The Role of Reason and Logic in Epicurean Philosophy - DeWitt's Perspective

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In order to assist us in discussing the role of reason and logic in Epicurean philosophy, the following is an excerpt of the material on this topic from DeWit't's "Epicurus and His Philosophy. The most important chapter is Chapter 7 - "The Canon, Reason, and Nature," but DeWitt comments on the topic in numerous places leading up to that Chapter, which I have attempted to capture here:

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From the point of view of logic this progression from the general to the particular constituted a sort of chain argument, a device in which Epicurus had great faith. He looked upon truth in terms of the whole and the part, the integer and the details. The details seemed to him so linked with one another that, if only the beginning was rightly made, one truth after another would infallibly reveal itself until perfection of knowledge should be attained. As Lucretius expressed it; "One point will become dear from understanding another; nor will blind night ever rob you of the path and prevent you from peering into the ultimate realities of nature; so surely will understanding o[one thing kindle a gleam to illuminate the next."

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He exalted Nature as the norm of truth, revolting against Plato, who regarded Reason as the norm and hypostatized it as a divine existence. The fallacy consists in classifying Epicurus as an empiricist in the modern sense; he never declared sensation to be the source of knowledge; much less did he declare all sensations to be trustworthy.

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He declared dialectic a superfluity but was able to criticize Plato with great acumen and he wrote against the Megarians, the contemporary experts in logic. He rejected geometry as having no bearing upon problems of conduct but adopted the procedures of Euclid in the composition of his own textbooks. He refuted the assumption of the mathematicians that matter is infinitely divisible, rightly insisting that the result would be zero. This is not the thinking of an ignoramus.

He also exhibits great familiarity with the writings of Plato and he distributed among members of his school the work of refuting or ridiculing his various dialogues. His own classification of the desires is developed from a Platonic hint and he begins to erect his structure of hedonism from

the point where this topic was left by Plato. A paragraph is extant in which he warns his disciples against the Platonic view of the universe as described in the Timaeus, and elsewhere he pokes a little satirical fun at that famous opus. More than half of his forty Authorized Doctrines are direct contradictions of Platonic teachings.

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The closeness of the relationship between Epicurus and Aristotle may be judged from the fact that two volumes on the subject have been published by the eminent Italian scholar Ettore Bignone. Leaving aside for the moment the undoubted contentions of the two schools. it may be said that common to both founders was the direct analytical approach to problems as opposed to the circuitous analogical approach adopted by Plato. The main difference was that the attitude of Aristotle was analytical while that of Epicurus was analytical and pragmatic at the same time.

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It was the romantic aspect of the new knowledge that captivated Plato, who was no more than up-to-date as a mathematician himself. In geometry he seemed to see absolute reason contemplating absolute truth, perfect precision of concept joined with finality of demonstration.

He began to transfer the precise concepts of geometry to ethics and politics just as modern thinkers transferred the concepts of biological evolution to history and sociology. Especially enticing was the concept which we know as definition. This was a creation of the geometricians; they created it by defining straight lines, equilateral triangles, and other regular figures. If these can be defined, Plato tacitly reasoned, why not also justice, piety, temperance, and other virtues? This is reasoning by analogy, one of the trickiest of logical procedures. It holds good only between sets of true similars. Virtues and triangles are not true similars. It does not follow, therefore, because equilateral triangles can be precisely defined, that justice can be defined in the same way. Modern jurists warn against defining justice; it is what the court says it is from time to time.

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Yet this was only the beginning. One false step invites another. The quest of a definition, of justice, for example. presumes the existence of the thing to be defined. If equilateral triangles did not exist, they certainly could not be defined. Assume that justice can be defined and at once it is assumed that justice exists just as equilateral triangles exist. Hence arose Plato's theory of ideas. The word idea means shape or form and he thought of abstract notions as having an independent existence just as geometrical figures exist, a false analogy.

The theory of ideas was rejected as an absurdity by the young Epicurus, because he was a materialist and denied all existences except atoms and space. The theory once rejected. the instrument became useless; scientists have no use for dramatized logic; they depend chiefly upon their senses.

