

The Beginning of an Outline of Epicurean Reasoning

Post by “Godfrey” of March 17, 2022 at 9:19 PM

Getting away from Philodemus On Signs for a moment, I’ve been looking at The Hellenistic Philosophers by Long and Sedley for original quotes from Epicurus regarding signs and methods of inference. I also had a look at a cluster of Principle Doctrines that are relevant (PD 22 & 23 are from Nate’s compilation, with thanks).

PD22 *We must take into account both the underlying purpose and **all the evidence of clear perception, to which we refer our opinions**. Otherwise, everything will be filled with confusion and indecision.* O'Connor (1993)

PD23 *If you resist all the senses, you will not even have anything left to which you can refer, or by which you may be able to judge of the falsehood of the senses which you condemn.* Yonge (1853)

PD24 *(1) If you are going to reject any sensation absolutely, and not distinguish opinions reliant on evidence yet awaited from what is already present **through sensation, through feelings, and through every focusing of thought into an impression**, you will confound all your other sensations with empty opinion and consequently reject the criterion in its entirety. (2) And if you are going to treat as established **both all the evidence yet awaited in your conjectural conceptions, and that which has failed to <earn> attestation**, you will not exclude falsehood, so that you will have removed all debate and all discrimination between correct and incorrect.* Long and Sedley (1987, p. 135-6, kindle version)

Letter to Herodotus 37-38 *(1) First, then, Herodotus, we must grasp the things which underlie words, so that we may have them as a reference point against which to judge matters of opinion, inquiry and puzzlement, and not have everything indiscriminated for ourselves as we attempt infinite chains of proofs, or have words which are empty. For the primary concept corresponding to each word must be seen and need no additional proof, if we are going to have a reference point for matters of inquiry, puzzlement and opinion. (2) Second, we should observe everything in the light of our sensations, and in general in the light of our **present focusings whether of thought or of any of our discriminatory faculties**, and likewise also in the light of the feelings which exist in us, in order to have a **basis for sign-inferences** about evidence yet awaited and about the non-evident.* Long and Sedley (1987, p. 136, kindle version)

Post by “Godfrey” of March 17, 2022 at 9:20 PM

The Hellenistic Philosophers has a translation of Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 7.211–16 (Usener 247, part) (p. 142-3, kindle version) which seems to me to be a great start for an outline of methods of inference (or Epicurean logic, Epicurean reasoning, Epicurean processing). I edited and rearranged the text to get the beginnings of an outline.

1. The Basics

A. **Self-evidence is the foundation and basis of everything.**

B. **True opinions:** attested and non-contested by self-evidence

C. **False opinions:** contested and non-attested by self-evidence

D. **Conjectural opinions:** awaiting verification through attestation and/or contestation

2. Definitions

A. **Attestation:** perception through a self-evident impression of the fact that the object of opinion is such as it was believed to be.

Example: if Plato is approaching from far off, I form the conjectural opinion, owing to the distance, that it is Plato. But when he has come close, there is further testimony that he is Plato, now that the gap is reduced, and it is attested by the self-evidence itself.

B. **Non-contestation:** the following from that which is evident of the non-evident thing posited and believed.

Example, Epicurus, in saying that there is void, which is non-evident, confirms this through the self-evident fact of motion. For if void does not exist, there ought not to be motion either, since the moving body would lack a place to pass into as a result of everything's being full and solid. Therefore the non-evident thing believed is uncontested by that which is evident, since there is motion.

C. **Contestation:** is something which conflicts with non-contestation. It is the elimination of that which is evident by the positing of the non-evident thing.

Example: the Stoic says that void does not exist, judging something non-evident; but once this is posited about it, that which is evident, namely motion, ought to be co-eliminated with it. For if void does not exist, necessarily motion does not occur either, according to the method already demonstrated.

D. **Non-attestation:** opposed to attestation, being confrontation through self-evidence of the fact that the object of opinion is not such as it was believed to be.

Example, if someone is approaching from far off, we conjecture, owing to the distance, that he is Plato. But when the gap is reduced, we recognize through self-evidence that it is not Plato.

The thing believed was not attested by the evident.

E. **Self-evident**: evident without proof or reasoning (from Merriam-Webster online)

It would probably be helpful to agree on plain English versions of these definitions!

Not covered here is the idea of multiple satisfactory theories from Pythocles and Lucretius. I don't have a cite at hand but that seems much more straightforward than this.

Post by "Cassius" of March 17, 2022 at 11:13 PM

Thank you very much Godfrey! All this is extremely helpful and a great step forward in organizing. I particularly like the different translation of Herodotus from Long and Sedley.

In the second post I am going to suggest a tweak to Section One: Somewhere over the years I picked up an aversion to the term "self-evident" - probably because of Jeffersons use of the term in the Declaration to describe a number of assertions that history has shown to be not "self-evident" at all to later generations.

