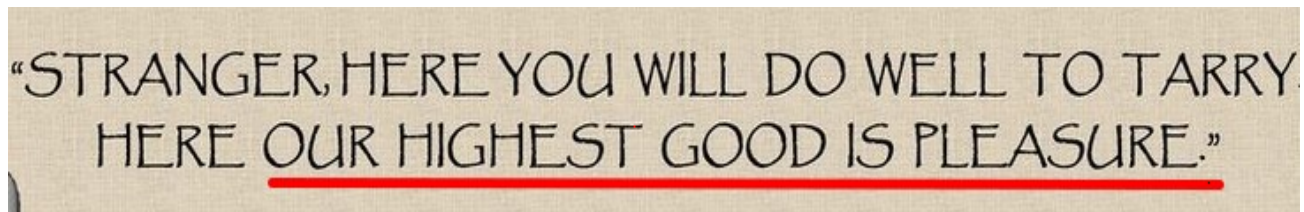


Comment at the Epicurean Philosophy Facebook Group On Pleasure As The Highest Good

Post by "Cassius" of September 16, 2020 at 7:48 AM

I don't encourage anyone who is not currently using Facebook to use it, and I am gradually but progressively cutting back on using it myself. I mainly use it for "recruitment" to come into contact with people I never would otherwise, so I do monitor and help with moderating the page. As long as I have time I'll probably continue to do that, just like I encourage people, if they desire, to participate in Reddit or other forums where they might meet like-minded people who would be good to get to know. I consider this Epicureanfriends.com forum to be the place where I post everything of significance where I want to be sure that it is preserved and seen and discussed by like-minded people, but that doesn't mean we should ignore other places where we can find good people.

[Today I posted this at Facebook](#), which I think is a useful reminder here at Epicureanfriends too:



Seems to me that it is time for a periodic reminder to current participants and applicants to the Epicurean Philosophy Facebook Group: At the top of our group page we have the slogan traditionally attested to have been the "motto" of the original school of Epicurus in Athens - "Stranger, here you will do well to tarry, here our highest good is PLEASURE." (emphasis added)

In other places around the internet you will encounter people who talk as if Epicurus held "painlessness" or "tranquility" or "stillness" to be the highest good, as if they know better than Epicurus what he "should" have said. This Facebook page is devoted to a classical interpretation that takes Epicurus at his word, and incorporates within his system all his statements about tranquility and absence of pain in a way that gives full effect to everything he said, without rewriting Epicurus to suit modern neo-Stoic idealism about the nature of virtue and pleasure.

The moderators maintain this group with that classical Epicurean view in mind. We welcome and encourage you to submit posts and participate in threads with the goal of pleasure in view. We are mindful that there are many who disagree with the "pleasure" emphasis, and we

moderate the group to ensure that those of us who wish to associate with the classical view have a place here where we can do so with like-minded people. If you are firmly of the view that the word "painlessness" represents the ideal that you wish to be associated with in studying Epicurus, then you will find many other places on the internet and at Facebook where your arguments will be welcomed. We ask that you respect our goals within this group and post those arguments elsewhere.

Citations convince no one who has their mind made up on this subject, but for those who are new to the group or to Epicurean Philosophy, here are several of the most clear statements in the ancient Epicurean texts on this issue:

(1) [Epicurus' Letter to Menoecus](#):

And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.

(2) Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends:

I will start then in the manner approved by the author of the system himself, by settling what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

...

The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

(3) Diogenes of Oinoanda, Fragment 32

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into "What is the means of happiness?" and they wanted to say "the virtues" (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not "what is the means of happiness?" but "What is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?", I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end. Let us therefore now state that this is true, making it our starting-point.

It's one of the purposes of this group to meet new people with whom to share our views, so these topics will always be welcome issues for discussion as we go forward. But as a result of our openness to meeting new people, you'll sometimes see debate about these issues from those who hold opposing positions, so please be careful to be sure you work to understand what you read. We'll appreciate your help and comments in moderating the group to keep the argument under control, and we ask your understanding that this group isn't a general philosophy forum where debate for the sake of debate, and argument for the sake of argument, is appropriate.

Note: I am only one of the moderators of the group, and I write here only from my own perspective about our goals and moderating guidelines. Please consult the "About" page and the opening post from Elli for a full statement of our long-standing guidelines.

