

Lucretius On The Development of Language

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2019 at 6:54 AM

This post starts with two versions of the key material from Lucretius, then includes other references of significance to this topic:

1743 Daniel Browne Edition - Book Five:

Nature compelled them to use the various sounds of the tongue, and convenience taught them to express the names of things; like children, before they can well speak, are forced to make use of signs, and are obliged to point with their fingers to the objects that lie before them; for every creature is sensible what faculties it has, and how it is to use them. So calves, before the horns appear upon their foreheads, will but fiercely, and push with them, when they are enraged, and the welts of panthers and lions will defend themselves with their claws and feet and teeth when their claws and teeth are scared to be seen; and all kinds of birds, we observe, trust to their wings, and rely upon the fluttering support of their pinions.

But to think that one man gave names to all things, and that men from thence learned the first elements of speech, is absurd and ridiculous; for why should one man distinguish everything by a name, and use the various accents of the tongue, and at the same time another not be as capable of doing this as he?

Besides, if others had not the use of words among them as soon, how could they be made acquainted with the use of them? Or by what art would this one man make them know and understand what he designed? One alone could not compel the rest, and by force make them learn the catalog of his names. He could not prevail by reason, or persuade men so unfit to hear, to do as he directed. Nor would they bear with patience, or by any means endure, to have strange sounds of unintelligible words any longer rattling in their ears to no purpose.

And then, what is there so very wonderful in this, that men, to whom Nature has given a voice and a tongue, should, according to the various knowledge they had conceived of the great variety of things, distinguish each of them by a proper name; when mute cattle, and the several kinds of wild beasts, express their passions by different voices and sounds, when their fear, their grief, or their joys are strong upon them? And that they do so you may observe from evident examples.

For when fierce mastiffs are at first provoked, they snarl, and grin, and show their hard white teeth, and threaten, in their rage, with lower sounds than those they rend the air with when they bark and roar aloud; but when they gently lick their whelps with their soft tongue, or toss them with their feet, or seem to bite, and finally gape as if to eat them up, but never touch

them with their teeth, they show their pleasure with a whining voice; not so, as when they howl, left by themselves at home, or when they whimper, with their crouching bodies, to shun the coming blow.

And does not the horse with different neighings fill the air, when, hot in blood and in the prime of youth, he is sorely galled with spurs of winged love, and rages in his lust among the mares, and, eager to engage, with open nostrils snuffs the scent? Does not he shake his trembling limbs, and neigh, for other reasons, with far other sounds?

And then, the feathered race, the various kinds of birds, the hawk, the osprey, and the seagulls, that live and seek their food in the salt waves, they throw out other notes at other times, than when they strive for food and fight for prey; and some will change their hoarse voice according to the different qualities of the air, as the long-lived ravens, and the flocks of crows, when they are said to call for rain and showers, and sometimes to cry for wind and storms. If therefore the different perceptions of things will compel these creatures, mute as they are, to send out different sounds, how much more reasonable is it that men should be able to mark out different things by different names?

Cyril Bailey Edition:

Then after they got themselves huts and skins and fire, and woman yoked with man retired to a single [home, and the laws of marriage] were learnt, and they saw children sprung from them, then first the race of man began to soften. For fire brought it about that their chilly limbs could not now so well bear cold under the roof of heaven, and Venus lessened their strength, and children, by their winning ways, easily broke down the haughty will of their parents. Then, too, neighbours began eagerly to form friendship one with another, not to hurt or be harmed, and they commended to mercy children and the race of women, when with cries and gestures they taught by broken words that 'tis right for all men to have pity on the weak. Yet not in all ways could unity be begotten, but a good part, the larger part, would keep their compacts loyally; or else the human race would even then have been all destroyed, nor could breeding have prolonged the generations until now.

But the diverse sounds of the tongue nature constrained men to utter, and use shaped the names of things, in a manner not far other than the very speechlessness of their tongue is seen to lead children on to gesture, when it makes them point out with the finger the things that are before their eyes. For every one feels to what purpose he can use his own powers. Before the horns of a calf appear and sprout from his forehead, he butts with them when angry, and pushes passionately. But the whelps of panthers and lion-cubs already fight with claws and feet and biting, when their teeth and claws are scarce yet formed. Further, we see all the tribe of winged fowls trusting to their wings, and seeking an unsteady aid from their pinions. Again, to think that any one then parcelled out names to things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is mere folly. For why should he be able to mark off all things by words, and to utter the

diverse sounds of the tongue, and at the same time others be thought unable to do this? Moreover, if others too had not used words to one another, whence was implanted in him the concept of their use; whence was he given the first power to know and see in his mind what he wanted to do? Likewise one man could not avail to constrain many, and vanquish them to his will, that they should be willing to learn all his names for things; nor indeed is it easy in any way to teach and persuade the deaf what it is needful to do; for they would not endure it, nor in any way suffer the sounds of words unheard before to batter on their ears any more to no purpose.