I think the term we are looking for is something more directly related to the force of the evidence and our manner of receiving it - this may in fact be a place where the "ante oculos" term was used by the ancient Epicureans. The words that strike me as more appropriate are more like "plain" and "clear" and "patent" and "obvious" --- with the unstated predicate of "clear to the senses" or "plain to the senses.". I would almost consider the possibility that the legal terms "clear and convincing evidence" and "beyond a reasonable doubt" might be appropriate, particularly if "beyond a reasonable doubt" were defined as something like "a doubt for which one can state a reason (a reason grounded in evidence from one of the three canonical faculties).

Unless there is some connotation of "self-evident" that has escaped my foggy mind over the years (and that is very possible) it seems to me that Epicurus is focusing on a process of "pointing out to our attention" the thing being considered, and that indeed it is an act of our mind that is involved in paying attention. ... And that's sort of the opposite of being "SELF-evident" which is probably something that might actually contradict the rest of the philosophy. There's "evident to our senses" after we pay attention, but probably not something that is "self-evident" without our act of attention. (In sum, the "self" part being the problem.)

If I recall correctly both the letter to Herodotus and the Torquatus section on Epicurus explaining his observation that please need no logical argument that both seem to highly the issue of "paying attention."

What do you think about that?

Post by “Cassius” of March 17, 2022 at 11:15 PM

From the Torquatus narrative:

[Quote from Torquatus](#)

These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to DRAW ATTENTION to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and DIRECTION OF ATTENTION on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to PRONOUNCE UPON patent and evident facts.....

Post by “Cassius” of March 17, 2022 at 11:30 PM

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.

[38] 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.

Post by “Cassius” of March 17, 2022 at 11:33 PM

[Quote from Letter To Herodotus](#)

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.

[38] 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.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 18, 2022 at 2:06 AM

Self-evident does seem problematic. Like so many words it apparently has a technical meaning and a common meaning. The dictionary definition is near the end of post #2. Epicurus' definition, I think, is:

[PD24](#) *...what is already present through sensation, through feelings, and through every focusing of thought into an impression...* Long and Sedley, 1987

[PD24](#) *...that which is actually given by the sensation or feeling, or each intuitive apprehension of the mind...* Bailey, 1926

To my understanding, this snippet refers to the "data" that comes from the faculties and which is then examined using Epicurean reasoning. Maybe instead of "self-evident" it could be called "evidence from perception"?

Cassius do you remember Voula Tsouna's Zoom *epibolai* presentation for the 2021 Hellenistic Forum? This was one of the passages that she used in her presentation. If I read my illegible notes correctly, she and Elizabeth Asmis interpreted "focusing of thought" as a conscious operation whereas A.A. Long felt it was not a conscious process. Much of that discussion was over my head though, so I may have that wrong. But I believe I'm correct in my understanding that this snippet is only referring to the signs, not the method of inference. Is that what you're saying as well? So that addressing this is addressing a re-phrasing of "self-evident"?

If "focusing of thought" is thought of as a non-conscious process, such as light focusing through a lens, that would read similarly to Bailey's "intuitive apprehension", "apprehension" meaning understanding or grasp. This seems to be describing the anticipations if I'm understanding it correctly.

Post by "Cassius" of March 18, 2022 at 5:24 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Maybe instead of "self-evident" it could be called "evidence from perception"?

YES I agree and think that's far preferable, and more consistent with the way Epicurus seems to be expressing it. Evidence from perception = "evidence from the canonical faculties.". I think the term "perceiving" applies equally to all three legs of the canon. We perceive not only using the five senses but also through the feeling of pleasure and pain and also through the faculty of anticipations.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

If "focusing of thought" is thought of as a non-conscious process, such as light focusing through a lens, that would read similarly to Bailey's "intuitive apprehension", "apprehension" meaning understanding or grasp. This seems to be describing the anticipations if I'm understanding it correctly

And yes again I agree here too.

I am not sure whether you mean Bailey or DeWitt though, because I associate "intuitive" with DeWitts views.

Either way, I have always thought that a key aspect of any leg of the canon must be its "non-rationality" (its automatic functioning) -not its "non-consciousness" - so again I would substitute non-rationality in your sentence there rather than non-conscious.

Post by “Cassius” of March 18, 2022 at 5:41 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

But I believe I'm correct in my understanding that this snippet is only referring to the signs, not the method of inference

Here I am not sure but my comment would be that I think you are hinting correctly that there are definitely two processes involved in human life:. There is (1) the operation of the canonical faculties, which presents raw perceptual data to us automatically without injection of opinion, and (2) the conceptual reasoning process, where we weigh the evidence and form our opinions, and this is the stage that is not automatic and where our opinions formed can be "right" or "wrong" depending on our method of processing.

In other words, I have always thought that Diogenes Laertius's statement about seeing multiple oxen and then over time forming a picture or definition of an ox is something that definitely does happen - I think that's probably the conceptual reasoning process. But I think that is what I list there as function (2), not function (1), and function (1) is where anticipations and feelings and the 5 senses are in operation. So I think the process Diogenes Laertius is describing does exist and Epicurus talked about it, but what he is describing is not the operation of anticipations, but what we do with the data from anticipations (and from the other 2 legs too).

What we are discussing in the "inference" stage is function 2, where we have the ability to think through the alternative methods of reasoning and improve our understanding of the ways Epicurus is suggesting that we sift and weigh the evidence.

