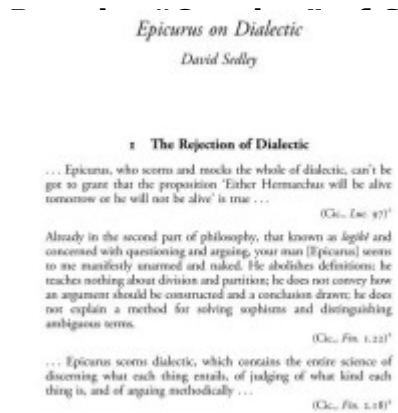


David Sedley: "Epicurus On Dialectic" (With Lots of Discussion of the "Bat Riddle")



September 27, 2020 at 5:27 AM

Attached to this message is an article by David Sedley that contains a lot of interesting information about Epicurus' views on "dialectic" (presumably referring to "logic" - or as Sedley says "syllogistic, definition, division, partition, the resolution of sophisms and logical principles governing the assignment of truth and falsity").

Sedley is one of my favorite living writers on Epicurus. I am posting this without studying the article in full but I feel sure that the analysis here will be helpful to our topic in this forum on the Epicurean Canon of Truth. The views of Epicurus on the use of some aspects of logic are complex (or at least seem to appear that way to us today) and this is an important topic for understanding Epicurus' view of truth.

Sedley develops this discussion through reference to "the Bat Riddle":

Quote

The Bat Riddle

At the end of Republic book 5, Plato's Socrates argues that scientific knowledge (epistêmê) focuses on Forms, while sensible particulars are the domain of unstable 'opinion' (doxa). For example, while Beauty (the Form) corresponds to pure 'being' and can therefore be known, 'the many beautiful things' no more are beautiful than they are not beautiful and therefore cannot be known. Down to this point, the antithesis has been argued only with regard to pairs of opposite predicates - beautiful/ugly, large/small, double/half and so on. But in the closing remarks of the discussion Glaucon hints at its broadening so as to cover substances too:

'It's like the double meanings at feasts', he said, 'and the children's puzzle about the eunuch, his shooting the bat - their puzzle about what he did it with and what the bat was on. For these too [i.e., the cases of opposites] are ambiguities, and it is impossible to think reliably of each of them as either being or not being, or as both, or as neither.'

More quotes of interest:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1704-david-sedley-epicurus-on-dialectic-with-lots-of-discussion-of-the-bat-riddle/?postID=9125#post9125>

One may detect here in Epicurus a general distrust of argument-analysis. How do we know it is a sophism? Less because of any lack of formal soundness than because we already know, pragmatically, that its conclusion is not one that we can live with.²² At least on this evidence, *epilogismos* seems to be Epicurus' favoured way of dispensing with formal dialectical reasoning.²³

which we must take stage by stage. First of all, Epicurus denies the universal validity of RCP, using the following formulation: 'It is false that every thing (πρᾶγμα) is true or false as asserted or negated.' Note that this formulation shifts truth and falsity from being properties of affirmations and negations, as they were for the Peripatetics in (2), to being properties of 'things', or, as he calls them in the next sentence, 'existing things' (ὄντα). More fully and precisely, truth and falsehood are treated as properties belonging to things *in virtue of how they are spoken of.* The idiosyncratic usage is another mark of the passage's fundamental authenticity. It strikingly recalls Epicurus' reported analyses of 'true' and 'false': 'What is true is that which is as it is said to be; what is false is that which is not as it is said to be.'⁴³ That is, although truth lies in a correspondence between statements and things, it attaches primarily to the things themselves, in virtue of the way they are spoken of, and not to the statements, in virtue of the way things are. This view of truth, as something observable in external things, in turn reflects Epicurus' radically empiricist insistence, as reflected in a well-known passage of Lucretius,⁴⁴ that truth is a concept we learn by experiencing instances of it in the world.

In that last footnote 44 Sedley is referring to this following passage from Lucretius, here translated by Martin Ferguson Smith:

470 ble, they do not even know whether knowledge of the impossibility of
knowledge is possible, since, on their own admission, they know noth-

26. 462–468: Cf. 379–386 and see note there.

BOOK FOUR

113

ing.²⁷ Against such people, who have planted themselves with their head
in their own footprints,²⁸ I disdain to argue. However, if I were to
concede that they do have this knowledge, I would put the following
questions to them. Since they have never before encountered anything
true, how do they recognize knowledge and ignorance? What has given
them their conception of truth and falsehood? What proof have they that
the doubtful differs from the certain?

