

Episode 159 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 13 - Chapter 7 - The Canon Reason and Nature 04

Post by "Cassius" of January 31, 2023 at 7:05 AM

Welcome to Episode 159 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

We're now in the process of a series of podcasts intended to provide a general overview of Epicurean philosophy based on the organizational structure employed by Norman DeWitt in his book "Epicurus and His Philosophy."

This week we complete our discussion of Chapter Seven - The Canon, Reason, and Nature

The Dethronement of Reason

Ridicule

Nature as the Norm

Priority of Nature over Reason

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/52623559>

Post by "Cassius" of January 31, 2023 at 7:16 AM

At the opening of this episode I referenced in support of Epicurus' position against dialectical logic a letter from Seneca. Seneca was a Stoic, but he repeatedly quoted Epicurus approvingly, and this time in a lengthy and scathing attack on the misuse of logic and syllogisms. In my view this is Seneca again expressing a position of Epicurus, and it seems to me that this is very helpful in explaining the point being made in this Chapter 7:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2867-episode-159-epicurus-and-his-philosophy-part-13-chapter-7-the-canon-reason-and-n/>

(Seneca's Letters - Book II Letter XLVIII) ([Original with Latin is here](#) 😞)

In answer to the letter which you wrote me while traveling, - a letter as long as the journey itself, - I shall reply later. I ought to go into retirement, and consider what sort of advice I should give you. For you yourself, who consult me, also reflected for a long time whether to do so; how much more, then, should I myself reflect, since more deliberation is necessary in settling than in propounding a problem! And this is particularly true when one thing is advantageous to you and another to me. Am I speaking again in the guise of an Epicurean?

But the fact is, the same thing is advantageous to me which is advantageous to you; for I am not your friend unless whatever is at issue concerning you is my concern also. Friendship produces between us a partnership in all our interests. There is no such thing as good or bad fortune for the individual; we live in common. And no one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbor, if you would live for yourself. This fellowship, maintained with scrupulous care, which makes us mingle as men with our fellow-men and holds that the human race have certain rights in common, is also of great help in cherishing the more intimate fellowship which is based on friendship, concerning which I began to speak above. For he that has much in common with a fellow-man will have all things in common with a friend.

And on this point, my excellent Lucilius, I should like to have those subtle dialecticians of yours advise me how I ought to help a friend, or how a fellowman, rather than tell me in how many ways the word "friend" is used, and how many meanings the word "man" possesses. Lo, Wisdom and Folly are taking opposite sides. Which shall I join? Which party would you have me follow? On that side, "man" is the equivalent of "friend"; on the other side, "friend" is not the equivalent of "man." The one wants a friend for his own advantage; the other wants to make himself an advantage to his friend. What you have to offer me is nothing but distortion of words and splitting of syllables. It is clear that unless I can devise some very tricky premises and by false deductions tack on to them a fallacy which springs from the truth, I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it! 'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese."

Suppose now that I cannot solve this problem; see what peril hangs over my head as a result of such ignorance! What a scrape I shall be in! Without doubt I must beware, or some day I shall be catching syllables in a mousetrap, or, if I grow careless, a book may devour my cheese! Unless, perhaps, the following syllogism is shrewder still: "'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a syllable does not eat cheese. Therefore a mouse does not eat cheese." What childish nonsense! Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?

Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried

either by his neighbor's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy men, sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.

I should deem your games of logic to be of some avail in relieving men's burdens, if you could first show me what part of these burdens they will relieve. What among these games of yours banishes lust? Or controls it? Would that I could say that they were merely of no profit! They are positively harmful. I can make it perfectly clear to you whenever you wish, that a noble spirit when involved in such subtleties is impaired and weakened. I am ashamed to say what weapons they supply to men who are destined to go to war with fortune, and how poorly they equip them! Is this the path to the greatest good? Is philosophy to proceed by such claptrap and by quibbles which would be a disgrace and a reproach even for expounders of the law? For what else is it that you men are doing, when you deliberately ensnare the person to whom you are putting questions, than making it appear that the man has lost his case on a technical error? But just as the judge can reinstate those who have lost a suit in this way, so philosophy has reinstated these victims of quibbling to their former condition. Why do you men abandon your mighty promises, and, after having assured me in high-sounding language that you will permit the glitter of gold to dazzle my eyesight no more than the gleam of the sword, and that I shall, with mighty steadfastness, spurn both that which all men crave and that which all men fear, why do you descend to the ABC's of scholastic pedants? What is your answer? Is this the path to heaven? For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come.