Lastly, what is there so marvellous in this, if the human race, with strong voice and tongue, should mark off things with diverse sounds for diverse feelings? When the dumb cattle, yea and the races of wild beasts are wont to give forth diverse unlike sounds, when they are in fear or pain, or again when their joys grow strong. Yea verily, this we may learn from things clear to see. When the large loose lips of Molossian dogs start to snarl in anger, baring their hard teeth, thus drawn back in rage, they threaten with a noise far other than when they bark and fill all around with their clamour. Yet when they essay fondly to lick their cubs with their tongue, or when they toss them with their feet, and making for them with open mouth, feign gently to swallow them, checking their closing teeth, they fondle them with growling voice in a way far other than when left alone in the house they bay, or when whining they shrink from a beating with cringing body. Again, is not neighing seen to differ likewise, when a young stallion in the flower of his years rages among the mares, pricked by the spur of winged love, and from spreading nostrils snorts for the fray, and when, it may be, at other times he whinnies with trembling limbs? Lastly, the tribe of winged fowls and the diverse birds, hawks and ospreys and gulls amid the sea-waves, seeking in the salt waters for life and livelihood, utter at other times cries far other than when they are struggling for their food and fighting for their prey. And some of them change their harsh notes with the weather, as the long-lived tribes of crows and flocks of rooks, when they are said to cry for water and rains, and anon to summon the winds and breezes. And so, if diverse feelings constrain animals, though they are dumb, to utter diverse sounds, how much more likely is it that mortals should then have been able to mark off things unlike with one sound and another.

Epicurus from the Letter to Herodotus:

First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning.

For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference.

And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.

Having made these points clear, we must now consider things imperceptible to the senses.

Epicurus Principal Doctrines

22. We must consider both the real purpose, and all the evidence of direct perception, to which we always refer the conclusions of opinion; otherwise, all will be full of doubt and confusion.

23. If you fight against all sensations, you will have no standard by which to judge even those of them which you say are false.

24. If you reject any single sensation, and fail to distinguish between the conclusion of opinion, as to the appearance awaiting confirmation, and that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind, you will confound all other sensations, as well, with the same groundless opinion, so that you will reject every standard of judgment. And if among the mental images created by your opinion you affirm both that which awaits confirmation, and that which does not, you will not escape error, since you will have preserved the whole cause of doubt in every judgment between what is right and what is wrong.

25. If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other, nearer, standard, when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles.

Commentary By Norman DeWitt:

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Lucretius Book Four (Daniel Browne Edition):

Many more things of this kind we observe and wonder at, which attempt to overthrow the certainty of our senses, but to no purpose - for things of this sort generally deceive us upon account of the judgment of the mind which we apply to them, and so we conclude we see things which we really do not; for nothing is more difficult than to distinguish things clear and plain from such as are doubtful, to which the mind is ready to add its assent, as it is inclined to believe everything imparted by the senses.

Lastly, if anyone thinks that he knows nothing, he cannot be sure that he knows this, when he confesses that he knows nothing at all. I shall avoid disputing with such a trifler, who perverts all things, and like a tumbler with his head prone to the earth, can go no otherwise than backwards.

And yet allow that he knows this, I would ask (since he had nothing before, to lead him into such a knowledge) from whence he had the notion what it was to know, or not to know; what was it that gave him an idea of Truth or Falsehood, and what taught him to distinguish between doubt and certainty?

You will find that knowledge of truth is originally derived from the senses, nor can the senses be contradicted, for whatever is able by the evidence of an opposite truth to convince the senses of falsehood, must be something of greater certainty than they. But what can deserve greater credit than the senses require from us? Will reason, derived from erring sense, claim the privilege to contradict it? Reason – that depends wholly upon the senses, which unless you allow to be true, all reason must be false. Can the ears correct the eyes? Or the touch the ears? Or will taste confute the touch? Or shall the nose or eyes convince the rest?