You will find that our conception of truth is derived ultimately from
the senses, and that their evidence is unimpugnable.²⁹ You see, what we 480

This article by Sedley contains extensive discussion of Epicurus' view of the Platonic / Aristotelian "Bat riddle" about the implications of referring to bats as birds. It seems to me that all of this is a good example of how Epicurus was deeply concerned about refuting word games, and this would then constitute a prime example for the argument that the "limit of pleasure" / painlessness terminology was intended as a specific logical rejoinder to the anti-Pleasure argument in Plato's [Philebus](#) (just as Epicurus was responding to this argument in Plato's Republic, per Sedley), and not (as it is used by Stoics/Neo-Epicureans today) as a full and complete definition of the goal of human life.

To answer this difficulty, it seems to me, we have to assume that the debate between Epicurus and the Platonist opposition rests on a close consideration of the *Republic* 5 argument. A natural reading of that argument is as follows. Scientific knowledge cannot be had of perceived particulars or types, because they are inextricably context-dependent in a way that makes their predicates unstable. Whatever perceived token or type is beautiful, large or double in one context will turn out to be ugly, small or half in another context. Such predications of sensible items are therefore condemned to being at once true and false (they 'both are and are-not'). Hence scientific knowledge must instead have as its objects intelligible, context-free concepts, kinds or classes which do not admit of any change and could not be otherwise than they are: according to Plato's own metaphysics, these are transcendent Forms. So far, a reasonably conventional reading of Plato's text. However, what Plato then may be thought to do by having Glaucon compare the hat riddle is hint that the same antithesis between context-dependent and context-free items is generalizable to a comprehensive range of natural genera, such as bird, wood and stone, even though these, unlike the originally cited items, do not have opposites.⁴⁵ Whether pumice is a stone and whether fennel is wood, will depend on the context⁴⁶ in which each is being used or observed.⁴⁷ Hence the quantified 'All fennel is wood' would count as false, since, although dried fennel is wood, freshly cut fennel is not. (An easier example for us might be bamboo.) But the unquantified 'Fennel is wood' and 'Fennel is-not wood', much like Aristotle's 'Man is white' and 'Man is-

And always remembering that the Randians' favorite, Aristotle, was essentially in the same camp as Plato, here we see that Epicurus objected to both:

The idea of extending Plato's antithesis, to cover taxonomic genera as well as pairs of opposites, should be acceptable in principle to the Peripatetics too, if (as we will see confirmed) they are siding with Plato in this debate: even if they are assumed not to endorse Plato's theory of transcendent Forms, they would at least broadly agree with him that the method of taxonomic division has as its subject matter not perceived particulars, but intellectually accessible genera and species.⁴⁸ We will see too, in section 3.5, that as well as the *Republic* Epicurus had Plato's *Phaedrus* in his sights: the project, described in the latter dialogue, of 'dividing species by species at the natural joints (*κατὰ εἶδη* ... διακρίνου κατὰ ἄρτην ἢ ἰσχυρὰν), without trying to break any part like a bad cook' (265e1-3), no doubt helps further fill out the idealised Platonic method to which Epicurus is reacting.

Epicurus himself has no place in his ontology for intelligible genera and species. Scientific knowledge can have as its object nothing but the world's specific occupants, especially as these are the primary locus of truths. Hence the *Republic* 5 argument, once it had been extended to generic items like bird and stone, will have represented a real challenge for him, suggesting that no stable genus-species taxonomy is possible. And, as we learn from our text, his response was to bite the bullet and accept just that: such taxonomy is not a dependable method of analysis.

That Epicurus is arguing against Plato is made unambiguous. But in doing so he is, equally clearly, reported as deploying current Peripatetic terminology. Moreover, as we will see confirmed shortly, specific contem-

And this shows that Platonic-Aristotelian connection, which would suggest that the Epicurean line about walking around endlessly prating about the meaning of "the good" was aimed as much or more at Plato than at Aristotle:

'Peripatetics' from *peripatein*, 'to walk'. The formulation echoes a tradition belonging to Alexandrian Neoplatonism, according to which 'Peripatetics' had in reality been the name of the entire Platonic school, derived from Plato's practice of walking while doing philosophy, but when Plato's immediate heirs switched to the name 'Academics' the Aristotelians alone were left with the title 'Peripatetics'.⁴⁹ This is recognizably a *ben trovato* story designed to favour the harmony of Plato and Aristotle by making Plato himself the original Peripatetic.⁵⁰ The precise wording chosen is hardly likely to derive from the early third-century BC context we are now considering, but rather from Sikeliotes' Alexandrian Neoplatonist sources. Nevertheless, the formula is intended as a way of referring to the early Peripatetics, themselves datable to the late fourth and early third centuries BC. Moreover, it is striking that some kind of Platonic-Aristotelian syncretism is implied not only by this hybrid title that Sikeliotes adopts for the school but also by the philosophical confrontation on which he informs us.⁵¹ We have already seen the Epicureans reported as arguing

There is important information in this article too about Epicurus' arguments against determinism: