

Episode 257 - There Is No Necessity To Live Under Necessity - Part 1

Post by “Cassius” of December 2, 2024 at 9:01 AM

Much of our podcast discussion of Epicurus' opposition to both Necessity and Skepticism is going to turn on Dr. Sedley's article "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism."

I'd like to note here that one insight that I think we're going to take away from that article is that Dr. Sedley believes (with good reason I think) that Epicurus' primary grounds for objecting to determinism was not "the swerve," which is not mentioned in the letter to Menoecus.

The primary and very interesting basis that I think we'll find has lots of applications is that Epicurus was objecting to reasoning by infinite regression. This is the basis for

VS40. The man who says that all things come to pass by necessity cannot criticize one who denies that all things come to pass by necessity: for he admits that this too happens of necessity.

... and it's implicit also in VS09. Necessity is an evil, but [there is no necessity to live under the control of necessity](#).

As Dr. Sedley it's also the basis for the defense of the senses as in Book 4 of Lucretius and in Digenes of Oinoanda Fragment 5:

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find? Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

We need to discuss the implications of the infinite regression objection, but I think one of the primary take-aways is that the argument amounts to pointing out that an infinite regression

proves nothing. If it proves nothing, what then are we left with? We are left with what we can observe through the senses, the feelings, and the anticipations.

We perceive through the canonical faculties that we *can* know some things, and that we *can* make some decisions that affect the future on our own. Since nothing can be more reliable than these faculties (they are the test of truth of everything) then neither arguments by infinite regression nor on any other basis which cannot be validated through them should be accepted as persuasive.

Sedley seems to me to be saying that this kind of logical argument is the real basis for Epicurus' reasoning on the critical issues of skepticism and determinism, and i think he's right. As for the swerve, it makes sense, but as Lucretius himself says, it is impossible for us to observe the swerve in action, and as Sedley says, the swerve is not really logically needed to explain how the atoms first came together to create worlds - and thus it is not included in the letter to Herodotus.

(This is not to say that the swerve isn't significant at all, but does indicate that we should not place excessive reliance on it in basic discussion, especially since Epicurus didn't mention it to either Herodotus or Pythocles.)