Post by "Cassius" of September 16, 2020 at 7:17 PM

Here's a response worth preserving, and my response to that:

AT:

I do hope we can calm down those people who keep telling us that epicureans somehow prioritise short-term pleasure over long-term pleasure. I believe that deeply embedded in Epicurus' thinking is the assumption that pleasure should be measured over an entire lifetime. Therefore anything that generates pleasure now while building up pain later is not a rational choice.

Cassius:

Andy thanks for the comment. I do think your first sentence is spot on, but I am afraid we can't count on "calming down" many of those outside the group - we seem to live in a sea of people who either (1) see Epicureans as "hedonists" in the common derogatory meaning of that word, or (2) see Epicureans as proto-stoics who prize "tranquility" above pleasure. It's going to be a constant struggle to point back to the texts and point out that Epicurus held clarity to be of prime importance, so that when he used the word "pleasure" he didn't actually mean "comatose." But the "struggle" is definitely worth it as this is the kind of philosophic exchange which can be both enjoyable and productive at the same time.

Interestingly enough on your second and third sentences, I used to say exactly the same thing myself, but I am no longer thinking that "an entire lifetime" is really the precise point, unless you qualify that "entire lifetime" might be very short. It's hard to escape that conclusion due this very clear statement in the letter to Menoeceus: "(But the wise man neither seeks to escape life) nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. ***And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.***"

I think that second sentence rules out a flat preference for "length of time of pleasure" as overruling all other factors. Epicurus was pretty precise that "the most pleasant" is the way to weigh the question, rather than the longest period of time. And I think we can see the logical basis of the point if we think about it. If we consider anything that is "outside of pleasure itself, such as "noble pleasures" or "virtuous pleasures" or "longest pleasures" then we logically put ourselves in the position of needing to understand the nature of "nobility" or "virtue" or "time" and that is going to require wisdom or knowledge of those other factors in addition to pleasure.

That's the logical trap set by Plato in the [Philebus](#) which you can find by reading that dialogue. Once you admit that there is a standard by which to measure pleasure that is different from pleasure itself, you box yourself in (logically, that is) to admitting that this other factor is as important as is pleasure. Once you admit that this other factor is "as important" then Plato will show you, logically again, that what you really need is knowledge of this mystical art of judging, more so than pleasure itself.

So from a practical point of view, definitely all of us judging our own lives are going to consider how long our future pleasures will last, and how long our future pains will last, and consider that in making our judgments. But one of the reasons we are here, and one of the main ways we end up understanding Epicurus and being able to fight off the attacks of those who elevate virtue or something else to the role of "ultimate good," is to study what Epicurus was saying and see that he was both practical and an expert at logical argument.

And what he was saying is clear: the ultimate good cannot be defined "universally" in more detail than "Pleasure." It's up to each of us in our own lives to come to terms with what that means to us, and apply it accordingly. That might mean choosing to live very simply and live so

as to savor every last drop of a 100+ year life. Or it might mean, if we are so inclined at age 25, to strap a rocket to our back and fly to Mars so as to experience the delight of that experience, even if we know that the price will be we'll be dead in a year.

There's no way "logically" to make that decision as a universal for everyone. Nature does do it for us; nature leaves it up to us to do it. Everyone has their own personality and their own judgment about these things, and that's why I think Epicurus phrased things the way he did, and that's why this sentence and the others quoted above are very precise and do not provide a qualifier to the word "pleasure":

"We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. "

Post by "Don" of September 16, 2020 at 9:11 PM

Fragment 116 says, and according to Attalus's Usener website, from Plutarch:

Quote

Plutarch, Against Colotes, 17, p. 1117A: Such is ... the man who, in in the letter to Anaxarchus can pen such words as these: "But I, for my part, summon you to sustained pleasures and not to empty virtues, which fill us with vain expectations that destroy peace of mind."

The pleasures Epicurus calls us to are ἡδονὰς συνεχεῖς hedonas sunekheis "constant, continuous, sustained." So I don't think this refers to length of time, but he is calling us to make decisions that lead to one pleasure after another and pleasures or pains that lead to pleasure "down the line" even if not in this present moment. I still maintain this kind of terminology refers to long-term pleasure as opposed to the longest time. I've had this discussion elsewhere on the forum.

