

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 30, 2024 at 6:57 PM

For those who are reading along here and don't have ready access to DeWitt's text, here is how he introduces the subject in his Chapter 8. i don't agree that Lucretius has no help to offer, but much of the rest seems useful:

Quote

The innate capacity to distinguish colors is an anticipation of experience no less than the innate capacity to distinguish between justice and injustice. The difference is that the color-sense is part of the individual's preconditioning for life in his physical environment and emerges in early childhood, while the sense of justice is part of the preconditioning for life in the social environment and emerges later, developing in pace with experience, instruction, and reflection. How the Anticipation functions as a criterion may be seen in the case of the gods: it is impossible to think of them as in need of anything, for example, because according to the idea universal among men their happiness is perfect.

Unfortunately the traditional accounts of the Anticipations have gone far astray. Three excellent reasons can be cited for these aberrations: first, in the graded textbooks of Epicurus the topic was reserved for advanced students and entirely omitted from both the Little and the Big Epitome; consequently Lucretius has no help to offer; second, already in antiquity the concepts of such abstract things as justice had become confused with the general concepts of such concrete things as horses and oxen; third, modern scholars have become victims of the confusion of the ancients and on their own account have committed the error of merging the Anticipations with the Sensations.

It is highly probable that Epicurus allowed even to certain animals, especially elephants, the possession of these embryonic anticipations of social virtues. The tendency of the day was to have recourse to the study of irrational creatures in order to learn the teachings of Nature. It should be recalled too that not only was Epicurus very eager to have information of Pyrrho, who had been in India, but also that the writings of Alexander's associates, Aristobulus, Nearchus, and Onesicritus concerning India were available in his youth, and the same is true of the description of India by Megasthenes of the time of Seleucus. The elder Pliny, who quotes three of the above writers,

ascribed to elephants "a sort of divination of justice,"³¹ an excellent equivalent of the Epicurean Anticipation. Pliny also ascribes to elephants the possession of pride, honesty, prudence, equity, and even religion.³² All of these fall squarely into the category of abstract notions, where the Anticipations belong.

The term *prolepsis* was correctly rendered by Cicero as *anticipatio* or *praenotio*³³ and less precisely, though intelligently, by the elder Pliny as *divinatio*. It is wrongly rendered as "concept" by those who confuse the general concept of such a thing as an ox with the abstract idea of justice. One scholar prefers "preconception," but perhaps "preconcept" would be preferable. It seems most advantageous, however, to adhere to "Anticipation" because this is the meaning of the Greek word *prolepsis*.

Two explicit accounts of the term have fortunately survived from antiquity, the first from Cicero and the second from Diogenes Laertius. Unfortunately there is virtual unanimity among modern scholars that the authority of Cicero is to be rejected and that of Laertius accepted. This would mean that the word of a stodgy compiler weighs more with us than that of the gifted Cicero. It means also that we, who possess about seventy pages of the text of Epicurus, are in a better position to form a judgment than Cicero himself, who knew all the outstanding Epicureans of his time, whether Greek or Roman, and enjoyed access to all the original texts.