

VS26 - Long and Short Argument Reference in Cicero's On Ends

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Cassius Amicus

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Here's a relatively minor point, but I think this illustrates how we can gain context for otherwise obscure Epicurean sayings by looking back at earlier arguments to which the Epicureans were likely responding. One such issue is whether it is best to present arguments in question/answer form or by extended narrative. Here's Vatican saying 26 for the Epicurean side:

"26. One must presume that long and short arguments contribute to the same end."

Taken by itself this doesn't have much meaning, til we see that Cicero touches on the same issue in "On Ends":

TORQUATUS: "Very well then," said he, "this is what I will do, I will expound a single topic, and that the most important. Natural Philosophy we will postpone; though I will undertake to prove to you both your swerve of the atoms and size of the sun, and also that very many errors of Democritus were criticized and corrected by Epicurus. But on the present occasion I will speak about pleasure; not that I have anything original to contribute, yet I am confident that what I say will command even your acceptance."

CICERO: "Be assured," I said, "that I shall not be obstinate, but will gladly own myself convinced if you can prove your case to my satisfaction."

TORQUATUS: "I shall do so," he rejoined, "provided you are as fair-minded as you promise. But I prefer to employ continuous discourse rather than question and answer."

CICERO: "As you please," said I. So he began.

And here it is traceable back to Plato in Gorgias (where it's mentioned several times):

"SOCRATES: And will you continue to ask and answer questions, Gorgias, as we are at present doing, and reserve for another occasion the longer mode of speech which Polus was attempting? Will you keep your promise, and answer shortly the questions which are asked of you?"

GORGAS: Some answers, Socrates, are of necessity longer; but I will do my best to make them as short as possible; for a part of my profession is that I can be as short as any one.

SOCRATES: That is what is wanted, Gorgias; exhibit the shorter method now, and the longer one at some other time."

It's possible that VS 26 is not a reference to dialectic, but it seems to me it probably is. Regardless, it is interesting to think about why Socrates so preferred the dialectic method, and why the Epicureans preferred the "continuous discourse" method.