

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

Post by "Joshua" of November 3, 2024 at 1:06 AM

This seems to be the relevant passage from [Lactantius](#):

## Quote

You see, therefore, that we have greater need of wisdom on account of evils; and unless these things had been proposed to us, we should not be a rational animal. But if this account is true, which the Stoics were in no manner able to see, that argument also of Epicurus is done away. God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them? I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at; but having examined the matter, we easily do away with this formidable argument. For God is able to do whatever He wishes, and there is no weakness or envy in God. He is able, therefore, to take away evils; but He does not wish to do so, and yet He is not on that account envious. For on this account He does not take them away, because He at the same time gives wisdom, as I have shown; and there is more of goodness and pleasure in wisdom than of annoyance in evils. For wisdom causes us even to know God, and by that knowledge to attain to immortality, which is the chief good. Therefore, unless we first know evil, we shall be unable to know good. But Epicurus did not see this, nor did any other, that if evils are taken away, wisdom is in like manner taken away; and that no traces of virtue remain in man, the nature of which consists in enduring and overcoming the bitterness of evils. And thus, for the sake of a slight gain in the taking away of evils, we should be deprived of a good, which is very great, and true, and peculiar to us. It is plain, therefore, that all things are proposed for the sake of man, as well evils as also goods.

There are a number of quotations in Lactantius that are consistent with the surviving works of Epicurus and Lucretius;

## Quote

Finally, **Lucretius**, as though forgetful of atoms, which he was maintaining, in order that he might refute those who say that all things are produced from nothing, employed these arguments, which might have weighed against himself. For he thus spoke:—

*"If things came from nothing, any kind might be born of anything; nothing would require seed."*

Likewise afterwards:—

*"We must admit, therefore, that nothing can come from nothing, since things require seed before they can severally be born, and be brought out into the buxom fields of air."*

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That which follows is concerning the school of **Epicurus**; that as there is no anger in God, so indeed there is no kindness. For when Epicurus thought that it was inconsistent with God to injure and to inflict harm, which for the most part arises from the affection of anger, he took away from Him beneficence also, since he saw that it followed that if God has anger, He must also have kindness. Therefore, lest he should concede to Him a vice, he deprived Him also of virtue. From this, he says, He is happy and uncorrupted, because He cares about nothing, and neither takes trouble Himself nor occasions it to another.

- This is a very loose paraphrase of the first Principal Doctrine; 1. *"A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness."*
  - Note: It may be disputed whether PD1 actually suggests that the gods are without kindness. A general sense of goodwill might not be inconsistent with the nature of the gods, but granting favors or answering prayers would certainly be inconsistent with Epicurus' idea of a god.

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But religion is overthrown if we believe **Epicurus** speaking thus:—

*"For the nature of gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality together with supreme repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since, exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting anything of us, it is neither gained by favours nor moved by anger."*

- We know this quote not from Epicurus but from **Lucretius**, I.44-49 and II.646-651

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Afterwards **Epicurus** said that there was indeed a God, because it was necessary that there should be in the world some being of surpassing excellence, distinction, and blessedness; yet that there was no providence, and thus that the world itself was ordered by no plan, nor art, nor workmanship, but that the universe was made up of certain minute and indivisible seeds.

- High level summary citing isonomia and atomism. This passage in Lucretius comes close to covering all the main points;

*Nothing from nothing ever yet was born.  
Fear holds dominion over mortality  
Only because, seeing in land and sky  
So much the cause whereof no wise they know,  
Men think Divinities are working there.  
Meantime, when once we know from nothing still  
Nothing can be create, we shall divine  
More clearly what we seek: those elements  
From which alone all things created are,  
And how accomplished by no tool of Gods.*

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But **Epicurus** opposes us, and says: "If there is in God the affection of joy leading Him to favour, and of hatred influencing Him to anger, He must of necessity have both fear, and inclination, and desire, and the other affections which belong to human weakness."

- Lactantius presents this as a direct quotation, but I am not familiar with it. Perhaps it comes from a lost work. Again from **Lucretius** we have a thematically similar passage;

*O what emoluments could it confer  
Upon Immortals and upon the Blessed  
That they should take a step to manage aught  
For sake of us? Or what new factor could,  
After so long a time, inveigle them—  
The hitherto reposeful—to desire  
To change their former life? For rather he  
Whom old things chafe seems likely to rejoice  
At new; but one that in fore-passed time  
Hath chanced upon no ill, through goodly years,  
O what could ever enkindle in such an one  
Passion for strange experiment?*

Display More

I'm inclined to doubt that it was Epicurus who composed the trilemma that bears his name. For one, the [Epicurean gods](#) themselves take no pains to prevent evil in our world; they would themselves fall on the horns of the trilemma as either "feeble" or "envious" or at best totally indifferent. Indeed, a god who was willing to prevent evil would not be untroubled, and so would not, according to Epicurus, be a god.

That being said, there was an instance above of Lactantius quoting Lucretius but putting his words into the mouth of Epicurus. Either Lucretius directly quoted Epicurus in Book 1, lines 44-49 (and in book 2), or Lactantius was in error.

So it strikes me as possible that Lactantius could be responding to the work of a later unknown Epicurean who lived during the Christian era and argued against it, but quoted that later Epicurean as if it were Epicurus himself.

Another possibility is that the trilemma evolved out of prolonged strife between Christians and pagans and that it was assigned to Epicurus because of his reputation for atheism. In which case the argument is neither Epicurean nor Skeptical, neither Cynical nor Stoic nor Academic, but simply and broadly pagan.