

Episode 273 - TD03 - Is The Soul Immortal And Death Actually A Good/

Post by "Cassius" of March 23, 2025 at 8:26 PM

I'll post more on this as I continue to edit today's episode, but I want to bring out something that anyone who is following along can help us consider on a point that relates both to the existence of "gods" and to the existence of "souls."

Cicero's first arguments to the student that death is not an evil because we are not there mirrors pretty closely Epicurus' argument, but Cicero does not cite Epicurus as his authority for the argument.

Today, especially as we get into section XIII of part one, we're going to see Cicero make an argument that we should believe that the soul can survive the death of the body because that's what most all the great men of the past have thought. As he gets into this in Section XIII, he's going to include some material that arguably is very close to Velleius' argument based on prolepsis for the existence of gods as beings blessed and imperishable.

Quote

Examine the sepulchres of those which are shown in Greece; recollect, for you have been initiated, what lessons are taught in the mysteries; then will you perceive how extensive this doctrine is. But they who were not acquainted with natural philosophy, (for it did not begin to be in vogue till many years later,) had no higher belief than what natural reason could give them; they were not acquainted with the principles and causes of things; they were often induced by certain visions, and those generally in the night, to think that those men, who had departed from this life, were still alive. And this may further be brought as an irrefragable argument for us to believe that there are gods,—that there never was any nation so barbarous, nor any people in the world so savage, as to be without some notion of gods: many have wrong notions of the gods, for that is the nature and ordinary consequence of bad customs, yet all allow that there is a certain divine nature and energy. Nor does this proceed from the conversation of men, or the agreement of philosophers; it is not an opinion established by institutions or by laws; but, no doubt, in every case the consent of all nations is to be looked on as a law of nature. Who is there, then, that does not lament the loss of his friends, principally from imagining them deprived of the conveniences of life? Take away this opinion, and you remove with it all grief; for no one is afflicted merely on account of a loss sustained by himself. Perhaps we may be sorry, and grieve a little; but that bitter lamentation, and those mournful tears, have their origin in our apprehensions that he whom we loved is deprived of all the advantages of life, and is sensible of his loss. And

we are led to this opinion by nature, without any arguments or any instruction.

Again he does not attribute this argument to Epicurus either, but if you compare the text in Book one of on the nature of the gods, around section XVII, with the argument here in XIII of TD. there are some pretty striking parallels.

The main reason I point this out is that I have a germ of a thought that what we are seeing here is Cicero's misinterpretation of the Epicurean argument from prolepsis, first in the case of the existence of gods, which we know Epicurus did consider to be related to prolepsis, and next on the existence of souls, which I don't know that we do see Epicurus say is related to prolepsis.

Epicurus of course did not say that souls can survive death, but he does seem to say that souls do exist, so the question arises whether Epicurus could have considered that there is a prolepsis in regard to the existence souls in the first place. (Asked another way, does Epicurus say both that we have prolepses that incline us to believe that gods are blessed and imperishable, and also that we have prolepses to believe that we have souls? (The potential prolepsis I am asking about is not "that souls survive death," but that "we should consider that we have souls even though just like gods we cannot see or touch them.")

The two sections I am comparing are:

[Tusculan Disputations XIII](#)

[On the Nature of the Gods XVII and thereabouts](#) (sorry this link doesn't take you directly to the paragraph - I'll fix that in the future)

Key to this analysis is that I think most of us agree that the faculty of prolepses leads toward formation of opinions, but that a prolepsis is not itself an opinion. Cicero doesn't seem to accept this, and he seems to think that an Epicurean prolepsis is a fully formed opinion, and since all men have the opinion that gods exist and that souls survive death, that makes it true. I also think most of us agree that Epicurus would say that it doesn't matter how many people think a thing to be so, that's not sufficient evidence of its truth - we should require sound reasoning based on observations from the senses, prolepsis, and feelings, and these are not subject to majority vote.

So:

Is this section XIII of Tusculan Disputations an Epicurean argument meant to mirror Velleius section XVII in On The Nature of the Gods? If it's an Epicurean argument, was Cicero extending it to the existence of souls on his own, without precedent from Epicurean texts, or is it likely that the Epicureans reasoned this way in regard to souls as well as gods?