

Sextus Empiricus

Post by “Eikadistes” of November 4, 2022 at 12:24 PM

After some investigation, it seems that the original trilemma may have originated from the Skeptic Carneades in the 2nd-century BCE. This is proposed by Mark Larrimore in his introduction “Responding to Evils” in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, pp. xviii-xxi. <<https://archive.org/details/proble...00unse/mode/2up>>

“It is customary to trace the trilemma to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE). As the skeptical character Philo says in a much-quoted passage from David Hume’s (1711-76) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,

Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered.

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

The source of ‘Epicurus’ old questions’ is the early Christian theologian Lactantius’ (240 to ca. 320) *The Wrath of God*, written around 313. From Lactantius’ perspective, Epicurus was an atheist (and so he has been understood by Christians for centuries), but the Epicurean use of the trilemma is intended not to deny that there are gods, nor even that there is a god who is omnipotent and benevolent. It is a lesson about how to respond to evils. Epicurus clearly believed there were gods whose natures we could know. They are in fact neither willing nor able to prevent evil, but this is not because they are malevolent. It is because they (wisely) know better than to become involved with things. The Epicurean argument therefore doesn’t stop at the difficulties with the Stoic (and later Christian) idea of a provident God, but goes on to articulate a view of the attitude of the gods to evils which we should emulate. The problem is not that the gods are not upset by evils, but that we *are*.

Was Epicurus in fact the originator of the questions? Lactantius wrote half a millennium after Epicurus, and the trilemma appears in no other fragments or discussions of Epicurus and the other two sources predate Lactantius. One reason to doubt whether the trilemma was actually formulated or used by Epicurus (although it may well have been used by later Epicureans) is that for the purpose just described, a trilemma is not an optimal means. A well-constructed trilemma doesn’t conclusively show anything: it induces paralysis. Each one of its three intuitively credible statements is compatible with the others taken singly – but not together – so it cannot tell you which one(s) to give up. The form of the trilemma makes it more likely that the question was of ancient skeptic provenance, perhaps the work of Carneades (214-129 BCE). [See Reinhold Gleis, ‘Et invidis et imbecillus, Das angebliche Epikurfragment bei Laktanz, De ira Dei 13, 20-21,’ *Vigiliac Christianae*, 42 (1988), 47-58.] The trilemma was a form of argument perfected by the ancient skeptics.

It is in fact in Sextus Empiricus' manual of skepticism, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (ca. 200 CE) that the oldest extant version of the trilemma appears [...] Sextus Empiricus' conclusion is that since 'whether god exists is not apprehensible,'

those who firmly maintain that god exists will be forced into impiety; for if they say that he takes care of everything, they will be saying that god is the cause of evils, while if they say that he takes care of some things only or even of nothing, they will be forced to say that he is either malevolent or weak, and manifestly these are impious conclusions. [*The Sceptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Benson Mates (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 175]

The goal of ancient skepticism is *ataraxia*, 'An untroubled or tranquil condition of the soul.' For the skeptic, the point of the trilemma is not that god is one way or the other - or not at all - but that in religious matters as in all others, it is best to avoid firmly maintaining anything.

The third ancient version of the argument is roughly contemporaneous with the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. It is the only version to make explicit reference to Christian beliefs."

If God is good . . . and has knowledge of the future, and also has power to avert evil, why did he suffer the man, deceived by the devil, to fall away from obedience to the law, and so to die? For the man was the image and likeness of God, or even God's substance, since from it the man's soul took its origin. So if, being good, he had wished a thing not to happen, and if, having foreknowledge, he had been aware that it would happen, and if he had had power and strength to prevent it from happening, that thing never would have happened which under these three conditions of divine majesty it was impossible should happen. but . . . as that did happen, the very opposite is proved, that God must be assumed to be neither good nor prescient nor omnipotent: because inasmuch as nothing of that sort could have happened if God had possessed these attributes of goodness and prescience and omnipotence, it follows that it did happen because God is devoid of these qualities. [Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), i. 97-9 (II.5). I am grateful to John G. Gager for this reference. See his 'Marcion and Philosophy,' *Vigiliac Christianae*, 26 (1972), 53-9.]"