

Episode 253 - How The "Riddle Of Epicurus" Fits Into the Epicurean View of The Gods - Cicero's OTNOTG 28

Post by "Cassius" of October 30, 2024 at 2:05 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I wanted to mention that I've recently come across a few scholars who suggested that this trilemma actually comes from a Skeptic (perhaps Carneades the Academic), and not Epicurus (Larrimore, Mark Joseph. *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Blackwell, 2001). Based on *De Ira Dei* David Hume attributes this argument to Epicurus: "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* 1779). While it comports with Epicurean theology, it does not correspond with any extant writings of Epicurus nor another Epicurean. I also note that Lactantius documented this material approximately 600 years after Epicurus was teaching in Athens. < <https://twentiers.com/anger-of-god>>

Excellent post Nate. Now that I am fresh from reading Hume's Dialogue in which it appears, I tend to agree that it was a skeptic who framed the argument this way. As presented, it is focused on "the problem of evil" and tightly interwoven with the position that it is illogical to take the Stoic position that "god" is benevolent. The real root of it seems to be as part of the larger argument that there is so much pain and suffering in the world that a "good" god is impossible. While that argument helps against "design," and definitely has aspects that rings of the Epicurean argument that the world has so many defects that it can't have been designed by a benevolent god, it rings to me of having a much more "skeptical" flavor than Epicurus would have used.

As we know Epicurus focuses on stating the positive things that we *should* believe about gods - that they are living beings blessed and imperishable. While the two perspectives can be made to fit together, to me the Hume/Lactantius version rings with a real emphasis on suffering that does not strike me as the way Epicurus would have presented anything.

When Epicurus presents suffering it's usually (always?) in the context of how suffering can be avoided. After all pain is generally manageable if long and short if intense. Seems to me Epicurus' focuses on the remedy to pain and suffering and it would be uncharacteristic of him to use an argument that takes as its premise an emphatic endorsement that suffering inevitably dominates the human condition.