

Episode 227 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 02 - Velleius Begins His Attack On Traditional Views Of The Gods

Post by "Cassius" of May 18, 2024 at 2:51 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Cassius, I agree with most of DeWitt's thinking regarding the gods not being inherently immortal -

Let's grapple directly with the most infrequently-discussed of DeWitt's assertions: That any particular god has not by nature existed from eternity, and will not by nature remain immortal without attending to its own immortality.

In support of this beginning page 267 DeWitt cites:

1. The general reasoning that nothing but atoms are inherently immortally the same.
2. Gods are in the same order of beings as men and all other living things, all of which have a beginning and end;
3. Since there is nothing higher / supernatural to maintain them, they must maintain themselves;
4. Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile. wrote with texts of Epicurus before him, has this to say: "Freedom from pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blissful being, standing in no need of active concern:' 57 This manifestly implies that the [Epicurean gods](#) were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its perpetuation.
5. The incongruity between this selfish concern for their own bodily security and their indifference to the good of mankind was certain to elicit condemnation from believers in divine providence, and this has not escaped record. Thus the Christian Eusebius quotes his Atticus as saying: "According to Epicurus it's goodbye to providence, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods bring to bear all diligent care for the preservation of their own peculiar blessings." 58
6. DeWitt translates the initial section of the letter to Menoeceus differently (see the full version in his appendix to "St Paul and Epicurus" and says this: When once it has been discerned that the gods are under the necessity of preserving their own blessings, the next step is to learn that this activity is ascribed to them as a virtue. The recognition of this fact will serve to explain a rather cryptic statement from the pen of Epicurus himself. Writing of the "false suppositions" of the multitude, who thought of the gods, now as punishing the wicked, now as having venal relationships with them, he concluded as follows: "for [the gods], being exclusively devoted to their own peculiar virtues are partial to those like

themselves, deeming all that is not such as alien:' 59 The first half of this statement has been variously interpreted, but the recognition of our puzzling doctrine will make the meaning intelligible. Just as it is the virtue of men to achieve their own happiness, so it is the virtue of the gods to preserve their own blissfulness. This task so completely engages their attention that no participation in human affairs is possible.

What do you guys think of those, especially the reference to the letter to Menoeceus? Obviously here DeWitt is trying to make things more clear by adding section titles, and in addition he is asserting by adding in a reference in brackets that the latter part is an independent reference to the gods and not a continuation of what was being asserted previously as to incorrect ideas about the gods. Is this another area where is asserting that the texts were emended? I did not include this reference in the podcast because I did not get a chance to check it beforehand.

If anyone has time I would appreciate comments on all three: this, the Eusebius reference, and the Plutarch reference. They aren't really needed to support the logical argument that Epicurean any single Epicurean god has not and will not exist "from everlasting to everlasting," but if any or all of them are persuasive then it's obvious why DeWitt cited them.

THE GODS

“Both practice and study the precepts which I continuously urged upon you, discerning these to be the A B C’s of the good life. First of all, believing the divine being to be blessed and incorruptible, just as the universal idea of it is outlined in our minds, associate nothing with it that is incompatible with incorruption or alien to blessedness. And cultivate every thought concerning it that can preserve its blessedness along with incorruption. Because there are gods, for the knowledge of them is plain to see. They are not, however, such as many suppose them to be, for people do not keep their accounts of them consistent with their beliefs. And it is not the man who would abolish the gods of the multitude who is impious but the man who associates the beliefs of the multitude with the gods; for the pronouncements of the multitude concerning the gods are not innate ideas but false assumptions. According to their stories the greatest injuries and indignities are said to be inflicted upon evil men, and also benefits.

THE GODS INDIFFERENT TO WICKEDNESS

“[These stories are false, because the gods], being exclusively devoted to virtues that become themselves, feel an affinity for those like themselves and regard all that is not of this kind as alien.

Let me be sure to call this post to the attention not only of Don and Bryan but also @Twentier as I think this (if DeWitt can be supported) is a particularly important aspect of Epicurean theology. In emulating the gods, we would not only be emulating a *result*, but one aspect of that role model that we would be emulating comes in realizing that the gods, just like us, must act to maintain their blessedness. This would help strengthen the usefulness of the suggestion that the gods are objects of emulation -- Epicurus would be suggesting that we not only emulate them in result, but that we are emulation the act of working to sustain blessedness. I agree with DeWitt's suggestion that this would be a logical extension of Epicurus' theories about the gods. An example of that would be that when Torquatus describes to Cicero the characteristics of the best life, those are characteristics which must be maintained, whether by gods or by men.

Quote

[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the

enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance. [41] When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better?