

Epicureanism

Epicureanism was an agenda-setting but controversial school of thought within Hellenistic philosophy. Distinctive of Epicureanism is a grounding commitment to a materialist world picture, and, within that world picture, a materialist account of the human being and its cognitive abilities. Indeed, Epicurean philosophy may constitute the first attempt at articulating in detail a comprehensive materialist metaphysics, and would remain the only such attempt until Hobbes and Gassendi writing in the 17th century (the latter of whom drew explicitly on Epicurus's work).

This materialist stance is evident in Epicurus's account of language. It was commonly assumed (as per Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, ch. 2) that language has its origins in convention rather than nature (*nomos* rather than *physis*). By contrast, Epicurus held that at least some linguistic signs must emerge from causal relations obtaining between the individual and her physical environment. To this extent, Epicurus's doctrine can be called a form of *linguistic naturalism*: given our natures, perception compels us to form certain internal states – feelings and representations – which in turn compel us to emit certain vocal sounds. Language, *qua* expressive vocalization, thus builds on the foundation of our natural responses to objects and situations in our surrounding world.

Epicureans were clear, however, that this is merely an account of the *origins* of language: phylogenetically and ontogenetically, language builds on innate response mechanisms which are triggered by causal interactions with objects in the external world. But linguistic conventions will nonetheless play an important role in the development of a full natural language. In particular, conventions will help facilitate the role of language in communication. In this process, there is significant scope for linguistic variation to develop, where the peculiarities of each language reflect the intellectual and emotional temperament of its tribe. However, and as is nicely brought out in the excerpts from Lucretius, linguistic naturalism, even as restricted to the question of origins, is important in that it allows us to assert a significant degree of continuity between human and animal vocalization.

An important notion in Epicurean philosophy is that of *prolepsis*, often translated as “basic grasps.” Basic grasps are concepts (universal ideas) formed on the basis of sense-impressions. They serve, in a sense, as the basic point of contact between objects in the external

world and our capacities of rational reflection. But the notion is also specifically relevant to Epicurean philosophy of language: as Diogenes reports, basic grasps also serve as the primary denotation of words (e.g., “man”), such that any utterance of the relevant word will immediately call to mind the “general outline of man.”

At the center of much subsequent attention was Epicureans’ evident denial of what would come to be called *lekta*, most often glossed as *what is said* in an utterance – its content, in contemporary parlance – as opposed to the utterance itself (the acoustic event) and the worldly state of affairs the utterance responds to. Epicureans’ staunchly materialist metaphysics could happily embrace the existence of two latter categories. *Lekta*, by contrast, are supposedly abstract, incorporeal entities, and could find no place in the restrictive ontology of Epicureanism.

This was a matter of serious concern, for instance, to the Stoics, who would make this the focal of their criticism of Epicurean philosophy of language. For instance, Plutarch argued that denying the existence of *lekta* is tantamount to rendering learning, teaching, and a range of other cognitive functions quite impossible, on the grounds that it is the *lekton* and not the utterance which carries the property of being true or false.

The notion of *lekta* prefigures in interesting ways Frege’s category of *Sinn*. Moreover, Frege argued, quite in line with Plutarch, that denying the existence of *Sinne* is tantamount to denying that “mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from generation to generation” (Frege, “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*,” p. 154). And it is not too much of a stretch to see influential 20th century philosophers of language such as Quine and Davidson as advocating a broadly Epicurean position against Frege. In particular, Quine and Davidson held, like the Epicureans, that while we can talk loosely of words and sentences as having meanings, these meanings can play no grounding, explanatory role in a theory of language.

Further readings:

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