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EPICURUS AS PHILOSOPHER

Of all false opinions concerning Epicurus the most preposterous is that which would dismiss him as a dullard or even as a charlatan. If correctly appraised he will be seen to have attempted a genuine synthesis of philosophy.

He came upon the scene when a great corpus of speculative writings had accumulated, which is precisely the circumstance that invites to a synthesis. A certain progress in this direction had been made by Plato and Aristotle but neither of these was a conscious synthesizer and neither of them was interested in creating an encyclopedic digest of philosophic thought for public use, much less for the amelioration on human life and the increase of happiness. This is precisely what Epicurus attempted. His aim was to survey the whole course of Greek creative thought, to criticize. to cull it, to organize it and make the results available in the form of useful and understandable handbooks.

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THE NEW ORDER OF NATURE

Especially conspicuous in the Canon of Epicurus is the omission of Reason as a criterion of truth. Only the Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings are recognized as direct contacts between man and his physical and social environment. By virtue of being direct contacts, they acquire a priority over Reason and in effect exalt Nature over Reason as affording a norm of truth.

How this revolution came about may be explained by recalling a few details. The Ionian scientists had studied nature chiefly in her terrestrial aspects, taking reason for granted as a faculty. The Italian Greeks had ignored the terrestrial aspects of nature and exploited the faculty of reason. This procedure led from arithmetic and geometry to astronomy, and by astronomy was revealed the celestial order of nature. This inflexible celestial order captivated the imagination of Plato, who was a romantic, and it was this he was imitating when he proposed in his Republic and his Laws a rigidly regimen led polity, of which a travesty now flourishes in Soviet Russia.

After this Platonic interruption the Ionian tradition was revived by the later Aristotle, but he switched the emphasis from inorganic to organic nature. The sciences of zoology and botany were founded by him. In the course of these studies he arrived at the conclusion "that Nature

does nothing at random." Of this discovery he did not realize the importance. It signified that organic nature is governed by laws. In reality it marks the discovery of a new order of nature, the terrestrial order, as contrasted with the celestial order of Plato's grandiose cosmogony.

It was the lead of Aristotle that Epicurus chose to follow. He looked to organic nature as furnishing the norm just as Plato had looked to reason. This divergence resulted in two opposing interpretations of the phrase "living according to Nature." To the Stoics, who hitched their wagon to Plato's star, it signified the imitation of the inflexible celestial order by a rigid and unemotional morality. To Epicurus and Epicureans, "living according to Nature," though they never made a slogan of it, signified living according to the laws of our being. Of this being the emotions were recognized as a normal and integral part, undeserving of suspicion or distrust.

How the new terrestrial order of nature and the older celestial order operate as points of departure for inferential truth may be illustrated simply in the case of justice. For Epicurus the Feelings are the criterion. Injustice hurts and justice promotes happiness. Therefore human beings make a covenant with one another "not to injure or be injured." Justice is this covenant. It is of Nature. No dialectic is necessary to discover the fact; it is a matter of observation. The sense of justice is innate; it is an Anticipation or Prolepsis existing in advance of experience and anticipating experience. Even certain animals possess it; elephants, for example, the bulls excepted, do not injure one another and they marshal the herd to protect one another against injury from outside.

Plato. on the contrary, taking his departure from the analogy between geometry and ethics and politics. requires a definition; dialectic is invoked as the instrument and the ten books of the Republic are devoted to the quest. In the background are the mathematical notion of ratio and the musical notion of harmony. Thus at long length the conclusion is reached that justice is a harmony of the three constituents of the soul. reason, passion. and desire. Justice in the state is a harmony of the constituent classes.

Plato was complicating philosophy for the few who find self-gratification in complexity. Epicurus was simplifying philosophy for the many who were willing to live by their philosophy. Platonic justice seemed to him a specious pretense. In Vatican Collection 54 he wrote: "'We should not pretend to philosophize but philosophize honestly, because it is not the semblance of health we need but real health."