Post by "Cassius" of September 16, 2020 at 9:42 PM

I agree with you I think Don, and I do see a distinction between long-term and longest time.

I also think that there is a possibility that this phrasing may be another targeted argument against Plato, and you'll recall that DeWitt discusses this as a point of contention, that Plato had argued that another reason that pleasure could not constitute the goal is that it is not always present (not continuous being the implication):

This first is from page 66

Neither was he in debt to his teachers for his hedonism. None of them was a hedonist. He was in debt to Plato for suggestions concerning the classification of desires and the calculus of advantage in pleasure,⁴⁷ but differed from both Plato and Aristippus in his definition of pleasure. To neither of these was **continuous** pleasure conceivable, because they recognized only peaks of pleasure separated either by intervals void of pleasure or by neutral states. In order to escape from these logical dead ends Epicurus worked his way to a novel division of pleasures into those that were basic and those that were decorative.⁴⁸ The pleasure of being sane and in health is basic and can be enjoyed continually. All other pleasures are superfluous and decorative. For this doctrine, once more, he was in debt to no teacher.

THE NATURAL CEILINGS OF PLEASURE

Having established body and soul upon a parity, equal partners in life, Epicurus next proceeded to propound a number of paradoxes: first, that limits of pleasure were set by Nature, beyond which no increase was possible; second, that pleasure was one and not many; and third, that **continuous** pleasure was possible. These new doctrines were the offspring of controversy, because the contrary doctrines had been sponsored by Plato and his followers, who in this instance agreed for the most part with the multitude.

The first paradox is part of Authorized Doctrine 3, and by this position its prime importance is revealed: "The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures." The meaning is plain if the pleasure of eating be taken as an example. Nature is the teacher, as usual, and sets the norm. Hunger is a desire of the first category according to Epicurus: it is both natural and necessary. Where this natural and necessary desire for food exists, the pleasure of satisfying it cannot

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PLEASURE CAN BE CONTINUOUS

The apex of the new structure of ethics erected by Epicurus consists in the teaching that pleasure can be continuous. The discovery of a logical basis for this proposition was essential for the promulgation of hedonism as a practical code of conduct for mankind. No philosophy that offered merely intermittent intervals of pleasure would have possessed any broad or organic appeal for those in quest of the happy life.

The predecessors of Epicurus had spent considerable thought upon the analysis of pleasure, but their attitude was in the main merely analytical and academic, lacking relevance to action. Their real was not for promoting the happiness of mankind. They were rather in the position of men who give themselves to the study of anatomy without contemplating the practice of medicine. The attitude of Epicurus, on the contrary, was pragmatic from the beginning. The declaration that "Pain is the worst of that philosopher by which no malady of mankind is healed" has already been quoted.⁴⁹

The desired logical basis for the continuity of pleasure was afforded by the discovery of natural ceilings of pleasures. From this is derived the division into basic and ornamental or superfluous pleasures, corresponding respectively to natural and necessary desires and those that are neither natural nor necessary. Hunger and thirst exemplify the

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lowest class while the desire for rich viands and rare wines belongs to the second class. Correspondingly, the satisfaction of natural hunger and thirst is a basic pleasure while the gratification of abnormal desires for rich foods and drinks is ornamental and superfluous.

So while I agree with you again that there's a logical distinction between long-term vs longest, and duration of pleasure is certainly a legitimate consideration, I think this one may be parallel in nature to "absence of pain" - it may need to be "compartmentalized" as a logical rejoinder to an anti-Pleasure argument from Plato and the usual suspects, and as a result handled carefully outside that context, so as not to overstretch its application.

I am glad you posted that because otherwise I would not have gone back and looked up these sections in DeWitt, which I remembered only vaguely.

I think I am only now after 10+ years realizing the significance of some of these sections from DeWitt, and after our discussions here and in the Lucretius podcast. I read the words here, and I thought I understood them the first time, but it's really beginning to sink in to me how DeWitt is pointing out that Epicurus was both the ultimate pragmatist, and disdainful of dialectical logic, but also at the same time he responded directly to Plato in logical terms, playing Plato's own game. I think this explains some of the difference in interpretation that I still have in discussing these things with some other people. I am going to have to be more careful to both point out the inadequacies of "logic" while at the same time point how how Epicurus uses "logic" himself, as carefully as any of the Stoics or Platonists did -- just like DeWitt observed.

