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The New Canon

By **Hiram Crespo**, editor.

Most people who have interest in Epicureanism are seeking to improve their lives and to fine-tune their search for happiness, so that they generally are interested in the ethics, the ripened fruits of Epicurean discourse. And there is nothing wrong with enjoying the soul-nurturing sweet nectar of a wholesome, calculated wisdom tradition that has come down to us ... it is in the sweetest part of the tree, after all, that nature has placed the seed that might take root if it finds fertile soil. For some plants, it's the flower that is the genitalia, and for others it's the fruit.

The spiritual garden that is Epicureanism gives us many varieties of flower and fruits, mellows to engage us in the pleasures of sane philosophy. But at the root of our coherent system lies always, invariably, the Canon. We all know that roots are neither the easiest to digest nor the sweetest to our palate. Some, like carrots, can be had raw. Others, like yams and cassava, require that we treat them, boil them, or fry them. They require preparation and slow digestion. But only from the root, from the Canon, can the fruits of naturalist philosophy self-perpetuate in our soul.

The Canon is not just a theoretical system of epistemology, defined as the theory of knowledge and of how it is properly attained and verified. It was also one of the 300 scrolls that Epicurus wrote, of which only fragments remain. The original scripture of the Canon is lost to us. However, we do know from indirect sources what the Canon taught and we are able to recreate its teachings to a great extent.

Nausiphanes, Epicurus' atomist teacher (who had been Democritus' pupil), was the one who invented the tripod, the three-legged stool used as criteria by which to judge reality. The tripod, as Epicurus taught it, consisted of:

1. sense perception (hearing, sight, smell, touch, taste) – materialists must be empiricists because reality and nature are one and the same; they must accept the evidence before our senses as our firm, undeniable connection to reality

2. feelings (pain, pleasure) – this is how nature, via natural selection, guides living entities and helps them to recognize the survival strategies of their ancestors

3. anticipations (inherited instincts and innate recognitions) – the baby must pre-cognitively anticipate the nipple in order to engage in the pleasures of feeding; people must recognize each other as people in order to engage in the pleasures of socializing, we must recognize our primal panic and vertigo while in the presence of an awesome predator or while standing at the edge of a cliff in order to avoid being eaten or falling, etc.

Of all these, sense perception is of key importance. While reason is certainly a useful tool to apprehend reality, if fed wrong data or if left to speculate without being grounded on nature, reason can churn out catastrophic, absurd, needless, or impractical conclusions.

Residents of Papua New Guinea, amazed at the wealth brought in by Westerners during the II World War, believed that if they built wooden planes and landing strips, their ancestors would fly in cargo from the heavens. Reasoning without the Canon can lead to falling off a cliff ... or to the development of cargo cults, dissonant worldviews that seek to blend childish imaginings with unanalyzed sense-data and should serve as a metaphor for all other forms of Platonism. If the Papuans had based their worldview on the study of nature and sought tangible sources for their knowledge, they would have concluded that death is final, that the ancestors do not intervene and that it is needless to await their cargo, and would have sought to find the legitimate sources for cargo as the product of labor in other lands.

Is it not tragic that people in so many cultures await Messiahs who died thousands of years ago, in spite of evidence that all humans have a life span usually shorter than one century? Christians and Muslims are joined by the cargo cult adherents who await John Frum, an American god that visited them during the mid-20th Century.

Without empirical data we do not have science. We have speculation or day-dreaming. There is nothing wrong with day-dreaming. This is fine for when we are poets and writers of fiction, but it's not naturalist philosophy.

INTELLECT: It is by convention that color exists, by convention sweet, by convention bitter.

*SENSES: Ah, wretched intellect, you get your evidence only as we give it to you, and yet you try to overthrow us.
That overthrow will be your downfall.*

- Wheewright, *The Presocratics*, p. 183

The word Canon translates as ruler, measuring stick (for reality). In other traditions (like Catholicism), the Canon has legal connotations, and the Canon should perhaps be thought of as the Law or Rule concerning knowledge that was set by nature. It was a sort of materialist Bible, was of central importance to ancient Epicureans, and was dubbed "the book that fell from heaven" in derision by enemies, jokingly by adherents. It constitutes, in our view, the most biologically-rooted of all known epistemological systems in Hellenistic philosophy. It clearly serves a life-based, life-affirming philosophy of this world and guides us to what is deemed (by nature) to be necessary knowledge.

