

Episode 206 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 14 - More On The Nature of Morality

Post by “Joshua” of December 17, 2023 at 3:40 AM

Do we know what the source is for the "babble of the crowd" bit? He seems to be attributing this to Epicurus, but I don't know of any citation that would support the claim. Epicurus is *often* mistrustful of the judgment of the crowd. The opinions of the multitude are wrong concerning the nature of the gods, wrong about celestial bodies, wrong about the causes of things, and so on.

VS29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

VS45. The study of nature does not create men who are fond of boasting and chattering or who show off the culture that impresses the many, but rather men who are strong and self-sufficient, and who take pride in their own personal qualities not in those that depend on external circumstances.

VS67. Since the attainment of great wealth can scarcely be accomplished without slavery to crowds or to politicians, a free life cannot obtain much wealth; but such a life already possesses everything in unfailing supply. Should such a life happen to achieve great wealth, this too it can share so as to gain the good will of one's neighbors.

VS81. The soul neither rids itself of disturbance nor gains a worthwhile joy through the possession of greatest wealth, nor by the honor and admiration bestowed by the crowd, or through any of the other things sought by unlimited desire.

In the Letter to Menoikeus, he makes it seem as though the Hoi Polloi are wrong about everything!

Very strange. Here is an alternative translation;

Quote

There, Torquatus, is a full, detailed and complete scheme of Moral Worth, a whole of which these four virtues, which you also mentioned, constitute the parts. Yet your Epicurus tells us that he is utterly at a loss to know what nature or qualities are assigned to this Morality by those who make it the measure of the Chief Good. For if

Morality be the standard to which all things are referred, while yet they will not allow that pleasure forms any part of it, he declares that they are uttering sounds devoid of sense (those are his actual words), and that he has no notion or perception whatever of any meaning that this term Morality can have attached to it. In common parlance 'moral' (honourable) means merely that which ranks high in popular esteem. And popular esteem, says Epicurus, though often in itself more agreeable than certain forms of pleasure, yet is desired simply as a means to pleasure.

Do you realize how vast a difference of opinion this is? Here is a famous philosopher, whose influence has spread not only over Greece and Italy but throughout all barbarian lands as well, protesting that he cannot understand what Moral Worth is, if it does not consist in pleasure; unless indeed it be that which wins the approval and applause of the multitude. For my part I hold that what is popular is often positively base, and that, if ever it is not base, this is only when the multitude happens to applaud something that is right and praiseworthy in and for itself; which even so is not called 'moral' (honourable) because it is widely applauded, but because it is of such a nature that even if men were unaware of its existence, or never spoke of it, it would still be worthy of praise for its own beauty and loveliness. Hence Epicurus is compelled by the irresistible force of instinct to say in another passage what you also said just now, that it is impossible to live pleasantly without also living morally (honourably). What does he mean by 'morally' now? The same as 'pleasantly'? If so, does it amount to saying that it is impossible to live morally unless you — live morally? Or, unless you make public opinion your standard? He means then that he cannot live pleasantly without the approval of public opinion? But what can be baser than to make the conduct of the Wise Man depend upon the gossip of the foolish? What therefore does he understand by 'moral' in this passage? Clearly, nothing but that which can be rightly praised for its own sake. For if it be praised as being a means to pleasure, what is there creditable about this? You can get pleasure at the provision-dealer's. No, — Epicurus, who esteems Moral Worth so highly as to say that it is impossible to live pleasantly without it, is not the man to identify 'moral' (honourable) with 'popular' and maintain that it is impossible to live pleasantly without popular esteem; he cannot understand 'moral' to mean anything else than that which is right, — that which is in and for itself, independently, intrinsically, and of its own nature praiseworthy.

Anybody got an idea where this stuff comes from? Perhaps Cicero didn't read Greek as well as he thought he did...but I have to assume that he is misinterpreting what Epicurus actually said here. If the reference to the crowd is actually derived from what Epicurus said about justice existing only by convention based on mutual advantage, then Cicero has grossly misunderstood that idea.