This, I think, cannot be, for every sense has a separate faculty of its own, each has its distinct powers; and therefore an object, soft or hard, hot or cold, must necessarily be distinguished as soft or hard, hot or cold, by one sense separately, that is, the touch. It is the sole province of another, the sight, to perceive the colors of things, and the several properties that belong to them. The taste has a distinct office. Odors particularly affect the smell, and sound the ears. And therefore it cannot be that one sense should correct another, nor can the same sense correct itself, since an equal credit ought to be given to each; and therefore whatever the senses at any time discover to us must be certain.

And though reason is not able to assign a cause why an object that is really four-square when near, should appear round when seen at a distance; yet, if we cannot explain this difficulty, it is better to give any solution, even a false one, than to deliver up all Certainty out of our power, to break in upon our first principle of belief, and tear up all foundations upon which our life and security depend. For not only all reason must be overthrown, but life itself must be immediately extinguished, unless you give credit to your senses. These direct you to fly from a precipice and other evils of this sort which are to be avoided, and to pursue what tends to your security. All therefore is nothing more than an empty parade of words that can be offered against the certainty of sense.

Lastly, as in a building, if the principle rule of the artificer be not true, if his line be not exact, or his level bear in to the least to either side, every thing must needs be wrong and crooked, the whole fabric must be ill-shaped, declining, hanging over, leaning and irregular, so that some parts will seem ready to fall and tumble down, because the whole was at first disordered by false principles. So the reason of things must of necessity be wrong and false which is founded upon a false representation of the senses.

From *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*
Friedrich Nietzsche
Fragment, 1873: from the *Nachlass*.
Tr. Walter Kaufmann

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Let us still give special consideration to the formation of concepts. Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept "leaf" is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions; and now it gives rise to the idea that in nature there might be something besides the leaves which would be "leaf"—some kind of original form after which all leaves have been woven, marked, copied, colored, curled, and painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy turned out to be a correct, reliable, and faithful image of the original form. We call a person "honest." Why did he act so honestly today? we ask. Our answer usually sounds like this: because of his honesty. Honesty! That is to say again: the leaf is the cause of the leaves. After all, we know nothing of an essence-like quality named "honesty"; we know only numerous individualized, and thus unequal actions, which we equate by omitting the unequal and by then calling them honest actions. In the end, we distill from them a *qualitas occulta* [hidden quality] with the name of "honesty"...

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Post by “Eikadistes” of October 23, 2019 at 8:33 AM

This reminds me of the Romulus and Remus Hypothesis which suggests that recursive language was created by two or more children who carried a genetic mutation that gave them the opportunity to develop their prefrontal cortex about seventy-thousand years ago. They note that complex structures, symbolic paintings, ceremonial artifacts, and the beginning of religion only appear after this period. They conclude that the distinguishing feature of a modern human is an active imagination. [<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20190805/...magination.aspx>]

Post by “Joshua” of October 23, 2019 at 11:20 AM

My thoughts on the question are not organized, but allow me to free-associate for a moment;

What, at minimum, a Theory of Language Needs to Explain;

1. It ought to explain why there is language, rather than no language.
2. It ought to take a position on the original incident of language; was the development centralized in place and time, or distributed throughout and across populations?
3. (Related) it ought to take a position on whether the development of language preceded the migrations out of Africa, or followed them, or some combination of these.
4. It ought to predict whether language, if vanished, would arise again under certain conditions, and what those conditions would be.

Two additional questions that should preoccupy the theorist;

5. Why are there vast differences in (apparently) unrelated language families? Why is such a language inflected and this other language isolating? Why does this language have stress accents, this other language have pitch accents, and this third language is tonal?
6. Also, why did Proto-Indo-European reach such a peak of inflected complexity, while the trend for the last few thousand years has been toward more word isolation? (I.e. English is less inflected than Old French, Old French is less inflected than Medieval Latin and Koine Greek, Medieval Latin and Koine Greek are less inflected than classical Latin and classical Greek, classical Latin and classical Greek are less inflected than Sanskrit, which in turn is less inflected than Proto-Indo-European.)

