

Epicurus On Causation

Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2024 at 11:13 AM

Only time at the moment to connect a couple of references that relate to Epicurus views on causation and what (if anything) is "causless," which relates to attacks that some make against Epicurus when they allege that the swerve, being "uncaused," is ruled out of court.

Below is a Ciceronian discussion of Epicurus' views. I would suggest at some point we compare this to the way Frances Wright discusses Epicurus' view (responds to this argument?) in A Few Days In Athens:

a cause when without it the effect could not have happened, but when by its specific action it necessarily produces the effect caused. Before the wound of the serpent who bit Philoctetes changed into an ulcer, what reason was there in the nature of things why the Greeks should leave this hero in the isle of Lemnos? Afterwards this cause existed, and in much closer connexion with the event—and the event itself declared and manifested the cause. Reason, therefore, points out the cause of the event. But from all eternity this proposition was true, "Philoctetes shall be left in an island," nor could it be altered into a false one. For two contrary propositions (when I say contrary, I mean such that one affirms a thing, and the other denies it) which oppose each other can never stand together, for, in spite of Epicurus, one must be true and one false. Thus this proposition, "Philoctetes shall be wounded," was true before all ages; and the contrary, "He shall not be wounded," was false; unless, indeed, we adopt the opinion of the Epicureans, who affirm that such propositions are neither true nor false, or, when they are ashamed of that,

utter that still more impudent assertion, that disjunctive propositions composed of two contradictions are true, though neither of their component parts is true. Oh, marvellous licentiousness and miserable ignorance of logic! If anything in speech is so indifferent as to appear neither true nor false, that is certainly not true. That which is not true must of necessity be false, and that which is not false must be true. We must, therefore, maintain that doctrine which Chrysippus has proved, namely, that every proposition is either true or false. Reason itself will oblige us to grant, that there are things which are true from all eternity, that these things are not bound to eternal causes of necessity, and that they are free from the compulsion of fate.

XVII. It appears, indeed, to me, since the ancient philoso-

examine the question concerning fate, and not rush with Epicurus to a fortuitous concourse of atoms to help us out of our difficulty. Every atom has a motion of its own, says he. In the first place, why is it so? It possesses a peculiar energy; that force, for example, of Democritus, which this philosopher terms an impulse, and which Epicurus calls gravity or weight. But you have not yet discovered that primitive power in nature from which your atoms derive their motion. Do they cast lots with one another which shall move this way and which that way? If they can thus move through small spaces, they may move through great ones, and the spaces of their movements may be multiplied to infinity. To make such assertions as these, is rather to beg the question than to discuss it. You have not yet revealed to us any extrinsic cause which impresses each atom with that impulse which gives it its proper direction. In the empty space which your atom occupies, I see nothing to prevent it from precipitating itself for ever in a perpendicular line; and in the atom itself I discover no quality which can counteract its specific gravity, or rescue it from falling. However, though Epicurus refuses to assign any cause for his atomic motion, he thinks he has started a very noble theory, when he has thrown out that sophism, which all men of sense despise and reject. Nor do I think it possible for any one to give greater support to the arguments of fate and necessity and universal compulsion, or more completely to deprive the soul of all freedom of volition, than Epicurus has done, when he confesses that he could never otherwise have resisted fate if he had not taken refuge in these imaginary declinations. For even though there were such things as atoms, which he can never prove to me, those declinations could never be explained. For if these atoms are moved and agitated by their specific gravity according to the necessity of nature, since it is the law of all heavy bodies to move and proceed till they meet some opposing obstacle, this also follows inevitably, that these atoms, some, if not all of them.