It seems to me that the canonical faculties are DeWitts "witnesses in court" who are testifying "truthfully" in not giving their own opinion, but sometimes (not always) suffering under having been too far away from the action to see what happened with clarity, so we have to piece together their testimony. Sometimes their testimony is clear and direct with no reason for doubt and we embrace the obvious conclusion with confidence, and sometimes we have to judge prudently and "wait" until more witness testimony is available. Sometimes we have the luxury of waiting for as long as necessary to get more evidence, and sometimes life demands that we go with our best judgement on the available evidence.

The inferential reasoning process is more equivalent to the "jury instructions" that the judge gives to the jury to tell them how to view the evidence and what principles of law to apply. This latter stage is full of opinion and discretion and is where all sorts of things can go right or wrong - but we hold that the best results are obtained when the jury understands the rules of evidence and weighs all the facts carefully without bias or prejudice or artificial rules. That's why our common law system has focused on decisions as to reasonable conduct being made by "a jury

of our peers" rather than by trying to get a single "expert" to enforce a "one size fits all" rule.

Post by “Cassius” of March 18, 2022 at 5:56 AM

Last comment for now: I very much agree with the "lens" analogy because that gives us the ability to illustrate the "intuitiveness" parallel with how a lens works:. Each lens has a specific size and shape and type of glass, resulting in them focusing with different degrees of sharpness and focal length and light gathering ability and color separation (and maybe other ways I could describe if I were an optician).

Those methods of focusing are part of the automatic nature of the particular lens, and by analogy a faculty of anticipations would work the same way - allowing us to focus our minds on something but not in random or all possible ways, but only in ways that are consistent with the makeup of the lens.

And the "unfolding" part over time (Velleius) could be analogized to: over time, as we grow up, we can and do "polish" the lens and are able to some degree to further tune its operation so that it focuses more sharply (such as with practice we are able to improve our hearing so that we can appreciate or create more elaborate music). But at any particular moment the lens is always functioning "automatically" according to its nature and tuning.

Post by “Cassius” of March 18, 2022 at 6:08 AM

Dare I hope that you Godfrey will push on with this topic and help us come up with a reference work similar to Nate's compiled doctrines/list of historic Epicureans, or Don's translation work on Menoecus, or Joshua's Torquatus recording and other material, or Martins presentation on propositional logic? 😊

I know others like Kalosyni are working on things too, (and I probably forgot some in my list). "Projects" like these are key aspects of us being able to work together using the forum ! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of March 18, 2022 at 7:45 AM

Godfrey if you get a chance to listen to it, we struggle through some closely related topics beginning at the 34:25 minute mark of this week's episode of the podcast. Pretty much the whole episode is devoted to the topic, but at 34:25 I think you'll see the most direct attention paid to some of this :

Post

[RE: Episode One Hundred Thirteen - Letter to Herodotus 02 - Principles of Thinking](#)

Episode 113 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today we continue our discussion of the Letter to Herodotus with a discussion of principles of clear thinking.

[spreaker.com/episode/49100316](https://www.spreaker.com/episode/49100316)



Cassius

March 17, 2022 at 9:16 PM

We discuss in the podcast that it may not be necessary to use terms like induction and deduction, but in assembling your outline I bet you are going to conclude that these issues are relevant to what you are assembling.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 18, 2022 at 2:34 PM

Quote from Cassius

In other words, I have always thought that Diogenes Laertius's statement about seeing multiple oxen and then over time forming a picture or definition of an ox is something that definitely does happen - I think that's probably the conceptual reasoning process.

I think we're on the same page, except for this quote. The oxen problem, to me, is part of function 1 but I see how there is also a rational, function 2 element to it. For function 1, learning begins in the womb and follows from there, so as an infant you could passively perceive oxen (or pictures of oxen) and at the same time hear people talking about oxen. Your faculty of pattern recognition would take this information and process it into a notion of oxen. This is what I understand, hopefully correctly, from Lisa Feldman Barrett and other current neuroscientists.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 18, 2022 at 2:40 PM

As for a compilation, I hadn't really thought of taking it much further but can keep at it. My main source right now is The Hellenistic Philosophers by Long and Sedley: they've already done much of the work with their compilations of their own translations. But there's certainly more out there, particularly comparative translations of various passages. BTW is there an online source of Sextus Empiricus? I found the Bury book online, which is good, but the Sextus passage that I used above is in book 7, and his translation of Against the Professors stops at book 6 😞

Post by “Godfrey” of March 18, 2022 at 2:44 PM

In order to try to process this info, I've put together an extremely simplified listing of the basics of Epicurean reasoning:

Attestation: I perceive this, therefore it is evidence

Non-attestation: that evidence conflicts with this evidence

Contestation: if that exists, it implies this can't exist

Non-contestation: this exists, and implies that exists

True opinions: attested and non-contested by perceived evidence

False opinions: contested and non-attested by perceived evidence

Conjectural opinions: awaiting verification through attestation and/or contestation

Multiple conjectured: if there are multiple reasonable opinions, it's foolish to insist on one