

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

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2020 at 11:36 AM

I consider this next passage to be also among DeWitt's best interpretations:

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example, when Aristotle says, "The sense of sight is not deceived as to color," this is true only of the close view, because colors fade in more distant views.

Sensations, however, usually present themselves in combinations of color, shape, size, smell, and so on. An immediate presentation of such a composite unit is a *phantasia*. All such presentations are true, but they do not rank as criteria in the meaning of the Canon, for the reason that the intelligence has come into play. An act of recognition (*epaisthesis*) has taken place in the mind of the observer, which is secondary to the primary reaction that registered color, shape, size, smell, and so forth.

That Epicurus did not regard these composite sensations as criteria is made clear by a statement of his own: "The fidelity of the recognitions guarantees the truth of the sensations."¹⁹ For example, the animal standing yonder is recognized as a dun-colored ox. This is a secondary reaction. Only the primary perceptions of color, shape, size, and so on constitute a direct contact between man and the physical environment. The truth of these perceptions is confirmed by the fidelity of the recognition.

Again, let it be assumed that the quality of sweetness is registered by sensation. It is not, however, sensation that says, "This is honey"; a secondary reaction in the form of a recognition involving intelligence has taken place. This, in the terminology of Epicurus, is "a fantastic perception of the intelligence." These were not given the rank of criteria by Epicurus for the reason already cited. It is on record, however, that later Epicureans did so.²⁰

So far is Epicurus from believing all sensations to be true in the meaning of the Canon that he guards against error in various ways. In the first place, attention must be paid to all sensations, as already mentioned. Next, the sensations of the individual must be checked by those of others: "Consequently attention must be paid to the immediate feelings and to the sensations, in common with others in matters of common concern and individually in matters of private concern and to all clear presentations of every one of the criteria."²¹ This guardedness was imperative, because contemporary skepticism was flourishing.

The problem of skepticism is attacked disjunctively in the Authorized Doctrines: either all sensations are rejected as valid evidence or some

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By way of concluding this account of the Sensations as criteria it is well to present a synoptic view of the evidence. Nowhere in our extant Little Epitome or the Authorized Doctrines do we find the statement "that all sensations are true." On the contrary, the Epitome begins by urging the student "to give heed to the sensations under all circumstances and especially the immediate perceptions whether of the intelligence or of any criterion whatsoever," which manifestly allows some value to all sensations and special value to immediate sensations.²⁷ At the end of the Epitome the student is warned to check his own observations by those of others.²⁸ These authentic statements are incompatible with belief in the infallibility of sensation. They presume belief in gradations of value among sensations and also the need of perpetual caution against error.

Of three Authorized Doctrines devoted to the topic, 23, 24, and 25, the first urges attention to "all the clear evidence"; the second warns that the rejection of all the sensations leaves the observer without the means of checking sensation by sensation; the third warns of the confusion resulting from rejecting any particular sensation. All of these are of the nature of warnings and completely belie the reckless verdict of an otherwise meticulous scholar "that the Epicureans boldly said that every impression of sense is true and trustworthy."²⁹

Lastly, in every instance above mentioned the word for sensation is *aisthesis* and not *phantasia*. That somewhere Epicurus had actually written "all phantasias are true" seems certain; in which of his writings it is unknown, but the evidence is sufficient.³⁰ This statement, as being assailable, was pounced upon by his detractors and zealously ventilated. If, however, the extant texts of Epicurus be taken as a guide, the *phantasia* or "fantastic" perception is merely the highest grade of evidence; the *aisthesis*, the perception of particulars, is the criterion.
