

Pros and Cons Of Considering Epicurean Philosophy To Be A "Religion"

Post by "Cassius" of March 21, 2024 at 9:58 AM

I have to add as an aside to what I quoted from DeWitt above that I've never seen that argument anywhere else. If someone has seen it elsewhere, please let me know, because I tend to see this is one example of the value of DeWitt's approach. DeWitt charges ahead to explore important questions where few others seem to want to go. If I have a criticism it is as I said in a recent podcast, that sometimes I don't think DeWitt *follows his own lead far enough*. So if I had been him I would not have written the following to imply that Lucretius' approach was superior to that of Epicurus (if in fact it does; as I reread it, I think DeWitt is maybe just making the point that you need both):

Quote

The weakness of logic, of course, is its lack of dynamic. Men do not feel called to devote their lives to the propagation of syllogisms. The merit of romanticism, on the contrary, is the dynamic that goes with it. It is powered by emotion. Lucretius often handles the logic of Epicurus with clarity and skill, but the force of propulsion behind the logic is emotion, pity for the superstitious misery of man and eagerness to emancipate him. In respect of this enthusiasm Lucretius seems to surpass his master, and yet Epicurus is on record as saying: "[The wise man] will be more susceptible of emotion than other men and this will be no obstacle to his wisdom." ^{6a} Here we have the recognition of the chimerical blend of logic and romanticism. It is the latter, the emotion, the eagerness to emancipate men from fear and to show them the road to happiness, that leads Epicurus to extol the blissfulness of the gods as a perfection to contemplate and imitate. It is the logic of materialism that compels him to deny it to them as a birthright, so to say, and to impose upon them the necessity of preserving it.

DeWitt has himself pointed out that:

Quote

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is

really superficial and captious. The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing."

To me this logical reasoning about the gods sustaining their own deathlessness is very similar to the example of the logical reasoning behind concluding that if the feelings are only two, then the absence of pain *is* pleasure, and vice versa. Both are logical assertions that stand or fall on the precise meaning of words that are asserted to correspond with the actual facts of reality, and to the rejection of interpretations that contradict these conclusions.

The gods are composed of atoms and void and therefore they are not by nature immortal. The feelings are two and therefore the presence of one is the absence of the other. Granting the premises of these propositions, then, to paraphrase Torquatus, nothing can be more true than the truth of these propositions, and Epicurus was asserting them dogmatically as established beyond doubt.

Yes we need "emotion" and "romanticism" to give force to the conclusions, but the logical reasoning supports the emotion and romanticism, it doesn't undermine it. DeWitt pioneers the discussion of the gods not being naturally deathless, but then he unfortunately draws back from the conclusion, when he should follow each step out to the end.

Lucretius *may* have tripped up on calling the gods immortal (I say *may* because I see this as more likely an issue of connotation and translation / wording), but I don't think there's anything inconsistent at all about the emotion and drive of Lucretius compared to Epicurus. We don't have the texts but I feel sure Epicurus was at least as driven and intense as Lucretius himself.