Philosophy, keep your promise! Therefore, my dear Lucilius, withdraw yourself as far as possible from these exceptions and objections of so-called philosophers. Frankness, and simplicity beseeem true goodness. Even if there were many years left to you, you would have had to spend them frugally in order to have enough for the necessary thing; but as it is, when your time is so scant, what madness it is to learn superfluous things! Farewell.

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2023 at 11:28 PM

Episode 159 is now available. This week we complete Chapter Seven on the Canon, Reason, and Nature!

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Post by “Cassius” of February 2, 2023 at 11:32 PM

Two additional show notes. Here's the first:

1 - Near the end of the episode Joshua closes strong against the misuse of "natural law" by the Stoics and others. Whenever we get to that argument it's always good to hear brother Nietzsche preach to us on that topic:

Beyond Good And Evil

[\(Gutenberg edition, translated by Helen Zimmern \) Chapter 1, section 9](#)

You desire to LIVE “according to Nature”? Oh, you noble Stoics, what fraud of words! Imagine to yourselves a being like Nature, boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power—how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference? To live—is not that just endeavouring to be otherwise than this Nature? Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different? And granted that your imperative, “living according to Nature,” means actually the same as “living according to life”—how could you do DIFFERENTLY? Why should you make a principle out of what you yourselves are, and must be? In reality, however, it is quite otherwise with you: while you pretend to read with rapture the canon of your law in Nature, you want something quite the contrary, you extraordinary stage-players and self-deluders! In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature, to Nature herself, and to incorporate them therein; you insist that it shall be Nature “according to the Stoa,” and would like everything to be made after your own image, as a vast, eternal glorification and generalism of Stoicism! With all your love for truth, you have forced yourselves so long, so persistently, and with such hypnotic rigidity to see Nature FALSELY, that is to say, Stoically, that you are no longer able to see it otherwise—and to crown all, some unfathomable superciliousness gives you the Bedlamite hope that BECAUSE you are able to tyrannize over yourselves—Stoicism is self-tyranny—Nature will also allow herself to be tyrannized over: is not the Stoic a PART of Nature?... But this is an old and everlasting story: what happened in old times with the Stoics still happens today, as soon as ever a philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical impulse itself, the most spiritual Will to

Power, the will to "creation of the world," the will to the causa prima.

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2023 at 11:36 PM

Also near the end I read a quote that I think supports the idea how nature, rather than logic, is the place to look for ultimate guidance.

From a website I put up some years ago to make Jackson Barwis' work more accessible, here is the quote from "Dialogues on Innate Principles" -

Quote from Jackson Barwis

When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

[Dialogue One - Jackson Barwis](#)

Post by "Cassius" of February 5, 2023 at 4:08 PM

I just finished listening to this episode and I think it is a very good one with lots of thought-provoking discussion. I am not so sure that we ended on as quite as clear a note as we might have, however, on "natural law," so i will see if we can revisit that as we proceed through Chapter 8.

I can see a casual listener wondering how we reconcile the emphasis on nature providing the norm with the cautions about "natural law" at the end. I think the points Joshua raised were correct, but we might need to go back and hit that point again. The point we want to make seems to be (to me) that it is correct to look to Nature in some ways but not in others. It is correct to look to Nature in following the guides of pleasure and pain given us as natural faculties, but it is incorrect to project on Natural a form of "reason" or "logic" and try to deduce from existing circumstances that those circumstances were somehow blessed as "correct" by Nature.

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I think we were pretty clear in focusing on the problem rearing its head mainly in societies trying to use "natural law" to enact legislation that applies to all people at all time and all places, which is contrary to the observation that individuals vary widely in what they find pleasurable and painful.

However I can see the possibility that listeners might think we were trying to have our cake and eat it too at the end of the podcast.

I think it is only natural that we would come back to these issues anyway as we go through Chapter 8, but if anyone has any comments on this please comment in this thread and we will incorporate that as we go forward.