Unlike other philosophies, we do not accept that life is inherently absurd and empty of meaning. Instead, we see that nature has given us tools to apprehend reality and that these tools give us all the knowledge and meaning we need. We often perturb our souls by seeking knowledge beyond what is necessary. We need to know how to survive and eat, how to relate to others, how to stay warm during a winter, how to protect ourselves from legitimate dangers, how to be happy ... we must know (KNOW, here not cognitively but experientially) the taste of food and the safety of friendship ... but we do not need to know immaterial beings from other realms, we do not need to know immortality and endless time, or endless anything. We also do not need to FEAR these spirits or endless time. Nature has not given us faculties to perceive these things because, even if they existed, they are not and have never been necessary.

For as children tremble and fear everything in the blind darkness, so we in the light sometimes fear what is no more to be feared than the things children in the dark hold in terror and imagine will come true. This terror therefore and darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature. - Lucretius in De Rerum Natura II:56-62.

This is not to say that the knowledge that we gain by enhancing our senses (with microscopes or telescopes, for instance) is not good or that, because it's acquired through artificial senses, that it's less awe-inspiring. But nature requires little of us. Natural, unnecessary knowledge is icing on a cake compared to the little bread, water and fruits that we need.

One of the first modern attempts at reconstructing the wisdom of the Canon for a contemporary reader is Cassius Amicus' *The Tripod of Truth, An Introduction to the Book That Fell From the Heavens*, which can be read online and is available from [smashwords](#) and from his webpage, [newepicurean.com](#). It's ironic, having an introduction to the Canon but not having the actual work by Epicurus. Cassius points to the section on the Canon in a previous work by Norman Dewitt as his main source.

Another very solid introduction to the Canon is the epistemology portion of the [elementalepicureanism.com](#) course. There is much more that could be said about this subject and about each one of the three legs of the tripod. I encourage anyone interested in deepening their understanding to read these works, from which might emerge a New Canon, an actual body of literature.

This tangible source for our tradition should serve the didactic and spiritual purpose of the ancient one: to set up a firm foundation for materialist philosophers who wish to base their wisdom tradition on the study of nature and will accept no less than a scientific philosophy. We must gain full awareness of how speculative philosophy and religion have the potential to produce unnatural beliefs and unrealistic expectations that can, if nurtured with full faith, torment the mortal soul.

No example of this is more universal than our unanalyzed fear of death and childish, arrogant rejection of our natural limits. These have promoted the sacrifice of widows to their dead husbands, the tormenting of children and those in agony with visions of hell, or the promise of eternal damnation (and the reduction to the status of a social pariah) for those who can not honestly say they subscribe to this or that religious doctrine. Lucretius, true and heroic Epicurean that he was, disbanded the false promises of unnatural worldviews and placed this advise on the lips of Mother Nature:

Why don't you retire like a guest sated with the banquet of life, and with calm mind embrace a rest that knows no care? - Lucretius in De Rerum Natura III:938-9

The sad repercussion of not basing our assessment of (our natural fear of) death on the study of nature is oftentimes the development of a form of cargo cult. This is, potentially, the difference between the forager who merely picks the fruits of philosophy and the Gardener who is a diligent keeper, nurturing the roots and even guiding artful bonsais to their maturity. Lucretius contrasted the life of a calculated hedonist to that of adherents of other worldviews who nurture, instead, needless sorrows:

Pleasant it is, when over a great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore upon another's tribulation: not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy, but because to perceive from what ills you are free yourself is pleasant. - Lucretius in De Rerum Natura II:1

The spiritual task of an Epicurean is that of reconciliation and engagement with nature. Imperturbability and flourishing are the by-products of the task.