

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2020 at 11:30 AM

So this is where I got my reference to the "mere words" passage -- I had forgotten DeWitt said this:

of poetry, he will not compose poems.³⁴ Consistent with this is the information that the writing of Epicurus was characterized by propriety,³⁵ which means the avoidance of figures of speech. The critic Aristophanes is said to have censured it as "highly peculiar."³⁶ In this attitude toward style Epicurus was certainly influenced by the contemporary vogue of geometry, which instituted a way of writing unprecedented for its baldness, yet undeniably adapted to its needs. His declaration that the sole requisite was clearness,³⁷ was no more applicable to himself than to geometers.

This exaltation of clearness and the rejection of figurative language is consistent with another dictum of Epicurus: "The wise man will leave writings behind him but he will not compose panegyrics."³⁸ It was in composing such speeches for festive occasions that the rhetoricians really gave themselves free reign and swung over to the diction of poetry.

The same priority of Nature over reason that predetermined the right kind of writing and rendered rhetoric superfluous eliminated dialectic, but the logic of this judgment can be given more precision. The effect of the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void was to deny the reality of Plato's eternal ideas. Thus dialectic, which was the avenue to comprehension of those ideas, became a superfluity. The testimony of Laertius is explicit: "Dialectic they reject as superfluous, for it should suffice physicists to get along with the names of things as they find them."³⁹ While this advice seems to overlap the recommendation concerning style, the application is different. It means that the quest of definitions is useless. This quest is capable of terminating in fantastic concepts, such as Other, Same, and Essence in Plato's *Timaeus*, possessing no meaning unless on the highest level of abstraction. Since Epicurus rejected the reality of the eternal ideas, such terms could possess no meaning at all. Hence the following dictum: "There are two kinds of inquiry, the one about realities, the other ending up in sound without sense."⁴⁰ In the same vein is the advice to the young Herodotus to take words at their face values "so as not by our endless attempts to define have all our ideas in confusion or have mere vocables that mean nothing."⁴¹

As a parting comment it may be stated that, when once Nature has been established as the norm, it follows logically that man should live