Epicurus analyzed human nature just as the later Aristotle analyzed ethics and politics, like a student of natural science observing the ways of plants and animals. It was this method he was following when he scrutinized human nature in action and reduced the direct contacts between man and his physical and social environment to Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings. It was the same method he followed when he classified human desires as "natural and necessary, natural but not necessary and neither natural nor necessary." After the same fashion he scanned the behavior of man in society and concluded "that the injuries inflicted by men are caused by hatred or by envy or by contempt." The best evidence of a certain validity in the

Canon was the ridicule heaped upon it; ridicule is available when arguments are lacking. A tacit tribute to its validity is the fact that the idea of the Prolepsis or Anticipation, the innate idea, was adopted by the Stoics and appears as an accepted commonplace in Cicero's thought. The Sensations were seized upon as the weakest leg of the canonic tripod and in this instance misrepresentation scored a victory. The fallacy that Epicurus declared all sensations to be true and hence trustworthy still flourishes. This would mean that vision informs us no more correctly about a cow at twenty paces than at half a mile.

Equally fallacious was the allegation that the Canon had been set up as a substitute for logic. To make such a claim is on a par with asking a trial lawyer to criticize a chemist, or, as Epicurus might have said, to ask the ears to pass judgment on the nose; the phenomena of which they are competent judges would not fall in the same class. The function of ancient logic was to score points and make opponents wince but no adversaries or witnesses were needed for the use of the Canon; solitude was sufficient. The modern scientist in his laboratory follows a like method. He depends upon the sensations as Epicurus did. The researcher works on the basis of an hypothesis, which he puts to the test of experiment, that is, of the senses, and these, exactly as Epicurus said, "confirm or or fail to confirm" the truth of the proposition. Even the theory of Einstein, that rays of light from distant stars are bent in passing the sun, was tested by photographs taken during an eclipse, and photographs are merely extensions of vision.

Page 121 The Canon, Reason, and Nature

The Canon was not an afterthought, as the Stoics asserted, but occupied the first place in the triad of Canon, Physics, and Ethics. This arrangement is unalterable, because the Ethics were deduced from the Physics and the truth of both Physics and Ethics was subject to the test of the Canon, which included Sensations, Anticipations, and Feelings.

The task of expounding the Canon would be much simpler were it not for ancient and modern confusions and ambiguities that beset the topic. Epicurus disposed of it in a single roll. The word canon denotes a rule or straightedge but metaphorically includes all the instruments employed by a builder. A perspicuous account of it is presented by Lucretius, who mentions also the square and the plumb line. Apart from this passage, however, Lucretius misleads the reader, because he gives exclusive prominence to the Sensations and seems to have lacked a clear understanding of the workings of Anticipations and Feelings as criteria.

These last two criteria, it is manifest, were not discussed in the Big Epitome which Lucretius had before him. In the graded textbooks of Epicurus the topic must have been reserved for advanced students. It is doubtful whether Lucretius was even acquainted with the roll that treated of the Canon. This is unfortunate, because his own one·sided treatment is largely to blame for the classification of Epicurus as an empiricist and for the ascription to him of belief in "the infallibility of sensation."

It is an even worse mistake to have confused the tests of truth with the content of truth, that is, the tools of precision with the stones of the wall. This was the blunder of Pierre Gassendi, who revived the study of Epicurus in the seventeenth century. It was his finding "that there is nothing in the intellect which has not been in the senses," From this position John Locke, in turn, set out as the founder of modem empiricism. Thus a misunderstanding of Epicurus underlies a main trend of modem philosophy. This astonishing fact begets an even greater concern for a correct interpretation, which may cause Locke to appear slightly naive.

The institution of the Canon reflects a contemporary striving for an increase of precision in all the arts, sculpture, architecture, music, and mathematics, but the immediate provocation is to be found in the teachings of Pyrrho the skeptic and of Plato. Pyrrho's rejection of both reason and the sensations as criteria rendered acute the need of establishing a canon of truth. In the judgment of Epicurus Plato also ranked as a skeptic, because he belittled the sensations as undependable and phenomena as deceptive, the only real and eternal existences being the ideas. Thus in his system reason became the only contact between man and reality, and human reason was crippled by the imprisonment of the soul in the body.