A materialist theory of language

The early Epicureans couldn't have known that all modern humans are descended from stock that lived in East Africa 100,000 years ago, and didn't colonize the rest of the globe until well into the intervening millennia. But here's what they do seem to believe;

1. That the utility of language is self-evident. Making noises is so useful that nearly every animal larger than a worm indulges the practice. Not just mammals and birds, but reptiles, amphibians, and even fish (using swim bladders) make use of pneumatic vocalizations. Insects rely on mechanical friction for the same effect, rubbing legs together or beating wings. Snakes hiss and sometimes rattle.

2. Language was not endowed by god or Prometheus, or invented by Adam or the First Man, but developed organically. It might have happened once and spread, or it might have happened many times.

3. Because it arose naturally, we can expect that such a thing has happened innumerable times on innumerable worlds, and will happen innumerable times again.

That'll have to be enough for now, but I'll revisit this evening!

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2019 at 1:07 PM

Joshua do you have comment on whether there is any relation between the excerpt from Nietzsche, especially in relation to the Lucretius Book FOUR material as to the relation of knowledge and the senses?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2019 at 4:29 PM

It would appear from Lucretius and from observation that there is a prolepsis of language, in terms of an innate desire to communicate and a "pencil sketch" of how to do so given our biology.

The Nietzsche excerpt, to me, does not relate to prolepseis but it useful to clarify the difference between a prolepsis and a concept. It illustrates how, for instance, "cow" becomes a concept, which I think we've determined is not a prolepsis (at least by our non academic reasoning). Similarly the Lucretius excerpts illustrate what a prolepsis could be, although I don't know that I've ever heard a prolepsis of language referred to so that could be open to discussion.

Quote

First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning.

For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference.

This is where it gets confusing to me, particularly in light of the recent thread on the gods and the discussion there of the words "immortal" and "incorruptible". One issue is that so much philosophy originates in languages other than English, so there's the added complexity of translation (for those of us who are primarily monolingual). Another issue more directly related to the above quote is that people seem to have conflicting first mental images of many words. So how does one burrow down to the first mental image of a given word?

Post by "Cassius" of October 23, 2019 at 5:35 PM

[Godfrey](#) in my own analysis, I presume it is pretty clear that conceptual reasoning is what occurs when we identify concepts such as "economics" and "socialism" and "capitalism" and talk about socialism and capitalism as involving different perspectives on economics. The key point being that we are clearly manipulating "ideas" that don't really have independent physical existence, but are terms that we have defined. Actually "conceptual reasoning" is probably much broader than that, and probably should be considered to include all kinds of reasoning and logic about anything, even concrete things, because what does reasoning and logic ever work with besides concepts? At any rate, "conceptual reasoning" using "concepts" or "abstractions" is certainly a highly useful tool of human affairs and I would think it is clear that everyone, including Epicurus, agrees that properly used, conceptual reasoning is a wonderful tool for human pleasure and happiness.

As for this discussion of language, someone / anyone points at a flying feathered animal and calls it a "bird" and then afterward in that territory among people who speak the same language flying feathered animals are called birds. Maybe the very disposition to point and make a sound at the same time is anticipated in our nature. But would anyone say that the precise sound made, and word chosen, was anticipated in our nature, or is every word / precise sound totally arbitrary based on local circumstances? Even considering words of emotion, does

the word "joy" sound pleasing in some way and the word "hurt" sound painful?

Because ultimate the question is as Nietzsche raises in the excerpt. Is any part of conceptual reasoning, or the assignment and manipulation of words, a result of there being an "essence-like quality of a leaf" or an essence of "honesty" that our nature puts us into contact with. Or is the entire naming and conceptual reasoning process totally a function of our own "arbitrary" choices as to how to name things and manipulate those names? Stated that way it seems pretty clear that the only way that could be correct would be some kind of Platonic theory of ideal forms existing somewhere else, or Aristotelian theory of "essences" residing within the thing being observed, neither of which I gather Epicurus believed to exist. And so is the process described by Lucretius essentially consistent with Nietzsche's excerpt?

Post by “Joshua” of October 23, 2019 at 6:09 PM

I continue to struggle in getting a handle on this question!

I read it this way; Nietzsche in this passage is doing good service in repudiation of Plato's Ideal Forms. He concludes that the concept or mental image of a thing is not only NOT a better representation of that thing's being—it is indeed, and must be, a worse one (rendering unequal things equal cannot be a step toward clarity).

