

PD01 - Blessed and Imperishable?

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2020 at 8:15 AM

I am going to have to look further into this but it appears that he translates the phrase as incorruptible, and ultimately his reasoning is pretty much what I remembered, that it is an elementary principle of physics that only the elements are eternal, and any combination of elements will eventually come apart.

Appendix

or is already gone by. So both the young man and the old man should philosophize, the former that while growing old he may be young in blessings because of gratitude for what has been, the latter that he may be young and old at the same time because of the fearlessness with which he faces the future. Therefore the wise plan is to practice the things that make for happiness, since possessing happiness we have everything and not possessing it we do everything to have it.

THE GODS

"Both practice and study the precepts which I continuously urged upon you, discerning these to be the A B C's of the good life. First of all, believing the divine being to be blessed and incorruptible, just as the universal idea of it is outlined in our minds, associate nothing with it that is incompatible with incorruption or alien to blessedness. And cultivate every thought concerning it that can preserve its blessedness along with incorruption. Because there are gods, for the knowledge of them is plain to see. They are not, however, such as many suppose them to be, for people do not keep their accounts of them consistent with their beliefs. And it is not the man who would abolish the gods of the multitude who is impious but the man who associates the beliefs of the multitude with the gods; for the pronouncements of the multitude concerning the gods are not innate ideas but false assumptions. According to their stories the greatest injuries and indignities are said to be inflicted upon evil men, and also benefits.

As far as making reasonable sense out of KD1, I don't see an issue there. If you are saying that you should set as your human goal never to suffer any pain whatsoever, that is obviously impossible for a human, and Epicurus would have realized that impossibility himself, which is why the focus is on pleasure obtained even at the cost of pain. As far as the model of what the best human life can be, there is a more clear and detailed statement of that in "On Ends"

Quote

XII. The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: **what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable?** One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one

which will not admit of further improvement.

As far as the gods being "thought constructs" I certainly realize that modern scholars favor that, but that is not what Epicurus appears to have held, or that Velleius describes in "On the Nature of the Gods." The Epicureans took their view of gods seriously, and whether we agree with it or not would not change what they thought or how we should understand their position before we decide what to adopt as our own. Focusing on thought constructs is one of the tangents of modern commentators that in my personal view (not in everyone's) undermines the possibility of understanding Epicurus thoroughly and on his own terms.

I think the main aspect of DeWitt's analysis of the immortality issue starts on page 267. I am not wedded to taking DeWitt's side in every position he takes, by any means, but I agree with his approach that in order to duplicate Epicurus' approach we much always start with the basics and then never let a basic rule (like nothing exists except atoms and void, in motion, etc) **ever** be violated in any subsequent speculation - so that if a passage or commentary appears to contradict an earlier foundation, then that interpretation of the passage is incorrect:

INCORRUPTIBILITY AND VIRTUE

If the adoption and adaptation of the Heraclitean theory of flux to explain the nature of the gods, that is, by an afflux and efflux of images, seems astonishing to the modern reader, not less astonishing is the doctrine that the maintenance of their own incorruptibility should be ascribed to the gods as a virtue. This is certainly advanced doctrine, and rather difficult to understand and more difficult to accept. Yet the evidence for it is sufficient and explicit.

At the outset it must be observed and kept diligently in mind that nowhere in his extant writings does Epicurus call the gods immortal. This might be thought an accident of the tradition were it not for the fact that other considerations rule out this possibility. If Lucretius does call them immortal repeatedly, this may be set down as an indication that he never really mastered the Epicurean lore of the gods and did not live to make an intensive study of it in preparation for writing about it.

The reasoning behind this doctrine of incorruptibility is readily discerned. From the doctrine that nothing exists except atoms and void it follows that the bodies of the gods must be corporeal. Gods are zoa, "animate beings." They are thus units in the ascending order of Nature, as is man. Being in this order and corporeal, they cannot be deathless. If deathlessness were inherent in their nature, they would be

EPICURUS AND HIS THEOLOGEMY

It is another thing for themselves. Since they do belong in the same class as men, it is a logical necessity to think of their incorruptibility as by some means generated. Since in the system of Epicurus, unlike that of Plato, this incorruptibility lacked a superior being as generator, he concludes, the only possibility was that the gods generated it for themselves by their own vigilance. Thus it must be assumed that just as the happiness of men is self-achieved, so the happiness of the gods is self-generated.

However astonishing this doctrine may seem, it is well substantiated. Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile, seems well versed in Epicurean beliefs, has this to say: "Plutarch has pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blessed being, according to the usual of ancient opinions." This, incidentally, implies that the Epicurean gods were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its preservation.

The inconsistency between this selfish concern for their own bodily security and their indifference to the good of mankind was certain to elicit condemnation from believers in divine providence, and this has not escaped record. Thus the Christian Eschschol quotes his Aristotle as saying: "According to Epicurus it's good to be provident, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods being in favor of all things care for the preservation of their own peculiar blessings."¹¹

When once it has been observed that the gods are under the necessity of preserving their own blessings, the next step is to learn that this activity is confined to their own system. The recognition of this fact will serve to explain a rather cryptic statement from the pen of Epicurus himself. Writing of the "false representations" of the multitude, who thought of the gods, not as possessing the virtues, nor as having real relationships with them, he concluded as follows: "The [the gods], being exclusively devoted to their own peculiar virtues, are partial to their like themselves, desiring of them in no way as others."¹² The last half of this statement has been variously interpreted, but the recognized sense of our passing descriptive will make the meaning intelligible. Just as it is the virtue of men to address their own happiness, so it is the virtue of the gods to preserve their own blessings. This act is so completely engaged their attention that no participation in human affairs is possible.

This is an excellent detailed discussion Eugenios so thank you for it. People will not always agree on every detail but it helps everyone to dig into the primary material and then display their reasoning about how to interpret it. Otherwise every discussion is just arbitrary assertion.

Probably there are all sorts of other considerations in your mind in starting the thread so there are lots of directions this can go.