

DeWitt's References On The Sorites Question

Chapter 7 - Mytilene and Lampsacus

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Epicurus was following the lead of his predecessors when he found in the behavior of animate creatures the evidence for identifying pleasure as the end or telos, but he improved upon their procedure by narrowing his observations to the behavior of newborn creatures, which as yet possess neither volition nor intelligence. This procedure was in effect a sort of genetic approach, which made pleasure "the root of all good" and "the beginning and the end of the happy life." It also afforded ground for asserting the essential unity of pleasure, which in turn made available a telling device, the sorites syllogism, against the Platonists, who declared some pleasures to be good and some bad and placed the pleasure of the mind in a class by itself.

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THE SORITES SYLLOGISM

If now we begin to piece our evidences together it will be clear that Epicurus began his campaign with a frontal attack and went from one group to another heckling the practicing teachers in his usual irritating way. It will be clear also that he chose to make hedonism the issue. The following passage is first-class evidence; it was translated by Cicero with the text of Epicurus *On the End* before him: "Time and again I demanded to know of those who were called wise what they had to leave in the list of goods if they subtracted those pleasures (of taste, vision and other senses) unless they chose to pour forth a stream of meaningless words. I could get no information from them." That the locale of this questioning was Mytilene can reasonably be inferred. While yet a student in Rhodes the thinking of Epicurus would hardly have progressed to such a point as to impel a public challenge. In smaller towns like Teos and Colophon it is unlikely that many philosophers were available for questioning. After the removal to Athens in 306 B.c. he confined himself to his own house and garden.

It is also clear that his attack was directed against Platonists, with whom Aristotelians would be one so far as he was concerned. It must be remembered that he looked upon Platonists as "high-steppers." Cicero's translation proceeds: "These men, if they will only get rid of their fancy notions of virtue and wisdom, will mean nothing else than the means by which those pleasures which I have listed above are obtained." ¹⁰ Here there is little cause for hesitancy. The teaching of Epicurus was realistic; pleasure was the good; justice was practiced for the sake of it. The fancy notions at which he scoffed were the belief in absolute justice, in the theory of eternal ideas in general, and the concept of true knowledge as the apprehension of them.

This is not the limit of our information, however. It is fairly plain that Epicurus chose for his assault upon the Mytilenean philosophers one of the more irritating of all forms of argument, the "sorites syllogism." In the same context in which we learn of Epicurus making his rounds to nettle the practicing philosophers we find this statement: "For my own part I am at a loss to know what meaning I shall attach to the good, subtracting the pleasures of taste, subtracting the pleasures of love, subtracting the pleasures of the ears, subtracting also the pleasure of the eyes in beauty of form and beauty of movement."

The true import of this passage has escaped detection. It is the sorites syllogism in narrative form. The key word is "subtract." For a correct understanding the argument must be restored to dialogue form, where it belongs. It consists of a chain of questions: "Do you deny the name of good to the pleasures of taste?" "Yes." "Do you deny the name of good to the pleasures of love?" "Yes." And so on with the rest. At the end of the chain the interlocutor has denied the name of good to everything that the man in the street calls pleasure and there is left only the pleasures of the mind. That the argument did arrive at this termination is made plain by

Cicero, who quotes the passage with more fulness. In his account is added: "Neither can this be said, that the pleasure of the mind alone is to be ranked among goods." It was thus that the imprudent Epicurus chose to exasperate his competitors.

Note: There is another reference in DeWitt which needs to be added here, but I cannot locate it at the moment. It may be a footnote, but it is a reference to a chain question (I believe referenced in Cicero) as to how many parts of the body can be cut off and still have life worth living. If anyone comes across that please note that here and we'll update this entry.