

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

Post by “Cassius” of December 17, 2023 at 5:58 AM

My best effort at understanding this is that he is referring to Epicurus' comments about one's reputation and esteem of one's neighbors (such as Torquatus had himself referred to in regard to the reasoning of his ancestors for at least part of their heroic deeds). Epicurus saw being esteemed as a friend as an important tool toward living a pleasurable life, just like friendship itself, so he focused on the actual views of the people around us rather than simply looking at their number.

But just like any other tool toward pleasure, circumstances can make it useless or even harmful (eating too much ice cream can make ice cream harmful) and so Epicurus would have distinguished the benefits of the good regard of the crowd when they are acting as friends from the detriment of the foolishness of the crowd when the crowd is acting negatively.

So when Cicero says (rightly) that Epicurus held virtue to be necessary for a happy life, Epicurus wasn't saying that it's the judgment of every single crowd that gives worth to acting virtuously, but that the good feeling of any number of people (who can hold you in esteem even when they sometimes disagree with you, or with whom you can separate if they become no longer your friends) is the part that's not possible to live well without.

## Quote

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.

So I think i'd extend what I commented last week in regard to the dilemma as to whether the gods love the good because it is good, or the good is good because the gods love it. Both of the important premises in that analysis are incorrect - there are both no supernatural gods to whose judgment we should defer, and there is no absolute good. Neither exists, and talking about them together just makes things more confusing.

And in questioning whether the crowd's esteem is valuable because it is always good, or whether the good is what the crowd esteems (both of which Cicero rejects), I'd say that Epicurus is focusing on the practical and saying that acting virtuously will gain us the esteem of our friends, which is always going to be desirable, but that the esteem of the crowd is

something that may or may not be desirable (just as we don't want to share in the crowd's views of the gods, but we do want to share our like-minded friends' views of the gods).

Cicero is trying to bluster his way through this and make Epicurus look bad by insisting on the absolute nature of "the good" and "the crowd" rather than on Epicurus' position that nothing is ultimately good if not based on pleasure, and that our attitude toward the crowd isn't determined by counting their numbers but by their positions and their attitude toward you. (Of course there are times when things are practically speaking pretty clear -- a murderous crowd outside your front door is going to be undesirable most of the time, but a crowd politely telling you that the sun revolves around the earth but otherwise respecting you may not be a problem at all.)

And always in the background in evaluating the final meaning is that Cicero is not allowing Epicurus to define "pleasure" to include the normal healthy condition of body or mind. When you factor in the Epicurean aspect of pleasure that does not involve "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll" then things look significantly different.

Edit: I made some significant edits while writing this post and I'm not sure these formulations are final either 😊