Discussion Plan For Chapter 07 "The Canon, Reason, And Nature" (Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy")

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CHAPTER VII - THE CANON, REASON AND NATURE

1. Introductory Points
    1. **The Canon was not an afterthought, but occupied first place in the triad of Canon, Physics, and Ethics.** This is because the Canon provides the test of the truth of the conclusions in the other two areas.
    2. **The "canon" is a metaphor for the tools of precision for measuring truth - it is not truth itself**. ("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 modern empiricism. Thus a misunderstanding of Epicurus underlies a main trend of modern philosophy. This astonishing fact begets an even greater concern for a correct interpretation, which may cause Locke to appear slightly naive.")
    3. **The need for the Canon was provoked by the teachings of the Skeptics,** primarily Pyrrho, but also in Epicurus' view Plato, because Plato belittled the senses and looked to "ideas" (which do not have a separate and independent existence outside of our minds).
    4. **DeWitt sees anticipations as "a kind of intuition."**
        1. "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."
    5. "**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.** "
2. The Dethronement of Reason

1. **The Canon makes no mention of reason, which means reason is denied rank as a criterion of truth.**
2. **Of the 12 Elementary Principles "nothing exists except matter and void" (and others of the principles) are totally destructive of Platonic idealism** (if only atoms and void are eternal, eternal "ideas" cannot exist; if the only thing that is incorporeal is void, there can be no incorporeal ideas or divine reason - they are absurdities). By the same argument the incorporeal soul is eliminated.
3. **For similar reasons, divine reason cannot be the cause of motion** ("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.")
4. **The idea of an ordering mind ("reason") as the cause of order in the universe is likewise absurd.** ("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." 3 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.")
5. **Of course ALL reason is not rejected by Epicurus - the purely human and mortal reason remains and is highly important.** (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." 8 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.8 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.)

6. **Error arises not in sensation but in human intelligence, because sensation is entirely non-rational (pre-rational).**
7. **IMPORTANT: Epicurus denied that the "recognition" function of the intelligence was a criteria of truth.** His later followers, however, changed this, and Dewitt suggests this was a major error of the later Epicureans. (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.')
8. **Epicurus identified three kinds of reason:**
    1. A dependable kind that proceeds by deduction from first principles.
    2. An inferior kind that proceeds by analogy from the visible to the invisible and is thus subject to correction by the former, and
    3. ordinary human intelligence, which is normally automatic and hence fallible and is subject to correction by volitional intelligence.
    4. Justification for this division: "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.13 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."
9. **All forms of reason are faculties of the human mind and within the human mind.** Outside of the mind there is no reason in the universe.

3. Ridicule
    1. **Epicurus was considered heretical to have attempted to dethrone reason as the criterion of truth.** "Few concepts are so flattering to the vanity of mankind as the hypothesis that the possession of reason exalts it above the brutes and offers it an affinity with the divine. Mystical notions receive a warmer welcome than

cold facts and figures, divine creationism than biological evolution. Plato's mysticism exercised a subtle flattery all its own, especially by the separation of form and matter, by the assumption of a pure reason contemplating absolute truth, by the identification of reason with God. Part of its charm consisted in a vague self-pity for the soul imprisoned in the body, pondering wistfully on the theme of previous existence and future incarnations. To declare the soul corporeal and to make it the equal partner of the body seemed repulsive realism, more easily satirized than refuted"

2. **The Epicureans considered the Canon poetically as "fallen from heaven" given its importance.** "The language of Epicurus sometimes swerves toward poetical diction, and in one of his more enthusiastic moments he seems to have been moved by gratitude to blessed Nature to characterize the Canon as diopetes, "fallen from heaven," as if it were a holy palladium. It was this epithet that Cicero was echoing when he dubbed it "the celestial rule" and more literally in another passage styled it as "fallen from the sky." ls Plutarch, who employed part of his leisure in digging up old slurs out of the archives, wrote scornfully: "It was not because Colotes had read 'the heaven-descended Canons' that bread was perceived by him to be bread and fodder fodder."

