

Episode 238 - Cicero's OTNOTG 13 - Velleius Erupts Against Stoic Fate and Supernatural God-Making

Post by “Cassius” of July 23, 2024 at 11:53 AM

This episode (which should be released later today or tomorrow, contains a very memorable passage which is worth noting as being among the most powerful as any of the existing Epicurean texts. In the episode, I noted that it has a parallel in Lucretius, especially as to the part about how those who resort to supernatural gods to explain nature end up harnessing us to oppressive gods.

Here's the statement by Velleius which is so strong, and I will look for parallels in Lucretius because I think the similarity of argument is well worth noticing:

Quote

The philosopher from whom we received all our knowledge has taught us that the world was made by nature; that there was no occasion for a workhouse to frame it in; and that, though you deny the possibility of such a work without divine skill, it is so easy to her, that she has made, does make, and will make innumerable worlds. But, because you do not conceive that nature is able to produce such effects without some rational aid, you are forced, like the tragic poets, when you cannot wind up your argument in any other way, to have recourse to a Deity, whose assistance you would not seek, if you could view that vast and unbounded magnitude of regions in all parts; where the mind, extending and spreading itself, travels so far and wide that it can find no end, no extremity to stop at. In this immensity of breadth, length, and height, a most boundless company of innumerable atoms are fluttering about, which, notwithstanding the interposition of a void space, meet and cohere, and continue clinging to one another; and by this union these modifications and forms of things arise, which, in your opinions, could not possibly be made without the help of bellows and anvils. Thus you have imposed on us an eternal master, whom we must dread day and night. For who can be free from fear of a Deity who foresees, regards, and takes notice of everything; one who thinks all things his own; a curious, ever-busy God?

Hence first arose your Εἰμαρμένη, as you call it, your fatal necessity; so that, whatever happens, you affirm that it flows from an eternal chain and continuance of causes. Of what value is this philosophy, which, like old women and illiterate men, attributes everything to fate? Then follows your μαντικὴ, in Latin called divinatio, divination; which, if we would listen to you, would plunge us into such superstition that we should fall down and worship your inspectors into sacrifices, your augurs, your soothsayers,

your prophets, and your fortune-tellers.

Epicurus having freed us from these terrors and restored us to liberty, we have no dread of those beings whom we have reason to think entirely free from all trouble themselves, and who do not impose any on others. We pay our adoration, indeed, with piety and reverence to that essence which is above all excellence and perfection.

To me, this argument is as well stated as several of Torquatus' summations in *On Ends*, and it's so well stated that (as I said in the podcast) I don't think Cicero would have come up with this phrasing himself. It seems clear to me that powerful and eloquent passages like attacking standard religious and moral views this must have been lifted almost verbatim directly from authentic Epicurean texts.

And I contrast that specifically with much of the moralizing material from Seneca, who seems to rewrite the thrust of Epicurus' argument to suit Seneca's own Stoic viewpoint. There's no way in my mind that a Stoic or Academic Skeptic like Cicero would have created such compelling and strong Epicurean anti-religious argument on his own, and Cicero makes no effort to reconcile this wording with Stoicism or Skepticism.

Now I'll look for one or more parallel passages in Lucretius.