

Episode 240 - Cicero's OTNOTG 15 - The False Allegation That "General Assent" Was The Epicurean Basis For Divinity

Post by "Cassius" of August 6, 2024 at 5:43 AM

This episode will be released today. In the meantime I wanted to memorialize an observation Joshua made last night to this effect:

That there is a parallel between Epicurus' statement in the letter to Menoeceus as to the nature of gods, and the statement by Torquatus in Cicero's On Ends as to the nature of the highest good.

Joshua can do a better job than I of stating his point, but the way I remember it is that as to gods in the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus points out that the idea of gods is etched on the minds of all men, but that the particular assertions about the gods that men make are untrustworthy and often wrong.

Quote

The things which I used unceasingly to commend to you, these do and practice, considering them to be the first principles of the good life. First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision. But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many.

In regard to the highest good, Torquatus points out that there is a common conception of the highest good on which all philosophers agree (that the highest good is the thing all actions aim at, but which is not itself aimed at anything else) and yet the specific observations men make against the highest good (that the highest good is virtue or piety) is untrustworthy and often wrong.

Quote

[29] IX. 'First, then,' said he, 'I shall plead my case on the lines laid down by the founder of our school himself: I shall define the essence and features of the problem

before us, not because I imagine you to be unacquainted with them, but with a view to the methodical progress of my speech. The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

In both cases, Epicurus is not using the conclusions of other men as the direct basis for his conclusion, he is observing that there is a common root perspective in the minds of men, but what men think about that common root perspective is in many/most cases totally wrong, and must be correcting by going back to observations from the canonical faculties.

Linking these two passages together leads to some interesting possibilities which I'll defer making in this post and see if Joshua gets a chance to elaborate his observation further himself.

All this came up in relation to the main point of this Lucretius Today episode, which is that it is ridiculous to assert that Epicurus based his ideas of gods, or of philosophy, by observing the conclusions of other men - the "general consent of mankind" / "Fifty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong" argument.