And ultimately that's my best argument against the "absence of pain passages" - that they are logical points being made in the context of refuting the anti-Platonic arguments, but were never intended to represent the full picture of the nature of pleasure any more than geometry or map-making can represent true reality - they are useful for discussing aspects of reality but they aren't reality themselves. So it may be that the "continuity" issue fits in the same category.

Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 4:36 AM

As far as Epicurus going back and forth, sometimes using logical arguments focused primarily on refuting Plato and the logical arguments of others, vs sometimes focused more practical through the use of real-life examples, this passage from the Biography by Diogenes Laertius may be relevant:

Quote

The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined. Of investigations some concern actual things, others mere words. This is a brief summary of the division of their philosophy and their views on the criterion of truth.

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2020 at 8:28 AM

I'm putting this here as a placeholder, because I'm unclear on what that portion that you underlined actually means. Not just here as you posted, but recently as I've been re-reading DL. I want to dig into the text and get clear what it actually means:

Quote

τῶν τε ζητήσεων εἶναι τὰς μὲν **περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων**, τὰς δὲ **περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν**.

Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 8:33 AM

That will be great Don and thank you. It looks like the version I quoted is [Bailey from his "Extant](#)

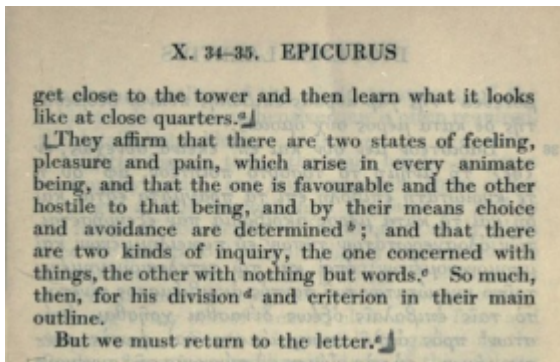
VI. LIFE OF EPICURUS 165

The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined. Of investigations some concern actual things, others mere words. This is a brief summary of the division of their philosophy and their views on the criterion of truth.

Now we must proceed to the letter.

Post by “Cassius” of September 17, 2020 at 8:35 AM

Hicks: <https://archive.org/stream/livesof...ge/564/mode/2up>



And Yonge: <https://archive.org/stream/TheLive...e/n447/mode/2up>

XXIII. They say that there are two passions, pleasure and pain, which affect everything alive. And that the one is natural, and the other foreign to our nature; with reference to which all objects of choice and avoidance are judged of. They say also, that there are two kinds of investigation; the one about facts, the other about mere words. And this is as far as an elementary sketch can go—their doctrine about division, and about the criterion.

Inwood and Gerson, Epicurus Reader:

They say there are two feelings, pleasure and pain, which occur in every animal; and the one is congenial to us, the other uncongenial. By means of them we judge what to choose and what to avoid. Of inquiries, some deal with objective facts, others with mere words.
This, then, is an elementary account of the division of philosophy and the criterion.

Post by “Don” of September 17, 2020 at 11:04 PM

In DL X.34, Diogenes describes two kind of inquiry or investigation (ζήτησις "zētēsis") carried out by the Epicureans:

Quote

"there are two kinds of inquiry, the one concerned with things, the other with nothing but words."

This translation seemed unsatisfactory to me, so I wanted to delve a little deeper into the original text. However, it appears a note to the text references section 37, which does shed light on the latter part of the sentence in 34:

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1691-comment-at-the-epicurean-philosophy-facebook-group-on-pleasure-as-the-highest-go/>

DL X .37: "In the first place, Herodotus, you must understand what it is that words denote, in order that by reference to this we may be in a position to test opinions, inquiries, or problems, so that our proofs may not run on untested ad infinitum, nor the terms we use be empty of meaning. [38] For the primary signification of every term employed must be clearly seen, and ought to need no proving; this being necessary, if we are to have something to which the point at issue or the problem or the opinion before us can be referred."

So it appears the investigation into "nothing but words" refers to an investigation into the clear meaning of the language used in any inquiry. This also appears to be borne out by the original text. The first kind of investigation is "concerning pragmata" τὰς περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων.

