

Episode 234 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 09 - Dealing With Marcus Aurelius And The Canonical Basis For the Epicurean View Of Divinity

Post by "Cassius" of June 23, 2024 at 1:02 PM

I agree with Don's post and analogize to pattern recognition, and also suggest that we can go further based on other citations.

In addition to the Centaur analogy, but I am convinced we also have to take into account what Lucretius said in Book 5 as to why the gods could not have created the universe:

Quote

[181] Further, how was there first implanted in the gods a pattern for the begetting of things, yea, and the concept of man, so that they might know and see in their mind what they wished to do, or in what way was the power of the first-beginnings ever learnt, or what they could do when they shifted their order one with the other, if nature did not herself give a model of creation? For so many first-beginnings of things in many ways, driven on by blows from time everlasting until now, and moved by their own weight, have been wont to be borne on, and to unite in every way, and essay everything that they might create, meeting one with another, that it is no wonder if they have fallen also into such arrangements, and have passed into such movements, as those whereby this present sum of things is carried on, ever and again replenished.

Seems to me that Lucretius is arguing that the gods could not have created the universe because (if they pre-existed the universe) then they would never have been exposed to any "pattern" that gave them the idea of a universe.

And that sounds like a very good argument to me that remains valid today.

Carrying the point forward, where do these "patterns" come from? It isn't sufficient to say that they are "etched" into us at birth, or for us to just say that this is precursor to genetic encoding and that that answers our concerns. How did that "etching" come about? Did the gods etch us, as the Stoics would probably argue? Or did it just "randomly" happen, which I think is equally untenable?

It looks to me like Epicurus would have said that in an eternal universe, nothing can be said to come absolutely "first." Instead, what has always eternally been happening is the flow of atoms through void.

From that perspective the sequence would be more like:

Atoms have always flowed through void naturally, combining into bodies, from which emergent properties and qualities have arisen. There was never a "first body."

As bodies grow they give off from their surfaces flows of atoms, which flows are in the shape of their surfaces. These flows of atoms in the shape of their surfaces are images.

The images are constantly flowing through the universe, some images combining with each other in ways that do not reflect their true origins (such as images of centaurs). Other images largely or fully retain fidelity to their original source, and thereby conveying to us sensations of concrete objects which we can be confident have independent existence external to us.

The atoms have always combined into bodies, and so this flow of images has also always existed. Simultaneously, along with these filmy flows, more solid bodies have combined into living beings. These living beings have thus always been exposed to the flows of images. Over time, individual species of living beings develop, as a result of their continued impact with flows of atoms, an ability to think, and over time the repeated exposure to light and dark and eventually trees and stars become exposure to trees and universes and more abstract relationships, one of which abstract relationships becomes identified as "divinity."

So to say simply that "prolepsis is the faculty that allows us to recognize the shapes or forms of the images that strike us" (which is pretty close to saying that it is "pattern recognition") is helpful. But the rest of the story seems to me how they are tied to the flow of images, which arise from the atoms themselves turning into bodies and in turn giving off images, thus eliminating any concern about divine origin of the whole process from start to finish. The "flow of images" would explain both the origin of the proleptic faculty and how it sharpens over time.

And it seems to me that "flows of images" remains a valid way to look at the situation, even though we don't think exactly in those terms today. We don't talk about "atoms" in quite the same way either, but the word continues to be useful, and the word "images" can be useful too if we are careful about what it means.