

Episode 237 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 12 - Isonomia And The Implications of Infinity

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Quote from Dewitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy"

ISONOMY AND THE GODS

In spite of a supercilious opinion to the contrary, Epicurus was not a muddled thinker but a very systematic one. He enunciated his Twelve Elementary Principles and adhered to them closely. Two of these, the fifth and sixth, asserted the infinity of the universe in respect of matter and space. To this idea of infinity he ascribed fundamental importance. He exhorted the young Pythocles to study it as one of those master principles which would render easy the recognition of causation in details.⁶⁸ Cicero must have been recalling some similar exhortation when he wrote: "But of the very greatest importance is the significance of infinity and in the highest degree deserving of intense and diligent contemplation."⁶⁹ He was quoting Epicurus.

It was from this principle that Epicurus deduced his chief theoretical confirmation of belief in the existence of gods. It was from this that he arrived at knowledge of their number and by secondary deduction at knowledge of their abode. He so interpreted the significance of infinity as to extend it from matter and space to the sphere of values, that is, to perfection and imperfection. In brief, if the universe were thought to be imperfect throughout its infinite extent, it could no longer be called infinite. This necessity of thought impelled him to promulgate a subsidiary principle, which he called *isonomia*, a sort of cosmic justice, according to which the imperfection in particular parts of the universe is offset by the perfection of the whole. Cicero rendered it *aequabilis tributio*, "equitable apportionment."⁷⁰ The mistake of rendering it as "equilibrium" must be avoided.

The term *isonomia* itself, which may be anglicized as isonomy, deserves a note. That it is lacking in extant Epicurean texts, all of them elementary, and is transmitted only by Cicero is evidence of its belonging to higher doctrine and advanced studies. Epicurus switched its meaning slightly, as he did that of the word *prolepsis*. To the Greeks it signified equality of all before the law, a boast of Athenians in particular. It was a mate to *eunomia*, government by law, as opposed to barbaric despotism, a boast of Greeks in general. That Epicurus thought to make capital of this happy connotation may be considered certain. He was vindicating for Nature a sort of justice, the bad being overbalanced by the good. It is also possible that he was remotely influenced by the teachings of Zoroaster, well known in his day through the conquests of Alexander,

according to whom good and evil, as represented by Ormazd and Ahriman, battled for the upper hand in mundane affairs.

Whatever may be the facts concerning this influence, Epicurus discovered a reasonable way of allowing for the triumph of good in the universe, which seemed impossible under atomic materialism. Thus in his system of thought isonomy plays a part comparable to that of teleology with Plato and Aristotle. Teleology was inferred from the evidences of design, and design presumes agencies of benevolence, whether natural or divine. Epicurus was bound to reject design because the world seemed filled with imperfections, which he listed, but by extending the doctrine of infinity to apply to values he was able, however curiously, to discover room for perfection along with imperfection.

That he employed isonomy as theoretical proof of the existence of gods is well documented. For example, Lactantius, who may have been an Epicurean before his conversion to Christianity, quotes Epicurus as arguing "that the divine exists because there is bound to be something surpassing, superlative and blessed."⁷¹ The necessity here appealed to is a necessity of thought, which becomes a necessity of existence. The existence of the imperfect in an infinite universe demands belief in the existence of the perfect. Cicero employs very similar language: "It is his doctrine that there are gods, because there is bound to be some surpassing being than which nothing is better."⁷² Like the statement of Lactantius, this recognizes a necessity of existence arising from a necessity of thought; the order of Nature cannot be imperfect throughout its whole extent; it is bound to culminate in something superior, that is, in gods.

It is possible to attain more precision in the exposition. Cicero, though brutally brief, exhibits some precision of statement. The infinity of the universe, as usual, serves as a major premise. This being assumed, Cicero declares: "The nature of the universe must be such that all similars correspond to all similars."⁷³ One class of similars is obviously taken to be human beings, all belonging to the same grade of existence in the order of Nature. As Philodemus expresses it in a book about logic, entitled *On Evidences*, "It is impossible to think of Epicurus as man and Metrodorus as non-man."⁷⁴ Another class of similars is the gods. This being understood, the truth of Cicero's next statement follows logically: "If it be granted that the number of mortals is such and such, the number of immortals is not less."⁷⁵ This reasoning calls for no exegesis, but two points are worthy of mention: first, Cicero is not precise in calling the gods immortals; according to strict doctrine they are not deathless, only incorruptible of body; the second point is that Epicurus is more polytheistic in belief than his own countrymen.

The next item, however, calls for close scrutiny. Just as human beings constitute one set of similars and the gods another, so the forces that preserve constitute one set and the forces that destroy constitute another.

At this point a sign of warning is to be raised. There is also another pair of forces that are opposed to each other, those that create and those that destroy.⁷⁶ The difference is that the latter operate in each of the innumerable worlds, while the former hold sway in the universe at large. For example, in a world such as our own, which is one of many, the forces of creation have the upper hand during its youthful vigor. At long last, however, the forces of destruction gradually gain the superiority and eventually the world is dissolved into its elements.⁷⁷

In the universe at large, on the contrary, the situation is different and the forces opposed to each other are not those that destroy and those that create but those that destroy and those that preserve. Moreover, a new aspect of infinity is invoked, the infinity of time. The universe is eternal and unchanging. Matter can neither be created nor destroyed. The sum of things is always the same, as Lucretius says. This truth is contained in the first two of the Twelve Elementary Principles. In combination they are made to read: "The universe has always been the same as it now is and always will be the same."⁷⁸ This can be true only on the principle that the forces that preserve are at all times superior to the forces that destroy.

It follows that Cicero was writing strictly by the book when he made his spokesman draw the following conclusion from the doctrine of isonomy: "And if the forces that destroy are innumerable, the forces that preserve must by the same token be infinite."⁷⁹ This doctrine, it is essential to repeat, holds only for the universe at large. It is not applicable to the individual world and it does not mean that the prevalence of elephants in India is balanced by the prevalence of wolves in Russia. Isonomy does not mean "equal distribution" but "equitable apportionment." It does not denote balance or equilibrium. No two sets of similar forces are in balance; in the individual world the forces of destruction always prevail at last, and in the universe at large the forces of preservation prevail at all times.

By this time three aspects of the principles of isonomy have been brought forward: first, that in an infinite universe perfection is bound to exist as well as imperfection; that is, "that there must be some surpassing being, than which nothing is better"; second, that the number of these beings, the gods, cannot be less than the number of mortals; and third, that in the universe at large the forces of preservation always prevail over the forces of destruction.

All three of these are direct inferences from the infinity and eternity of the universe. There remains to be drawn an indirect inference of primary importance. Since in the individual worlds the forces of destruction always prevail in the end, it follows that the incorruptible gods can have their dwelling place only outside of the individual worlds, that is, in the free spaces between the worlds, the so-called *intermundia*, where the forces of preservation are always superior. There is more to be said on this topic in the section that follows.

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