πραγμάτων (pragmatōn) is the genitive plural of πρᾶγμα (pragma) and means:

- deed, act, fact
- occurrence, matter, affair
- thing, concrete reality
- thing, creature
- thing of consequence or importance
- (in the plural) circumstances, affairs
- (in the plural, in bad sense) trouble, annoyance

So, it would appear the first kind of inquiry is of "things" in concrete reality. We're looking at existence, things as they exist. This could also be investigations into deeds, acts, i.e., the why and how things happen possibly..

The second kind of investigation is concerning "nothing but words" τὰς περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν. This makes it sound trivial, but section 37 gives this form of inquiry more gravitas. It's not "nothing but words" but it's an investigation into understanding the clear meaning of all words and language used to argue a point. This comes out clearer if we look at the definitions of the terms involved:

τὰς περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν

ψιλῆν = psilēn

(Note: this is the latter part of the names of the Greek letters u-pilon and e-pilon)

accusative feminine singular of ψιλός

- naked, bare
- bald, smooth
- unclad, uncovered
- small, frail, delicate
- simple, plain
- (military) light (troops)
- unarmed
- (of words) without meter (i.e. prose)
- (poetry) without music (Epic vs Lyrical)
- (singing) without music (a capella)
- (music) without singing (instrumentals)
- (grammar) without the rough breathing (i.e. with the smooth breathing)
- (grammar) describing the unaspirated voiceless stops, π (p), τ (t), κ (k), as opposed to the aspirated voiceless stops, φ (ph), χ (kh), θ (th)

φωνήν = phōnēn

accusative singular of φωνή (phōnē, e.g., English telephone)

- sound
- Usually of the human voice: voice, cry, yell
- The voice or cry of animals
- Any articulate sound (especially vowels)
- speech, discourse
- language

So, I would offer that the second kind of investigation is concerned with plain language, unadorned speech, no flowery discourse. Say what you mean, know what you're saying, and make your point.

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2020 at 6:49 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1691-comment-at-the-epicurean-philosophy-facebook-group-on-pleasure-as-the-highest-go/>

I think that's a very useful dive into the meaning of that section, but I do think there will remain an important distinction between the realities of things, which we detect through the senses, and our opinions about them, which can only be expressed through words, and which will always include the possibility of error mixed in to those opinions. Otherwise there would be little need to have made the point, since he had already in section 37 made the point about the importance of clarity.

Because in the end what is the implication of the distinction? I'm not sure what the answer to that question would be, but maybe the most obvious possibility is that inquiries about things can be settled through reference to the things themselves, but that inquiries about words are always ultimately matters of convention and opinion, wherein again error can take place. (it occurs to me to ask, "There are errors other than lack of clarity, correct?")

Post by "Don" of September 18, 2020 at 8:48 AM

Quote from Cassius

I think that's a very useful dive into the meaning of that section, but I do think there will remain an important distinction between the realities of things, which we detect through the senses, and our opinions about them, which can only be expressed through words, and which will always include the possibility of error mixed in to those opinions. Otherwise there would be little need to have made the point, since he had already in section 37 made the point about the importance of clarity.

It's important to remember that section 34 is Diogenes's commentary *about* the Epicureans, and 37 is Epicurus himself writing to Herodotus. So, when you say "he had already ... made the point..." that's not the case. Epicurus is making the point about clarity of language in 37 for the first time here.

A **VERY** (almost painfully) literal translation of Diogenes's commentary in 34 is:

Quote

τῶν τε ζητήσεων εἶναι τὰς μὲν **περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων**, τὰς δὲ **περὶ ψιλῆν τὴν φωνήν**.

And of inquiries (there) are, on the one hand, those concerning of concrete things; on the other hand, those concerning simple language.

(Note that the second is singular, so I am inclined to translate it singular as in **language, speech**, and not plural as in **words**.)

There two are listed using $\mu\epsilon\nu\dots\delta\epsilon\dots$. That's where the "on the one hand... On the other" come in. This is a very common feature of Ancient Greek. If you want to dive a little deeper, [here's a good intro to that online](#).

My conjecture is that Diogenes is setting up a dichotomy of inquiries where Epicurus saw a means to an end. It wasn't inquiries about words, it was inquiries using simple, direct language. The only inquiries about words would be to establish the clear meaning of words so works could be easily understood and not "run on ... ad infinitum." The only way we are going to transmit the truth of our canonical observations and the truth about the nature of things (atoms, void, etc.) is to through the clearest, simplest language possible. Epicurus is saying we don't use flowery rhetoric or poetry (Sorry, Lucretius) because there's a chance the results of our inquiries would not be understood.

