

# On Nature Book 28 - Reconstruction By David Sedley - 1973 Article (Discussion)

Post by "Cassius" of April 15, 2019 at 10:53 AM

This is the discussion thread for this paper by David Sedley:



Direct link to

article:

[https://www.academia.edu/4310042/Epicurus\\_On\\_nature\\_book\\_28](https://www.academia.edu/4310042/Epicurus_On_nature_book_28)

Link at Epicureanfriends Filebase: [EF Filebase](#)

Post by "Hiram" of April 17, 2019 at 11:26 AM

Continuing previous conversation in the file section (please provide feedback). Here are some additional notes:

**"first meaning".** "a pre-conception, based on sense evidence, with the help of which a perceived object can be recognized by name", ergo a word used in a secondary non-perceptual sense can have no prolepsis of its own ... and E insists that such words be traced back to the preconceptions associated with them in their primary, perceptual senses; that is: refer to nature

It seems like this first (proto) meaning was an extremely important aspect of the Epicurean theory of language. And it was tied to the faculty of anticipations / prolepsis.

To cite the example used in the other discussion: AUTARKEIA.

Let's dissect it referring to its original sense and use.

I am not a native Greek speaker, but even in Spanish and English AUT- deals with self (auto-didactic means self-taught, automatic means "doing things by itself"), auto-estima in Spanish means "self esteem". and -ARCHY means government, rule. Monarchy means government of

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/891-on-nature-book-28-reconstruction-by-david-sedley-1973-article-discussion/>

one, oligarchy is the regime of a few, etc. And so we conclude using the Epicurean method that autarchy is self-rule, governing oneself, setting rules for oneself and obeying oneself (which is actually an idea we also find in Nietzsche, a pre-requisite for self-overcoming).

So here is an instance where a very useful word in philosophy is traced to its roots and we also find a similar concept being used by another philosopher of great esteem.

Self-sufficiency (the usual translation of autarchy) can also be subjected to this investigation of the roots of the word, having to do with oneself (single individual, alone) and suffice / sufficient (not needing anything else or any more than what is there already).

---

more notes:

a particular problem of language, from the Epicurean perspective, is that at some point men of culture began to use empty words. They began to assign false or unnatural (supernatural?) meanings to words for non-existent things, and even to use

p. 21 Epicurus "wants concepts to be clarified by reference to the data of perceptions and feelings, not through mere verbal predication", and "shows strong doubts about the usefulness of definitions"

If we understand this, we can begin to appreciate why Epicureans greatly valued plain speech and distrusted the rhetorical arts, demoting them to a very secondary role in philosophy.

...

p 22 says that Metrodorus had been "building up a private terminology" using ordinary language, but also innovation ("without adapting certain linguistic conventions"). Metrodorus had been, in effect, constructing a language

"a private terminology" sounds like a naming language (a lexicon that can be adapted to any grammar or conventional language), but the act of ignoring linguistic conventions sounds like an act of full-blown conlanging. Metrodorus was attempting, in effect, to construct a language, to fully reform language for the sake of clarity, and to reconcile language with nature.

This accentuates a profound concern and doubt about the accuracy and usefulness of conventional language in philosophy, and a conviction that language obscures thought and needs to be optimized and reformed for the study of nature. Furthermore, (as the work cited says) men frequently mismatch their perceptions with names in conventional language, which is at the root of many errors.

The least we can say is that the founders called for a healthy distrust and choice of words in all of our investigations and communications.

## Post by "Hiram" of April 17, 2019 at 2:30 PM

epilogismos = empirical reasoning

**suffix epi "upon," "on," "over," "near," "at," "before," "after";** in case of epidermis it's the pre-skin, what comes before the skin (dermis), so it seems that epi-logismos may imply pre-rational? (logos), or what comes prior to reason (experience), but this has to be confirmed by someone who knows Greek

epilogismoi are also appeals to experience, as moral questions are also solved empirically (judged from experience)

We also have to interpret these discussions as strongly recommending a careful study of the terms used in Epicurean philosophy and their translations into our language to ensure that we are accurately representing the way in which we must study nature.

---

## Post by "Hiram" of April 17, 2019 at 2:43 PM

Previous commentary

--

This reminds me of Nietzsche's treatment of words as both authority or power upon creation / the world, as well as with the insistence among Epicureans in a careful choice of words, something on which we today and in the English language have not focused enough. We have instead been careful to avoid certain words (like faith, God or gods, hedonism) because of their conventionally understood meanings, instead.

Further up from this passage it suggests the need for "adapting certain conventional usages"-- which reminds me of the practice (which is mentioned in the recent "against empty words" video) of re-defining words according to nature, and Polyaeus insistence on this in his scroll "on definitions".

In p. 47 Epicurus here mentions that he has recently learned about the "difficulties of using the correct names for individual things". This resonates with my observation that the ancient Epicureans preferred to move away from speaking in the abstract (man) and trying to align their speech as clearly as possible with the concrete examples of categories (humans, men in the plural) to accentuate the individual specimens.

There seems to have been a more complete, comprehensive Epicurean theory of speech, rhetorics, and linguistics than most of us today are aware of (which would make sense in light

of the insistence on clear speech).

P. 48 again confirms what we know, that the Epicureans used conventional words and did not disregard conventional meaning ("our own usage does not flout linguistic convention") but yet assigned new and particular meaning to them, keeping in mind their distinct, clear meaning.

p. 49 mentions a work titled "On Ambiguity" as a source that explained why it's an error to transfer words that design the knowable to things that belong in the category of the unknowable. Here, Metodorus and Epicurus are also discussing who is and who is not a worthy intellectual opponent enough to dedicate time to them in light of the goal of benefiting sincere, committed students who want to be happy. Maybe we should discuss these matters more in detail in order to try to imagine what was discussed in that work.

p 50 contains a great quote in defense of empirical thinking, and the idea that false opinions can find themselves into the words of a language "through a non-empirical process, not following one of our current divisions, but simply arising from an internal movement". This is below called a "trace of suspicion" and a call is made to "turn to the entire faculty of empirical reasoning". This passage is beautiful and of great value!

p. 51: "for the opinion which he holds is, I know, by no means empirically based on current evidence ... every opinion to which we had not yet at the time applied an empirical assessment should be referred to the following rule: it is not possible, in my view, to subject every opinion immediately to an empirical assessment, but it is sufficient that a man will be ready merely to display a capacity for reasoning empirically when the opportunity allows. For someone who examines it with this lack of empirical reasoning and in an utterly inadequate fashion, will nevertheless be able to assess it empirically, (if it is an opinion that concerns actions, when he has the opportunity to observe someone who proceeds to action on the basis of it; he will see with what results the person performs this action and under its guidance he will arrive at the truth just as much in the category of avoidance as in that of choice".

The above passage re: how to think empirically about action is mentioned in the video on empty words. Concerning theoretical and unempirical opinions, they can be considered false if an empirical opinion based on them is untrue, or if when acted upon they lead to disadvantageous action (meaning that, here, the definite existence of "moral truths" is posited based on disadvantage).

p 55 Epicurus mentions the importance of the canon ("keeping at his side a yardstick with the help of which ... he will not proceed in the direction of falsehood"), and of being careful to await for confirmation (that is, empirical evidence) before we declare something to be true.

p 56 closes by citing how important this discourse is: "... try 10,000 times over to commit to memory what I and Metrodorus here have just said".