

# Episode 227 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 02 - Velleius Begins His Attack On Traditional Views Of The Gods

Post by "Cassius" of June 11, 2024 at 4:38 PM

## [Quote from Little Rocker](#)

I guess it still seems to me that 'blessed' and 'indestructible' are essential features of the prolepsis of 'gods' for Epicurus. 'The many,' too, think the gods are blessed and indestructible. They just go off the rails when they try to put meat on the bones of 'blessed.'

That's the really sticky point that's hard to get one's mind around. Does every positive aspect of a god (or anything else) boil down to simply that our faculty of feeling is assigning this to the "pleasure" category? It seems clear to me that "pleasure" has something to do with considering anything we would describe as blessedness.

But isn't there more to what's going on in our minds in addition to finding the gods (or any other subject) to produce a "pleasant" response in us?

Doesn't the mind have to have some organizing process that would present to us a selection portion of our attention that the faculty of pleasure then deems to be pleasurable?

Some selected DeWitt from his anticipations chapter that I think make sense here, even if some of his conclusions that seem to point to "innate ideas" don't necessarily follow:

## Quote

"Let the faithful Lucretius be called to the witness stand. Among his more striking and better remembered passages is one that emphasizes the proleptic or anticipatory behavior of all living creatures, including animals. Their first gestures anticipate the activities of their adult state. Children point with the finger before they can talk. Calves butt before they have horns. The cubs of lions and panthers fight with tooth and claw almost before they have teeth and claws. Young birds go through the motions of flying before their wings are fit for flight. Obviously all living things are preconditioned for life in their terrestrial environment. Is it, then, inconsistent with this observed fact to assume that human beings are preconditioned for life in their social environment?"

That calls to my mind the other section of Lucretius that I always have a problem getting my mind around -- how the eyes were not born so that should see, but that sight follows from the

birth of the eyes. We talk about that mostly in terms of its relationship (or lack thereof) to Darwinian evolution, but wouldn't it also apply to the faculties of the brain being born with some capabilities within them?

Another good observation I think:

#### Quote

Let Epicurus himself be allowed to testify. Basic to his hedonism is the observed fact that all living creatures, brute or human, however young and helpless, reach out for pleasure and shrink from pain. Even before the five senses have begun to perform their parts, long before the dawn of conscious motivation, and long before the development of understanding, pleasure seems to be a good and pain an evil thing.<sup>42</sup> This initial behavior, like the subsequent gestures of play, is at one and the same time prompted by inborn propensities and anticipatory of adult experience. In the growth of the living being and the unfolding of the faculties the attention of Epicurus is manifestly focused upon this principle, the priority of Nature over reason.

We don't often talk about "where pleasure came from" or "how it determines what is pleasurable and what is painful, but doesn't some kind of operation have to be "hard-coded" within us to get that process going from maybe as far back as the moment of conception? If that kind of mechanism is operational in terms of pleasure and pain, surely something analogous exists in our "thinking" processes, not in terms of a conclusion that this or that is painful, but that under certain conditions and contexts we're going to find some abstractions to be important and some not to be important?

Another quote that stems from the same issue (the status of pleasure -- is it proleptic?):

#### Quote

Even within Epicurean circles the term *prolepsis* underwent unjustified extensions. For instance, Epicurus, recognizing Nature as the canon or norm, had asserted that, just as we observe fire to be hot, snow to be cold, and honey to be sweet, so, from the behavior of newborn creatures, we observe pleasure to be the telos or end. Certain of his followers, however, shaken no doubt by Stoic criticism, took the position that the doctrine was an innate idea, that is, a prolepsis.<sup>48</sup> In strict logic this error was a confusion between *quid* and *quale*. The problem was not to decide what could be predicated of the end or telos but what was the identity of the end. Was it pleasure or was it something else?

I have a feeling that a lot of our problem in dealing with this issue is that we too are still "shaken by Stoic criticism."

I don't think DeWitt does a great job of wrapping all this up into a neat conclusion (especially when he occasionally talks about "innate ideas") but his "intuitionism" rings better, and along the way he makes what i think are a lot of good points that we can use today to make headway.