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2020 at 9:15 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The only inquiries about words would be to establish the clear meaning of words so works could be easily understood and not "run on ... ad infinitum."

I do think that is a significant part of the issue, especially as to poetry and other flowery and overly-complicated language. But I also am concerned about taking that too far as the full point. I think in that direction lies issues involved with the "present impressions of the mind," and concepts vs precepts, and whether there are four legs of the canon rather than just three.

Best way I can think to state my concern at the moment is that I think Epicurus was thinking that all communication through words is inherently limited and fall short of reality, just like math and geometry are inherently limited in what they can do. I believe that this position is one of the most important in the philosophy as providing the antidote to rationalism. No matter how clear we try to make our words or our theorems they will always fall short of reality.

Edit: For what it's worth I decided to see what [wikipedia says about "rationalism"](#):

In [philosophy](#), **rationalism** is the [epistemological](#) view that "regards [reason](#) as the chief source and test of knowledge"[\[1\]](#) or "any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification".[\[2\]](#) More formally, rationalism is defined as a [methodology](#) or a [theory](#) "in which the criterion of the truth is not sensory but intellectual and [deductive](#)".[\[3\]](#)

In an old controversy, rationalism was opposed to [empiricism](#), where the rationalists believed that reality has an intrinsically logical structure. Because of this, the rationalists argued that certain truths exist and that the intellect can directly grasp these truths. That is to say, **rationalists asserted that certain rational principles exist in [logic](#), [mathematics](#), [ethics](#), and [metaphysics](#) that are so fundamentally true that denying them causes one to fall into contradiction. The rationalists had such a high confidence in reason that empirical proof and physical evidence were regarded as unnecessary to ascertain certain truths - in other words, "there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience".[\[4\]](#)**

Different degrees of emphasis on this method or theory lead to a range of rationalist standpoints, from the moderate position "that reason has precedence over other ways of acquiring knowledge" to the more extreme position that reason is "the unique path to knowledge".[\[5\]](#)

Post by "Don" of September 18, 2020 at 10:40 AM

Quote

I think Epicurus was thinking that all communication through words is inherently limited and fall short of reality, just like math and geometry are inherently limited in what they can do. I believe that this position is one of the most important in the philosophy as providing the antidote to rationalism. No matter how clear we try to make our words or our theorems they will always fall short of reality.

I'm open-minded here, but what leads you to think this? I agree that we experience reality subjectively, but the only medium we have to communicate anything is through shared language. If Epicurus had the realizations he did and only experienced it for himself but didn't use language to communicate it, we wouldn't be discussing any of this.

Now, I will admit that we can communicate with "body language" - a comforting hug, a stern look - and that is immediate if the cultural context is shared. But that can't convey complex ideas from my head to yours. We have to use language, and Epicurus is advocating using the most simple, direct language to accomplish this to cut down the possibility of

misunderstanding. Now, we have to interpret his words because we neither live in his cultural context nor speak Ancient Greek as a first language.

I would contend that rationalism makes use of rhetoric and flowery speech to obfuscate reality. Epicurus advocates direct language to uncover and convey reality as it exists. That's still a blow against elevating rationalism but he can't argue against rationalism unless he sets the parameters of what kind of language to use.

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2020 at 11:12 AM

"We have to use language, and Epicurus is advocating using the most simple, direct language to accomplish this to cut down the possibility of misunderstanding."

That is certainly true, and so therefore Epicurus must have agreed with it.

But that does not mean that words, no matter how precisely defined, can ever be the equivalent of the thing itself, or reveal it in all its dimensions. That limitation also seems true from a non-supernatural atomist perspective, but the rationalism of Plato and others seems to elevate words into something more - like the Logos of Christianity. (In the beginning was the word.....)

As per the implication of the Wikipedia excerpt, it would appear that Epicurus held that such a view of the nature of words and concepts is incorrect and that words are purely matters of convention.

I think there is a close parallel here between words and math and geometry, both of which too Epicurus would have used while also remembering their limitations.

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

Don absolutely I am with you on stressing of clarity as critical to Epicurus, I am just saying that no amount of clarity can convert words into something they are not - into real things which can reach the same status of reality as the canonical faculties.