4. Nature as the Norm
    1. **Aristotle had shifted the focus of the study of nature to organic life and away from Platonic ideas.**
    2. **Epicurus continued the shift away from Platonic ideas and built on the focus toward "creative nature.**" "It is this concept of creative nature that Epicurus took over. He calls the study of nature by the name physiology, the rerum natura of Lucretius, which includes nature in all manifestations, but he denied importance to the study of astronomy and eliminated mathematics from the curriculum of study."
    3. **Epicurus taught that Nature should be considered to be benevolent.** "Gratitude is due to blessed Nature because she has made the necessities of life easy to procure and what is hard to procure unnecessary." 21 The gratitude here signified exhibits an advance over the pagan gratitude to Mother Earth as the giver of bread. The word nature has taken on an ethical connotation. Nature is not merely the creatrix. She seems to be also benevolent and provident. The concept of her is close to that of Aristotle when saying "that Nature does nothing at random."
5. Priority of Nature over Reason
    1. **Epicurus gives Nature priority as antecedent to rational activity, and as the key to establishing the identify of the end or telos**.
        1. **Priority in time:** "His most telling argument has been preserved by Cicero.22 Let it be assumed that a human being has been deprived of all his five senses. This is tantamount to death and the subject has ceased to be a rational creature. In a muddled paragraph our biographer Laertius ascribes to Epicurus the idea "that the Sensations lead the way." 23 In the present

context this notion seems to have apposite application: the possession of sensation seems to be construed as antecedent to rational activity."

2. **Priority as to the telos:** "The priority of Nature was also insisted upon in establishing the identity of the end or telos. Aristotle had furnished a precious hint in this connection; he wrote "that perhaps even in the case of the lower animals there is some natural good superior to their scale of intelligence which aims at the corresponding good." 24 To this principle Epicurus adapted his procedure. By the promptings of Nature alone, apart from reason, every animate thing, the moment it is born, reaches out for pleasure and shrinks from pain. Consistent with this reasoning is the steady practice of referring to pleasure as "the end of Nature," which occurs five times in our scant remains. As analogous phrases may be cited "the good of Nature" and "the pleasure of Nature," all of them implying that reason played no necessary role in establishing the truth. Similar is the implication of parallel phrases such as "the wealth of Nature," signifying that Nature and not reason reveals the true meaning of wealth; and also "the limits of Nature," implying that Nature and not reason teaches the true limits of the desires."
3. **The Actions of Nature precede all human institutions and advancement.** "Another aspect of this priority of Nature over reason is manifest in the beginnings of human institutions. Since the sole cause of growth and change in the universe is the ceaseless motion of the atoms and this activity is nonpurposive, it follows that actions invariably precede thought. On this point the judgment of Epicurus is explicit: "Moreover, it must be assumed also that human nature by sheer force of circumstances was taught a multitude of lessons of all sorts and compelled to put them into practice, though reason subsequently contributed refinements and additions to these recommendations of hers, in some fields more rapidly, in others more slowly." 26 Lucretius in his fifth book enlarged liberally upon this theme: human beings wore skins before they manufactured garments; they lived in caves before they built huts; they employed clubs before they made weapons; they lived dispersed before they organized governments and built cities."
    1. **Origin of language is an example of this.** Language arises by nature, not by invention of reason: " 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"

4. **Nature is the Supreme Teacher and Physics is the Supreme Science.** ""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." "
    1. "..**Nature is neither a poet nor a rhetorician nor a dialectician**. Words must be taken at their face value, just as Epicurus advises the young Herodotus. This means for one thing that the use of figures of speech is abjured. Although the wise man may become a good critic of poetry, he will not compose poems."
    2. "**The writing of Epicurus was characterized by propriety**, 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, was no more applicable to himself than to geometers."
    3. "**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.
5. **It is more Epicurean than Stoic to assert that men should live "according to Nature."** (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 according to Nature, but the Epicureans seem never to have followed this inference through. It remained for the Stoics to identify Nature with Reason and to make a fetish of living according to Nature. They believed her supreme teaching was to be found in the divine order of the celestial realm, where Nature and Reason were at one." --- Note: Is this a correct deduction, or is this an artifact of most texts being lost?)

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Update: A discussion plan for Chapter 7 of DeWitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy" - on the subject of "The Canon, Reason, and Nature" is now posted here.