

Episode 251 - Cicero's OTNOTG 26 - How Niagara Falls Helps Us Understand the Flux, the Heap, and the Epicurean Gods

Post by "Cassius" of October 18, 2024 at 9:21 AM

[Quote from Cicero's Cotta speaking to Velleius](#)

To elude this, you have recourse to equilibration (for so, with your leave, I will call your ἰσονομία), and say that as there is a sort of nature mortal, so there must also be a sort which is immortal. By the same rule, as there are men mortal, there are men immortal; and as some arise from the earth, some must arise from the water also; and as there are causes which destroy, there must likewise be causes which preserve. Be it as you say;

This would appear to refer to isonomia, and there is little reason to doubt that Cotta/Cicero is applying it in a way that Velleius/Epicurus would not approve. I suspect the intentional distortion is that of failing to distinguish the *possible* from the *impossible*.

It seems likely to me that this is referring to an aspect of infinity. In an infinite universe things that are possible are going to recur an infinite number of times. The "infinite number of times" would account for the "equal" or "equitable" number. Given that presumption, you can deduce that things that *can* happen *will* happen an infinite numbers of times. Infinite = infinite so the number of occurrences is the same.

So I would presume that it's the "things that are possible" that Cotta/Cicero is evading. I'd say that's especially true when he says "by the same rule" and goes on to list scenarios that we see on earth do not occur at all. His references, in fact, (living beings springing from the air or sea) are similar to what Lucretius talks about do *not* happen due to the regular process of nature as governed by the atoms.

So I think we can dismiss earthlings being born in the earth and water as ruled out by uniform observation of earth-bound physics. But what might we infer about what Epicurus could have thought about equitable distribution of living things from mortal to deathless?

My first thought would be that humans (intelligent living things) have the ability to control their environments so as to extend their lives. The Greeks were certainly aware of medical treatments, and it was imaginable then, and readily predictable today, that medical technology will allow more and more transplants and replacements of body parts. It is easily conceivable that even brain transplants or rejuvenations, which are as yet impossible under current technology, will be attainable in the future.

As for survival past the destruction of Earth or any particular "world" due to the natural deterioration of all bodies over time that cannot fix themselves, there's no reason to think that Epicurus was dogmatic that it would be "impossible" for living beings to live in and travel through "outer space." For example, Lucian directly wrote about travel to the moon in "The True Story," and there's no reason to think that this obvious proposition was imaginable to many others. So as we are even about to do now in regard to travel to Mars, and then further on later outside the solar system, humanity will soon become "multi-planetary" to be followed by "interstellar" and then one day beyond our galaxy. Humanity will one day (if we stay on the current path) be able to survive any local supernovas or whatever, and as a whole will achieve a sort of "species immortality" or "species deathless." One would expect that any technological civilization that can travel interstellar will also be able to master the deterioration of the human body.

I don't think any of that would have been beyond the ancient Epicureans to imagine, and therefore since they would deem such a thing to be "possible" within the laws of physics, they would have been able to imagine living beings which can continuously replace the atomic structure of their bodies, which is essentially what we have Velleius relaying and Cicero/Cotta ridiculing. That would allow for a "distribution" of life (at each stage, in infinite numbers) all the way from quickly-expiring primitive organisms to intelligent beings who are in fact essentially "deathless." The only requirement of deathlessness is totally natural - such a being has to be able to develop the technology to replace or rejuvenate their bodies so as to make death a matter of choice rather than necessity.

So something along these lines is what I would speculate the Epicureans were theorizing:

The impossible (such as anything *supernatural*) will not and can never occur. On the other hand, because the universe as a whole is infinite in space and eternal in time, all things that are possible will occur an equal (infinite) number of times. Intelligent living beings which develop the ability to control their experience have the possibility of extending their lives indefinitely. Species or individuals which do so are ultimately deathless, and there are the same number of them as there are being that are mortal.

Everything in this set of possibilities would be purely natural and involve nothing supernatural whatsoever.