The Doctrine of Necessity In "A Few Days In Athens"

Post by “Cassius” of April 23, 2020 at 3:39 PM

One passage in "A Few Days In Athens" I have always found a little hard to parse is where (in Chapter 14) Frances Wright discusses the doctrine of "necessity." It seems to me that she leaves her own view of Epicurus' opinion a little ambiguous, because in the phrase I always remember she has Epicurus say: **"*we will not now traverse the ethical pons asinorum of necessity - the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers.*"**

The clip below contains the exchange, and the full chapter is here. I would be very interested in any comments on what you think Frances Wright believed Epicurus' position on this to be. Is she stating the same position that Epicurus writes in the letter to Menoeceus? Is she varying that position? If so, how? If not, why do you think that she does not make the position more clear? Or is this in fact clear and I just personally find it difficult for some reason?

doubt of any truth shall constitute a crime, then the belief of the same truth should constitute a virtue."

"Perhaps a duty would rather express it."

"When you charge the neglect of any duty as a crime, or account its fulfilment a virtue, you suppose the existence of a power to neglect or fulfil; and it is the exercise of this power, in the one way or the other, which constitutes the merit or demerit. Is it not so?"

"Certainly."

"Does the human mind possess the power to believe or disbelieve, at pleasure, any truths whatsoever?"

"I am not prepared to answer: but I think it does, since it possesses always the power of investigation."

"But, possibly, not the will to exercise the power. Take care lest I beat you with your own weapons. I thought this very investigation appeared to you a crime."

"Your logic is too subtle," said the youth, "for my inexperience."

"Say rather, my reasoning too close. Did I bear you down with sounding words and weighty authorities, and confound your understanding with hair-drawn distinctions, you would be right to retreat from the battery."

"I have nothing to object to the fairness of your deductions," said Theon. "But would not the doctrine be dangerous that should establish our inability to help our belief; and might we not stretch the principle, until we asserted our inability to help our actions?"

"We might and with reason. But we will not now traverse the ethical *pons asinorum* of necessity — the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers. You enquire if the doctrine we have essayed to establish, be not dangerous. I reply — not, if it be true. Nothing is so dangerous as error, — nothing so safe as truth. A dangerous truth would be a contradicion in terms, an anomaly in things."

"But what is a truth?" said Theon.

"It is pertinently asked. A truth I consider to be an ascertained fact; which truth would be changed into an error, the moment the fact, on which it rested, was disproved."

"I see, then, no fixed basis for truth."

"It surely has the most fixed of all — the nature of things. And it is only an imperfect insight into that nature, which occasions all our erroneous conclusions, whether in physics or morals."

Below is the[Bailey translation of an excerpt from the letter to Menoeceus]():

He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain; he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are

within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame. For, indeed, it were better to follow the myths about the gods than to become a slave to the destiny of the natural philosophers: for the former suggests a hope of placating the gods by worship, whereas the latter involves a necessity which knows no placation. As to chance, he does not regard it as a god as most men do (for in a god's acts there is no disorder), nor as an uncertain cause (of all things) for he does not believe that good and evil are given by chance to man for the framing of a blessed life, but that opportunities for great good and great evil are afforded by it. He therefore thinks it better to be unfortunate in reasonable action than to prosper in unreason. For it is better in a man's actions that what is well chosen (should fail, rather than that what is ill chosen) should be successful owing to chance.

And a clip of the PDF:

even than philosophy: for from prudence are sprung all the other virtues, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honourably and justly, (nor, again, to live a life of prudence, honour, and justice) without living pleasantly. For the virtues are by nature bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant
133 life is inseparable from them. For indeed who, think you, is a better man than he who holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature? He understands that the limit of good things is easy to fulfil and easy to attain, whereas the course of ills is either short in time or slight in pain: he laughs at (destiny), whom some have introduced as the mistress of all things. (He thinks that with us lies the chief power in determining events, some of which happen by necessity) and some by chance, and some are within our control; for while necessity cannot be called to account, he sees that chance is inconstant, but that which is in our control is subject to no master, and to it are naturally attached praise and blame.
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