Epicurus denied the existence of Platonic ideas on the ground that the only existences were atoms and empty space. Thus to his thinking man stood face to face with physical reality and his sensations constituted the sale contact with this reality. Had he stopped at this point he would have been an empiricist, but he did not. He made room also for a kind of intuition, which is incompatible with empiricism. He postulated that man was equipped in advance by Nature for living in his prospective environment, and not in his physical environment alone but also in his social environment. In addition to the five senses this equipment included innate ideas, such as that of justice, and these ideas, because they existed in advance of experience, were called Anticipations. Moreover, as Epicurus postulated, each experience of the individual, the sensations included, is accompanied by a secondary reaction of pleasure or pain. These pleasures and pains are the Feelings, which also rank as criteria, being Nature's Go and Stop signals.

Thus Nature, having equipped man with a triple contact with his environment, becomes a norm, while the Platonic Reason is eliminated along with the Platonic Ideas. It now remains to explain in more detail the dethronement of Reason and the recognition of Nature as the norm.

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THE DETHRONEMENT OF REASON

It will have been noted that the Canon makes no mention of reason. This means that reason is denied rank as a criterion of truth. It will be worth while to observe by what procedure this exclusion may be justified and what the consequences will be for the concept of reason itself. The position of Epicurus becomes seemingly paradoxical because there is no instrumentality by which reason can be dethroned except reason itself. Consideration of this paradox may be postponed until it has been shown how the Platonic concept of reason may be rendered absurd. The conclusions will be absolutely logical if the premises are accepted.

As will be set forth in the chapter on Physics, Epicurus adopted and declared Twelve Elementary Principles, one of which reads: "The universe consists of atoms and void:' This is a positive statement. If the implied negative be made explicit, it is this, that there is nothing incorporeal except void. This is destructive of certain teachings of Plato. According to him the sensations inform us only of the things that are transient, that have a beginning and an end. The realities are the eternal forms or ideas, which are not joined up with matter and so are incorporeal. Moreover, according to the same teachings the ideas are apprehensible only by pure reason, which, being, like the ideas, discrete from matter, is itself incorporeal and divine. Logically, therefore, if there is nothing incorporeal except void, the eternal ideas and the divine incorporeal reason are alike absurdities.

By this same principle it should be noted that the incorporeal soul is also eliminated. Thus, the soul. being corporeal and incapable of preexistence or survival, is reduced to a parity with the body. This means farewell to all the disabilities imposed upon it through imprisonment in the body and to all mystical ideas associated with successive incarnations. Corporeal reason alone is left, that is. human intelligence. There is another of the Twelve Principles that has a specific bearing upon the Platonic concept of reason: "The atoms are always in motion." If we seek the implied negative of this positive statement - and Epicurus reasons after this fashion - it will be this, that nothing else in the universe is in motion, because the void is incapable of motion and outside of atoms and void there is nothing. It will follow also that no other cause of motion exists. It will be nonsensical, therefore, to think. of divine reason as the cause of motion.

There is yet another of the Twelve Principles that possesses a bearing upon the function of reason in the universe. The second Principle reads:"The universe has always been the same as it now is." This principle is known to us as the law of the indestructibility and uncreatibility of matter. To Epicurus it meant that the idea of primeval chaos was absurd; the universe has always been a cosmos. Specifically, speaking of the various motions of the atoms, he said: "Of these there has been no beginning, the atoms and the void being eternal." To him the universe was a cosmos solely because of the various weights, shapes, and magnitudes of the atoms and their motions, all of which were constant factors. Consequently there was no need of the ordering mind (nous) according to Anaxagoras or of the divine demiurge of Plato. Both of these become absurdities. In the extant remains of Epicurus the word nous does not occur; it seems to have been deliberately avoided.

