

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

Post by "Joshua" of August 6, 2024 at 10:38 PM

I'd like to develop a thesis that I'm working toward, and that I briefly mentioned on Sunday because it only then occurred to me;

[Quote from Letter To Menoeceus, Yonge Translation](#)

First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, thou shalt not affirm of him aught that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness, but shalt believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious.

It's always struck me as odd that Epicurus' first use of *god* (θεὸν) is singular, and in subsequent usage he employs the plural. Some of the translators (as Yonge here) actually translate this as *God*, giving entirely the wrong impression.

I was struck by the similarity between this passage in Epicurus, and the opening words of Torquatus in *De Finibus*;

Quote from Cicero, On Ends, Reid Translation

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.

Notice that Torquatus in this passage is not saying that pleasure is the good because that is the "opinion of all philosophers"; Torquatus is relying on the "opinion of all philosophers" in order to establish a barebones definition of *the good* as such. What makes something the good? Something is the good because we test all things by it, but the good itself by nothing.

In the *Letter to Menoecus* Epicurus seems to be doing the same thing. Before we can even discuss the gods, we need a working definition of what a god really is. Notice how this interpretation of the passage perfectly explains the use of the singular.

Person A: I have three pet marmots at home that I need to go take care of, but after that I'm good for whatever.

Person B: ...What the hell is a marmot?

No one would ever follow up the initial statement with the question, "what are three marmots?" When we ask for a definition, we ask in the singular. When Epicurus speaks on the gods, he first offers a definition, and his definition is also in the singular. And like Torquatus, who relies on the opinion of all philosophers when defining the good, Epicurus invokes the common opinion of mankind when defining a god.

He does *not* use the common opinion of mankind to *justify his own belief that the gods exist*. He thinks the gods exist because of images that impinge, because of prolepsis, because of the principle of isonomia, and perhaps other considerations as well. But he thinks that the gods are blessed and incorruptible because this is the definition of a god; if a god is neither blessed nor incorruptible, it isn't a god.

I have very little facility with the Greek, but I've never seen this interpretation set forth and I find that it solves two thorny problems at one go.