

Epicurus

Reading 2 – Canonics – The Canonical Part of Epicurus' Philosophy

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! . . . For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. . . . You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. . . . I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" —Titus Lucretius Carus

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Reading 2

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The source for the following text is

Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

All section numbers are part of Book 10. For example, section 32, or [32], is 10.32.

This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher.

Canonics

The Canonical Part of Epicurus' Philosophy

EPICURUS AFFIRMS IN *The Canon* that our sensations, preconceptions, and feelings are the criteria of truth. The Epicureans also generally include apprehensions or perceptions of mental presentations as a criterion. Epicurus' own statements regarding the canonical part are also found in the epitome addressed to Herodotus and in the *Principal Teachings*.

Sensation Epicurus says that every sensation is devoid of reason and incapable of memory. Sensations

are not self-caused. Nor can sensations add to or take anything away from whatever it is that causes them.

Nothing can refute sensations or convict them of error. [32] One sensation cannot refute another homogeneous sensation, that is, one that is of the same kind or nature. Homogeneous sensations are equally valid. Neither can one sensation refute a heterogeneous sensation, that is, one that is not of the same kind or nature. This is so because the two kinds of

sensation do not judge similar objects. (By the way, reason itself cannot refute sensations since reason is wholly dependent on sensations.) Since we humans equally pay attention to all sensations, one sensation cannot refute another. The reality of separate perceptions guarantees the truth of our sensations. Seeing and hearing are just as real as feeling pain.

It follows that we should interpret things that are unclear to us by means of those things that are apparent to us, that is, by various phenomena. This is so because all our notions arise from sensations either directly or, with the help of reason, they do so by analogy, resemblance, or combination.

Those things that appear to madmen and in dreams are real since they produce real effects. Things that are not real do not produce real effects.

Preconception [33] By the term preconception, Epicureans mean a sort of apprehension, or a right opinion or notion, or a universal idea stored in the mind. A preconception is the recollection of a frequently appearing external object. For example, pointing at something, someone might say, "Such is a human being." As soon as the term "human being" is uttered, we have the direct notion of a typical human being by means of preconception. The preconception itself arises from sensations.

For this reason, the preconception originally associated with every term is the right one, plain and clear. We would never begin an investigation, seeking something in particular, unless we first knew what it was we were searching for. For example, "The thing standing over there is a horse or a cow." Before

knowing whether the thing is a horse or a cow, we must first know by means of preconception the shape or form of a horse or a cow. We would not have given anything a name, or assigned anything a term, if we had not first understood its general form by means of preconception. It follows, then, that preconceptions are clear. Moreover, matters of judgment in which we form certain opinions or beliefs depend on something previously clear. Utilizing these clear preconceptions, we can answer questions such as, "How do we know whether this thing is a human being?"

[34] Epicureans also call opinion "assumption." They say that opinions can either be true or false. An opinion is true if the evidence confirms and does not contradict it. On the other hand, an opinion is false if the evidence does not confirm and instead contradicts it. Therefore, they have introduced the expression, "That which awaits confirmation." So, for example, before declaring that an object in the distance is a tower, one should approach the object and learn what it looks like when near to it.

Feeling Epicureans say that there are two feelings in every living being. They are pleasure and pain. They further say that pleasure is an appropriate feeling, natural. By contrast, pain is strange, unnatural. It is by means of these two feelings that animals either choose or avoid something.

Other There are two kinds of inquiry. One has to do with actual things, the other with words alone.

So much, then, for the basic division of Epicurus' philosophy, as well as the criterion of truth. We must now turn to one of the letters.

So ends Reading 2. See you in **another reading or item**.



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