While by this line of argument it will be observed that the incorporeal, eternal, and unerring reason of Plato and Aristotle is eliminated, the purely human, mortal reason remains. Even this is subordinated to the sensations: "Not even reason can refute the sensations, for reason depends wholly upon them." This does not mean, as Gassendi imagined, that the whole content of thought is derived from the sensations, which was not the teaching of Epicurus, but rather that the deprivation of sensation is virtually death. The basic idea is the conviction that reason is incapable of making direct contact with reality; reason is active only when the sensations are active. Without the sensations reason possesses no criteria, since they along with the Anticipations and Feelings function 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." 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." 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." Even to such a perception as this Epicurus denied the rank of criterion, though his successors did not, 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, "The sense of sight is not deceived as to color, nor is that of hearing as to sound,"

It remains to mention that Epicurus minimized the value of reason even in dealing with things beyond the range of sensation, whether too minute or too remote for observation. To denote the notions relative to these unseen phenomena he raised a familiar word to the rank of a technical term, epinoiai, which by virtue of the prefix means "secondary" or "accessory" ideas. This is the sense in the following pronouncement: "For all accessory ideas (epinoiai) are derived from the sensations by virtue of coincidence, analogy. similarity and combination, reason also contributing something:' While this grudging concession to reason should be noted, it is observable also that procedures which employ comparison and analogy seem to Epicurus an inferior kind of reason. By analogy, for example, it should seem possible to have a heap of atoms, since we have heaps of dust, but a superior reason intervenes and reminds us that atoms are endowed with motion. Consequently, a heap of atoms is inconceivable. This superior reason employs the method of inference from the Twelve Elementary Principles. The procedure is deductive; Epicurus is not an empiricist.

Three kinds of reason are thus recognized: first, a dependable kind that proceeds by deduction from first principles; second, an inferior kind that proceeds by analogy from the visible to the invisible and is subject to correction by the former; third, ordinary human intelligence (dianoia), which is normally automatic and hence fallible and is subject to correction by the volitional intelligence.

Common to all these forms of reason is their restriction to the human mind; all are faculties of that mind. Outside of this human mind there is no reason in the universe, no world-mind which expresses itself in eternal ideas, regularities of motion, harmonic relationships, and spherical perfections and is identifiable with truth itself.

It still remains to glance at the paradox in which Epicurus involves himself by employing reason to dethrone reason as the chief criterion. He places himself in a position similar to that of the skeptic who denies the possibility of certainty in knowledge, thus depriving his own skepticism of certainty.

This paradox, moreover, does not stand alone. It is also paradoxical that Epicurus should have omitted reason from his Canon and at the same time accepted a great body of truth accumulated by the reasonings of predecessors and set these down among his Twelve Elementary Principles of Physics. From this inconsistency he thought to escape by treating each of these principles as if a theorem of geometry. For example, to demonstrate that the universe is infinite in respect of both matter and space, he resorts to a disjunctive syllogism. If matter were infinite and space finite, the latter could not contain the former. Again, if matter were finite and space infinite, then matter would be lost in space and no clashes or combinations of atoms would occur. Since these alternative assumptions lead to absurdities. the conclusion, is that the original proposition is true. With such reasoning even a Stoic logician could find no fault.

This treatment of the Elementary Principles as theorems does not save Epicurus from the charge of inconsistency. It gains for his system of knowledge merely the semblance of being logically self-contained. Reason is employed as a criterion to set up criteria by which it should itself be demoted, if not quite superseded. Reason, however, as he conceives it, is purely human. not divine.

The elimination of the divine reason entails a curious logical consequence: the universe is split in two. the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial regions. The former becomes anthropocentric, since the human Sensations. Anticipations. and Feelings are the norm; the latter is left impersonal and nonpurposive, being governed by natural laws. Plato's universe. on the contrary, is undivided, being completely theocentric and ruled by the divine and incorporeal reason. In the terrestrial sphere Epicurus approximates to the position of Protagoras, who said "Man is the measure," while Plato said "God is the measure."