

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

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2020 at 11:28 AM

Don here DeWitt begins discussion of your point:

EPICURUS AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

of the origin of language, because this was the only example chosen by Epicurus in his extant Little Epitome for the enlightenment of beginners. There was a controversy in his day whether language had its origin in invention and enactment or in natural evolution. The former theory assumed that some god or some gifted individual invented the names of things and prescribed them for the multitude. This notion was scouted by Epicurus. The following quotation, though hardly a verbatim report, expressed his judgment: "These men did not assign names to things intelligently but stimulated by a natural instinct, just as men cough or sneeze, cattle bellow, dogs bark and suffering men moan." ²⁸ Subsequently, the talented few, according to his account, taking their cues from Nature and impelled by expediency, by slow degrees brought human speech to its perfection among various races in various environments.²⁹

The specific logical ground upon which Epicurus based this view of the origin of language was the postulate that action is bound to precede thought. The involuntary act is the indispensable stimulus to the voluntary effort through which refinement and improvement are achieved. Let Lucretius speak for Epicurus: "Besides, if other men too had not employed spoken words in their intercourse one with another, from what quarter was this notion of utility implanted in this man's mind and from what source was this capacity in the first instance bestowed upon him, so that he knew and envisaged in his mind what he wished to do?" ³⁰ From this disability not even the gods were believed to be exempt. Unless Nature had first presented a specimen of creative activity, Lucretius demanded to know,³¹ how could the gods have known how to plan or create a world?

Since Nature is assumed to be the sole creatrix and man is restricted to improving upon her suggestions, it follows that Nature is the supreme teacher. By the same reasoning Physics is the supreme science, because through the study of this the teachings of Nature come to knowledge. As Cicero correctly informs us, "Through this body of knowledge the force of words, the meaning of style and the distinction between the logically consistent and the logically inconsistent can be discerned." ³²

In this quotation three topics are broached, words, style, and logic. The first two may be discussed together. By implication it seems to be declared that Nature is neither a poet nor a rhetorician nor a dialectician. Words must be taken at their face value, just as Epicurus advises