

Episode 246 - Cicero's OTNOTG 21 - Examining Epicurean Evidence-Based Reasoning

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2024 at 8:27 PM

It will take a couple of days to get this edition posted, but in the meantime I want to point out that this passage I'm about to quote seems to me to be a great way to introduce the issues that Philodemus addresses in "On Methods of Inference."

If we strip away the context of discussing gods, and focus on the part that begins with "What!" I think we'll see that this is an argument that strikes much more deeply at Epicurean philosophy than do many others. It goes to the whole issue of Epicurean reliance on the senses and their relationship to reason and how we draw conclusions about things that are not directly seeable or touchable by us.

This gives us a list of specific examples of arguments against Epicurus to observe and confront:

1 - You've never seen anything here on earth like the moon, the stars, or the planets, have you? How can an Epicurean form ANY opinions about something that they've never seen before up close? You Epicureans should be denying that the moon and stars and planets exist at all, because you've never seen any such thing up close to which to compare it!

2 - You've never seen a god here on earth either! You Epicureans should be denying that gods exist, because under your philosophy you can validate nothing that cannot be validated by the sense!

3 - If your Epicurean doctrine were to prevail, we'd have to throw out everything that history or reason discovers, because if it hasn't been previously observed by the senses, then you Epicureans reject that it is even possible!

4 - Yours is such a narrow way of thinking! If you had been born and raised in an inland nation, and neither you nor your friends had ever seen an ocean, you would deny that oceans are possible!

5 - If you had lived in a land which had only rabbits and foxes, you would think that someone who asserted that lions and panthers or elephants exist would be playing you for a fool!

Ok that's this part of Cotta's argument, and it demands a response.

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the Epicureans would not have admitted even a grain of truth in that charge, but in "On the Nature of The Gods" Cicero does not allow Velleius to reply.

Our job is to construct the argument that the ancient Epicureans used against these arguments. Probably Philodemus' "On Methods of Inference / On Signs" is the best place to start, but I bet there are other sources we can pull together as well.

We offer some possible responses in the podcast, but it deserves much longer treatment. Yes it applies to the gods, but it's an argument that applies to atoms and void and much of the rest of Epicurean physics. It's even at the root of the whole question of how we can be confident that the universe operates naturally and isn't the plaything of arbitrary gods.

Quote

But since you dare not (for I am now addressing my discourse to Epicurus himself) absolutely deny the existence of the Gods, what hinders you from ascribing a divine nature to the sun, the world, or some eternal mind?

I never, says he, saw wisdom and a rational soul in any but a human form.

What! Did you ever observe anything like the sun, the moon, or the five moving planets? The sun, terminating his course in two extreme parts of one circle, finishes his annual revolutions. The moon, receiving her light from the sun, completes the same course in the space of a month. The five planets in the same circle, some nearer, others more remote from the earth, begin the same courses together, and finish them in different spaces of time. Did you ever observe anything like this, Epicurus? So that, according to you, there can be neither sun, moon, nor stars, because nothing can exist but what we have touched or seen.

What! have you ever seen the Deity himself? Why else do you believe there is any? If this doctrine prevails, we must reject all that history relates or reason discovers; and the people who inhabit inland countries must not believe there is such a thing as the sea. This is so narrow a way of thinking that if you had been born in Seriphus, and never had been from out of that island, where you had frequently been in the habit of seeing little hares and foxes, you would not, therefore, believe that there are such beasts as lions and panthers; and if any one should describe an elephant to you, you would think that he designed to laugh at you.