

Epíkouros' On Nature, Book 28 vs. Plato's Cratylus

Post by “Bryan” of February 23, 2025 at 5:41 PM

It is clear that Epíkouros, in Book 28, takes up Plato's discussion of "conventionalist" vs. "naturalist" views of language.

A linguistic conventionalist thinks that languages come about *only* by convention. The conventionalist denies a word's intrinsic relationship to a class of objects and therefore asserts that any word can refer to a particular class of objects—and that no particular word is better *per se* for this purpose.

In contrast, Epíkouros recognizes that linguistic conventions originate from *an intrinsic relationship between a class of objects and the primary expression naturally used* (specific to race and location) to identify that class. Languages originated from natural impulses. Because of this, most words inherently apply to an originally specific concept. Therefore, Epíkouros recommends that we base our vocabulary upon these fundamental meanings.

So even though Epíkouros and Cratylus both disagree with Hermogenes regarding convention, Epíkouros and Cratylus disagree on the basis of "correct" usage (with Epíkouros basing this *in automatic association of fundamental etymologies*, and Cratylus in the divine origins of language).

Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2025 at 6:13 PM

Bryan it has been my presumption that Plato's basic position was that words were dictated either by leading me (maybe we participation of gods?) and therefore as you say that no word is particularly better than another.

And that Epicurus' view was that words developed naturally due to local factors, including among them widening agreement on specific choices over time.

Is it correct that both of these views, including Epicurus, do involve some amount of convention/agreement, in that once introduced people had to begin to come to an agreement to use it? And that the main difference is the starting point, more so than agreement over time?

I'm wondering if it is not important to be clear that even under the Epicurean view that Nature itself is not "dictating" particular words. I can see how words can arise "naturally" based on the conditions of local people in a particular area, but I suspect your'e not thinking that there is a

"Natural" word for a banana (for example). Correct or no?

Post by “Bryan” of February 23, 2025 at 7:38 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

there is a "Natural" word for a banana

Epíkouros says that he and Metrodorus, when they were younger, used to think there was no inherent connection between a word and an object -- particularly for an object of thought only conceived by analogy to the seen.

Yet over time they came to increasingly sympathize with the idea that there *is* an inherent connection (specific to race and location) for "the primary thought according to each word." (10.38a). For example, Epíkouros says "we do not use customary terms out of their bounds, nor while changing words for evident things." (Epíkouros, Peri Phýseōs, Book 28, P.Herc. 1479, fr. 13 [col. 5 sup.])