To put it another way; Plato thought that language was often faulty because it didn't accord with the Ideal Form, of which the physical object was a crude imitation. Each leaf is a phenomenon of the Form of the leaf.

Epicurus was concerned that we might go wrong with language if the word for a thing, which two people share, does not accord with the mental image of the thing, which must be different for each and formed by experience. Each leaf is a leaf by linguistic convention. Its genuine nature is atoms and void.

To solve Plato's problem, in his view, demands recourse to Logic and Geometry, that we might intimate the nature of the Forms which we cannot 'see' or even well-express.

To solve Epicurus' problem, in my view, we must have recourse to (1.) the senses, (2.) to a critique of the Reason that operates on them, and (3.) to the gentle proddings of corrective dialogue to calibrate the differences that arise over words.

But even as I type all of this the account fails to satisfy me. (And you should take anything I say about Forms with a critical eye; I haven't studied those dialogues since college).

Post by “Joshua” of October 23, 2019 at 6:25 PM

Cassius, I see we cross-posted. We're clearly going the same direction in connecting the question to Forms. I think Nietzsche is more or less correct, but does that get us anywhere in explaining what Epicurus might have meant by "first images" connected to words?

Post by “Cassius” of October 23, 2019 at 8:04 PM

Thank you Joshua you are doing a better job of focusing on the question than I am. You are right to highlight this from the letter to Herodotus:

[Quote from Cassius](#)

For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference.

Is this "first mental image associated with each word purely internal to each person? And where does this first mental image come from? Is this a reference to a picture we store in our mind (such as 'leaf') after many observations? Is the picture an "abstraction"? If so, does this have anything to do with "anticipations"?

And what is referenced by "there should be no need of explanation"? Is that a reference to somehow the thing is in our mind without experience of it previously, or that, once it is there, the thing is so clear to us that it needs no further analysis or examples in order to be clear?

I tend to interpret all this as meaning "let's be as clear as possible in our use of words as we discuss things with other people" which seems basic common sense. An easy example in when in Rome, speak Italian. And there are all sorts of other ways to be precise. But is that all it is saying, or does this have anything to do with "anticipations"?

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2019 at 8:46 PM

I'm thinking there are two issues: the issue of origin and the issue of use.

Lucretius seems to be describing origin when he speaks of the urge to communicate and debates against one person coming up with language and teaching it to others. From the origin, languages then could almost be considered like species as they would arise differently under different circumstances and continue to develop from those specific circumstances.

The issue of use is what I think Epicurus is referring to in the "first mental image" excerpt. If I may, I'd like to try to examine the subject with two specific instances to discuss, neither of which is part of the literature and both of which are contemporary to us. Question: what is your first mental image associated with

1) "door"

2) "light"

Post by “Joshua” of October 23, 2019 at 9:08 PM

Perhaps it will be helpful to look at examples where his advice is explicitly ignored. There are a number of ways in which our common use of language *intentionally* relies NOT on the "first mental image", but on some other aspect or quality for aesthetic, poetic, or rhetorical effect. For example;

Synechdoche: a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (such as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (such as society for high society), the species for the genus (such as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (such as a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (such as boards for stage)

Metonymy: a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated (such as "crown" in "lands belonging to the crown")

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money)

Epicurus seems to greatly dislike these devices; certainly with regards to Philosophy, and possibly in general. Lucretius, as a masterful poet, is guilty of using all of them! In the very second line of the poem, for example, he refers to the stars or constellations as the "sliding signs of heaven". He's a materialist; he doesn't actually believe that the random clusters of

stars are meaningful signs or representations. But the line reads beautifully, and the phrase serves the meter of the poem, so he uses it.

Here's a good example of why this can be a huge problem: in the Gospel of Matthew, 19:24, it is said, "*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*"

Well, it turns out that Christians have a strong material interest in denying the plain reading of everything Jesus ever said about wealth. This passage is no different; and so they have invented out of wholecloth a theory that the "Eye of the Needle" is a figure of speech for a pedestrian portal or doorway through a wall, adjacent to the main large gate. This usage is completely unattested in classical literature. It might turn out to be correct, but we have absolutely no way of knowing. If Jesus wished to be understood, he might have taken Epicurus' advice!

