

Reference to Epicurus' Views On Determinism in Cicero's "On Fate"

Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2024 at 11:06 AM

This is a Yonge translation of Cicero's On Fate - a section that mentions Epicurus' views:

say, Scipio will die in such and such a manner ; and his death itself was not less inevitable than the circumstances which attended it. Nor was it more possible to alter from true to false, the statement of, "Scipio has been slain," than this, "Scipio will be slain." Nor, since this is the case, do I see any reason why Epicurus has such a horror of Fate or Destiny, and why he flies for assistance to his atoms, and leads them out of the way, and why he endeavours to establish two inexplicable principles at the same time : first, that anything is

produced without cause, from which it will follow that nothing can produce something ; an opinion adopted neither by Epicurus himself nor by any other natural philosopher : secondly, that when two atoms move in empty space, one proceeds in a right line, and the other in an oblique.

For Epicurus, granting as he does that every proposition is either true or false, ought not to have hesitated to admit that everything eventually takes place in consequence of Fate. For there are no natural causes flowing from the necessity of things which determine the truth of this proposition. Carneades came down into the Academy. This fact was not without its causes ; but we must distinguish between those antecedent causes which depend on chance, and those efficient causes which contain a physical energy and influence. Thus this proposition was always true and certain, "Epicurus will die at the age of seventy-two, in the Archonship of Pitharatus." And yet there were no fatal causes which determined this event : but since it took place we may be sure that it necessarily happened in the way it did. And those who affirm that things future are immutable, and that things true and certain cannot become false and uncertain, ought not to be regarded as the partisans of strict fatalism, since they are only explaining the meaning of words. But those philosophers who introduce a chain of eternal causes of absolute necessity, despoil the human soul of its free-will, and bind it hand and foot in the necessity of fate.

X. This is all that we need say concerning possibility. Let us pass on to other matters.

rather expose myself to criticism for this, than grant that fate governs all things. For this last opinion is entirely

untenable, while the former is merely doubtful. Therefore Chrysippus strains all his energies to prove that every proposition must be true or false. For as Epicurus fears that by conceding this point, he may be obliged to admit that everything happens through fate, since the truth or falsehood of any given proposition existing from all eternity, must be certain in one sense or other, and if certain, then necessary according to the necessity of fate; and so he thinks that necessity and fate are established: so Chrysippus, on the other hand, fears that, if he cannot establish his point that every proposition is either true or false, then it will be impossible to prove that everything is done in consequence of fate, and of the eternal causes of all future events.

Epicurus, however, thinks that the necessity of fate is avoided by his fortuitous concourse of atoms. Hence arises a third motion beside those of gravity and percussion—attraction and repulsion, by which atoms pass through minute spaces. Epicurus calls it *ἐλάχιστος* or infinitesimal. And he is compelled in fact, if not in express words, to confess that this is an effect without a cause. For an atom moves not by the impulse impressed on it by another atom. For how can one atom be impelled by another, if they are all, as Epicurus asserts, borne perpendicularly downwards in straight lines by the force of gravity? For it follows, that if none of these bodies is ever impelled by another, then no contact can exist between them. From all which it appears that even if an atom exists, and varies from its straight course, it varies without a cause. Epicurus adopted this idea because he was afraid that if he granted that atoms always move by a natural and necessary attraction, he should deprive man of his liberty. The soul experiences no motions but those it might receive from the irresistible impulse of atoms. And from this consideration, Democritus, the author of the Atomic Philosophy, preferred admitting the necessity of fate to depriving indivisible bodies of their natural motions.