But that is just what advocates of a fourth leg of the canon concluded, as per Diogenes Laertius. Dewitt writes, and I agree, that this was a mistake - I think a huge one.

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2020 at 11:24 AM

and feelings through as contacts with reality.

Moreover, it is not in sensation but in human intelligence that error arises. Of sensation he wrote: "Sensation is entirely irrational." ⁷ This is not cited as a demerit but as a merit. It is the justification for regarding sensation as a criterion. It cannot "stimulate itself" and, unlike reason, "when stimulated by something external cannot add anything or take anything away." ⁸ For example, let us say that the color of white registers itself on the vision. It is not sensation that tells the observer he is seeing a white ox. This is a function of the intelligence and the recognition is "an immediate perception of the intelligence." ⁹ Even to such a perception as this Epicurus denied the rank of criterion, though his successors did not,¹⁰ and the ground of his rejection is manifest. If the observer says, "It is a white ox," this is a judgment and as such it is secondary to the sensation itself and it can err. Thus it does not qualify as a criterion. The sensation, however, does not err. As Aristotle said,¹¹ "The sense of sight is not deceived as to color, nor is that of hearing as to sound."

it seems to me that DeWitt's

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Post by "Don" of September 18, 2020 at 11:26 AM

Oh, now I like your explicit statement that words and by extension language itself is a convention. Just like other cultural phenomena, e.g., a group of people make contracts to not harm nor to be harmed... Likewise language evolves in a particular context to facilitate co-existence among people.

I also agree with your last paragraph. So, I don't think we basically disagree. I just don't want to stretch this farther than it needs to be.

My take is that this is saying language is a socially-evolved tool for understanding and communicating reality just like math or geometry. As such, we don't want to hide reality behind complex arguments in any of those spheres, but be as direct as possible. I will say that I could see this being used as an argument for so-called elegant solutions to math and science problems. Using the least amount of argument to explain the most widely applicable solutions.

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

Don here DeWitt begins discussion of your point:

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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

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

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

water, which appears to be bent. False evidence is to be corrected by that of other sensations. The evidence of all witnesses must receive attention. The volitional mind, as opposed to the automatic mind, which errs, functions as judge.

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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.

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2020 at 11:48 AM

Upon rereading this it seems to me that this from DeWitt dramatizes best what I agree with him is the issue here "the quest of definitions is useless":
cerning 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

In that I presume he is evoking something similar to the Quest for the Holy Grail, and illustrating that with the absurdities Plato comes up with in *Timaeus*.

Obviously definitions do have some uses, and some definitions are highly useful.

But that's the issue, unless the limitations of "reason" or "logic"- in this case the use of words, in other cases the use of math and geometry - are kept firmly in mind, your subject to the worst kind of error from failing to keep the canonical faculties supreme.

Post by "Cassius" of September 18, 2020 at 12:09 PM

Sorry Don I see while I was posting you made your most recent point and I do think we are largely in agreement.

Post by "Don" of September 18, 2020 at 12:21 PM

Hmm. I'm intrigued by DeWitt's take but I'm skeptical of his "ending up in sound without sense" translation of "τὰς δὲ **περὶ ψιλὴν τὴν φωνήν.**" I see no negation ("without") in that phrase nor the sense of "ending up in" although DeWitt may just be idiosyncratically paraphrasing. My sense though is that he's maybe stretching his paraphrase too far.

I'm also unclear on the "quest for definitions." I get that we shouldn't look for ultimate eternal Platonic meanings for Order, Essence, etc., but agreed upon definitions are essential for communication. If we don't agree on shared definitions, communication is impossible. In light of that, I would say laying out agreed upon definitions would have to be allowable.

So, overall, I'm in agreement with DeWitt on p. 131, I just think he may be stretching his thesis a little to do more work than it has to.

Post by “Cassius” of September 18, 2020 at 2:50 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

In light of that, I would say laying out agreed upon definitions would have to be allowable.

I would think DeWitt would say "yes of course" to that. I think he's saying that Epicurus was totally practical, accepting the good that comes through definition, while strenuously guarding against the bad that come can from it if not kept in check.

So many times this rings in my ears:

"And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole; whence in victory he brings us tidings **what can come to be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deepset boundary-stone.** And so religion in revenge is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us to heaven."