Another problem relates to how we define words—how we describe language using language. In one amusing story, Diogenes the Cynic elbows his way into the Academy with a plucked chicken under his arm. Aristotle had defined "Man" as a "featherless biped"; Diogenes lifted the chicken, and proclaimed his discovery of Aristotle's Man. As an Epicurean, I think there were two errors on display here; one was to define a word so broadly so as to be meaningless (Aristotle's mistake). The other was to mock the original effort without furnishing a constructive alternative, and to poison the well for everyone with ridicule (Diogenes' mistake).

Post by “Joshua” of October 23, 2019 at 9:18 PM

Hahaha....

Godfrey, I read both words at once, and so I "saw" a door ajar with light shining through.

For "door", I suppose a wooden object hanging on hinges to seal a man-sized opening. For "light", sunlight streaming through clouds or trees.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2019 at 9:50 PM

I was thinking that "door" is pretty straightforward, but "light" could be what you described, or a fixture on the ceiling that allows one to see things in a dark room, or a measure of weight, or

a measure of intensity of color, or a subject that is easy to comprehend, etc etc...

Joshua I was basically going to the same place as you, but in a much less erudite manner 😊

The door with light shining through is a nice image!

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2019 at 6:02 AM

just to pick on doors, it seems to me that I have a series of mental images that cone to mind on hearing door - or most other words - so what is it about "first"?

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2019 at 6:06 AM

One thing that may be relevant to this that I pick up as I retype the Lucretius passages from the old PDFs is how much use is made of consecutive alternate descriptions, such as:

I am going to walk through the door, the portal, the gate, the wooden sheet on hinges, the white barrier to the entrance, the divider of rooms..... Etc.

Now that is indeed a way to make sure one's point is understood, and maybe it is also a way to drill home a mental image.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 24, 2019 at 9:24 PM

Quote

just to pick on doors, it seems to me that I have a series of mental images that cone to mind on hearing door - or most other words - so what is it about "first"?

Excellent question! Are there any words for which everyone can agree on a first mental image? This I find very puzzling, but I haven't had time to give it serious thought these last couple of days. 🤔

Post by “Joshua” of October 24, 2019 at 9:47 PM

I think probably when we talk about mental images between people being the "same", what we really have to mean is "same enough to a first approximation". If you and I are talking about dogs, it doesn't really matter if I picture a spaniel and you a labrador. But if I picture a spaniel and you picture Dog the Bounty Hunter—well, we're going to encounter some confusion!

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2019 at 6:16 AM

Maybe the "first mental image" is our own in each case, and the reference is not to everyone having the same or even a similar image, or to communication with others at all, but a reference to we ourselves having confidence in our own image being clear and firm. And so maybe the entire passage by Epicurus is not referring to language or communication but is referring to having confidence in our own thought processes?

Post by “Todd” of October 25, 2019 at 11:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And so maybe the entire passage by Epicurus is not referring to language or communication but is referring to having confidence in our own thought processes?

IMO, the importance of the "first mental image" is in a rhetorical or polemical context.

I think the point was to be wary of people who insist on definitions for words that we all understand intuitively. The Platonists and Aristotelians being the likely suspects.

Two examples come to mind:

First, that Epicurus refused to define pleasure, to avoid being led into an argument where someone would twist the words of his definition to mean something entirely different from what we all understand by pleasure.

Second, an anecdote from Diogenes Laertius, where some philosopher has defined "man" as a featherless biped. Later, someone shows up with a plucked chicken and says, "Behold, a man!" (I'm paraphrasing, but that's the gist of it.)

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2019 at 12:32 PM

Todd I am forgetting - is this tied to an Epicurean context or chapter?

[Quote from Todd](#)

Second, an anecdote from Diogenes Laertius, where some philosopher has defined "man" as a featherless biped. Later, someone shows up with a plucked chicken and says, "Behold, a man!" (I'm paraphrasing, but that's the gist of it.)

Post by "Todd" of October 25, 2019 at 12:37 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Todd I am forgetting - is this tied to an Epicurean context or chapter?

No, this is in the "Life of Diogenes". Amusingly, the anecdote is about Diogenes making fun of Plato.

(I took your advice and decided to read DL in its entirety.)

Post by "Cassius" of October 25, 2019 at 12:38 PM

There is a lot of fun stuff in there - you won't regret it!

Post by "Joshua" of October 25, 2019 at 1:49 PM

Diogenes the Cynic, unless I am mistaken; in response to Aristotle. Aristotle made the first serious effort to catalogue and categorize animals.

Edit; oops! Hadn't refreshed.