD Hicks translation](#), that "reason" is not a part of the canon of truth:

X. 30–32. EPICURUS

hand, deals with things to be sought and avoided, with human life and with the end-in-chief.

They reject dialectic as superfluous ; holding that in their inquiries the physicists should be content to employ the ordinary terms for things.<sup>a</sup> Now in *The Canon* Epicurus affirms that our sensations and preconceptions and our feelings are the standards of truth ;

nor, regarded as having an external cause, can it add anything thereto or take anything therefrom.) Nor is there anything which can refute sensations or convict them of error : one sensation cannot convict another and kindred sensation, for they are equally valid ; nor can one sensation refute another which is not kindred but heterogeneous, for the objects which the two senses judge are not the same<sup>c</sup> ; nor again can reason refute them, for reason is wholly dependent on sensation ; nor can one sense refute another, since we pay equal heed to all. And the reality of separate perceptions guarantees<sup>d</sup> the truth of our senses. But seeing and hearing are just as real as feeling pain. Hence it is from plain facts that we must start when we draw inferences about the unknown.<sup>e</sup> For all our notions are derived from

perceptions, either by actual contact or by analogy, or resemblance, or composition, with some slight aid from reasoning. And the objects presented to madmen<sup>a</sup> and to people in dreams are true, for they produce effects—*i.e.* movements in the mind—which that which is unreal never does.]

Now here is the De Lacy commentary on Aristotle, showing that reason/logic is essentially the ULTIMATE test of "truth":

ing and arithmetic typify the exact arts. From these passages it is clear that Plato believes that merely empirical investigation cannot give rise to scientific knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Aristotle's attitude toward empirical method is more favorable than Plato's; for though Aristotle denies that empirical observation alone is adequate for knowledge, yet he does regard perception as the starting-point of all knowledge. In one passage he says that each sense organ has its distinctive objects of perception, and in regard to these objects it never errs.<sup>23</sup> In the *Metaphysics* he traces the origin of art and science to experience and memory. The observation and memory of what is beneficial to a number of persons suffering from some disease provide the ground for a generalization about the cure of that disease. Experience is knowledge of particulars, while art is knowledge of the universal; yet knowledge of the universal is derived from the determination of similarities in a number of particular cases.<sup>24</sup> In the *Topics* Aristotle describes the method of deriving the universal from the particular as the observation of the similar; and he asserts that this method is useful in inductive arguments, in hypothetical syllogisms, where inference is made from one group of objects to other objects that are similar, and even in the formulation of definitions.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of such statements as these, Aristotle does not formulate his own scientific method in purely empirical terms. He says that science requires the use of both reason and perception, and only once does he indicate that perception is the ultimate test.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of rational explanation he refers to an empirical generalization merely as a probable conjecture.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that Plato failed to recognize the need for observation. In several passages, e.g. *Phaedrus* 249B-C, he indicates that perception contributes to a knowledge of the Ideas.

<sup>23</sup> *De Anima* 418a.7-16; cf. 427b.11-14; 428b.18-19.

<sup>24</sup> *Metaph.* A.1, 980b.28-981a.12; cf. *Post. Anal.* 81a.38-b.9; 97b.7-25.

<sup>25</sup> *Topics* 1.108b.7-23.

<sup>26</sup> *De Gen. Animal.* III.760b.27-33.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. *Hist. Animal.* VI.571a.26-27.

Aristotle regards empiricism as inadequate because he believes that observation can never give necessary connections between objects. In the absence of causal knowledge the empirical scientist must base his knowledge on a study of signs, and inferences from signs are not reliable except in cases where the inferences may be converted into valid syllogisms. He says in one place that a science of physiognomy would be possible only if an invariable correlation could be established between physical qualities and mental traits, for instance between large extremities and courage. In that case one could infer syllogistically from the physical qualities as signs to the mental traits.<sup>28</sup> Especially significant in this connection is Aristotle's treatment of empirical method in rhetoric. Since rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is not concerned with truth, but only with conjecture of the probable or persuasive,<sup>29</sup> this art may employ empirical arguments. For example, the orator should study matters of state finance both from his own empirical observation and from the records of the experience of others.<sup>30</sup> The principal form of empirical argument that Aristotle attributes to rhetoric is the argument from signs and examples. Signs refer to the things they signify either necessarily or not necessarily. In the former case they can be converted into a syllogism of the first figure and are not entirely empirical. In the latter case they are asyllogistic and therefore refutable. An argument from example is an induction from one particular to another particular of the same genus.<sup>31</sup>

Though Aristotle recognizes that observation is the ultimate source of knowledge, he believes that knowledge can be obtained only through a combination of observation and reason. Like Plato, he constructs and defends his philosophical system

<sup>28</sup> *Prior Anal.* II.70b.7-38.

<sup>29</sup> In *Rhet.* I.1355a.17 Aristotle uses of rhetoric the phrase, πρὸς τὰ ἐπιδοῦσα στοχαστικῶς ἔχειν.

<sup>30</sup> *Rhet.* I.1359b.30-33.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Rhet.* I.1357a.32-b.36; *Prior Anal.* II.70a.3-38.