

Comment at the Epicurean Philosophy Facebook Group On Pleasure As The Highest Good

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2020 at 11:04 PM

In DL X.34, Diogenes describes two kind of inquiry or investigation (ζήτησις "zētēsis") carried out by the Epicureans:

Quote

"there are two kinds of inquiry, the one concerned with things, the other with nothing but words."

This translation seemed unsatisfactory to me, so I wanted to delve a little deeper into the original text. However, it appears a note to the text references section 37, which does shed light on the latter part of the sentence in 34:

Quote

DL X .37: "In the first place, Herodotus, you must understand what it is that words denote, in order that by reference to this we may be in a position to test opinions, inquiries, or problems, so that our proofs may not run on untested ad infinitum, nor the terms we use be empty of meaning. [38] For the primary signification of every term employed must be clearly seen, and ought to need no proving; this being necessary, if we are to have something to which the point at issue or the problem or the opinion before us can be referred."

So it appears the investigation into "nothing but words" refers to an investigation into the clear meaning of the language used in any inquiry. This also appears to be borne out by the original text. The first kind of investigation is "concerning pragmata" τὰς περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων.

πραγμάτων (pragmatōn) is the genitive plural of πράγμα (pragma) and means:

- deed, act, fact
- occurrence, matter, affair
- thing, concrete reality
- thing, creature
- thing of consequence or importance

- (in the plural) circumstances, affairs
- (in the plural, in bad sense) trouble, annoyance

So, it would appear the first kind of inquiry is of "things" in concrete reality. We're looking at existence, things as they exist. This could also be investigations into deeds, acts, i.e., the why and how things happen possibly..

The second kind of investigation is concerning "nothing but words" τὰς περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν. This makes it sound trivial, but section 37 gives this form of inquiry more gravitas. It's not "nothing but words" but it's an investigation into understanding the clear meaning of all words and language used to argue a point. This comes out clearer if we look at the definitions of the terms involved:

τὰς περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν

ψιλῆν = psilēn

(Note: this is the latter part of the names of the Greek letters u-pilon and e-pilon)

accusative feminine singular of ψιλός

- naked, bare
- bald, smooth
- unclad, uncovered
- small, frail, delicate
- simple, plain
- (military) light (troops)
- unarmed
- (of words) without meter (i.e. prose)
- (poetry) without music (Epic vs Lyrical)
- (singing) without music (a capella)
- (music) without singing (instrumentals)
- (grammar) without the rough breathing (i.e. with the smooth breathing)
- (grammar) describing the unaspirated voiceless stops, π (p), τ (t), κ (k), as opposed to the aspirated voiceless stops, φ (ph), χ (kh), θ (th)

φωνήν = phōnēn

accusative singular of φωνή (phōnē, e.g., English telephone)

- sound
- Usually of the human voice: voice, cry, yell
- The voice or cry of animals
- Any articulate sound (especially vowels)
- speech, discourse
- language

So, I would offer that the second kind of investigation is concerned with plain language, unadorned speech, no flowery discourse. Say what you mean, know what you're saying, and make your point.