

Philodemus On Piety

Post by "Don" of December 15, 2020 at 11:26 PM

Okay, so I literally have Obbink's work of On Piety right in front of me, reading through text and commentary up through Column 26 tonight... And I can't make heads or tails of this first section on the arguments for the existence of the gods. I'm getting the impression that even Obbink doesn't fully understand but uses literal translations and other means to obfuscate that fact.

I'm being a little hyperbolic, but not much.

As I understand the text, the primary goal here is not to lay out a systematic argument but to state specific examples from the authoritative texts of Epicurus (On Holiness, On Nature, On Lifecourses), Metrodorus (On Change, On Gods), Hermarchus (Against Empedocles), and Polyaeus to refute those who would accuse the Epicureans of atheism or impiety.

At some points, the gods (per the Epicureans) are material beings it seems.

But in others, they are described as being made up of similar or identical atoms making them "unitary beings" not subject to being corruptible. In other spots, they are made up of images (eidola) and the analogy given by Obbink is that of a waterfall (the constant flowing) or the flickering images of a motion picture that provide us the mental picture or idea of movement or a static image. The gods are compounds of this sort... Which sounds to me like Sedley's idealist view.

In some ways, this section strikes me as the kind of argument about "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin." And I find nothing that dissuades me so far to see the gods as helpful exemplars of the goal of the Epicurean path. I'm still exploring. This section runs from column 1 to 25/26 so I've made it through once. I'm more interested in the next section, cols 26-36, that talk about the Epicureans participation in rituals and rites.

I did find some good lines though:

"Therefore I think it is especially necessary to despise those who transgress or mock other observance as they do the traditional rites." ll. 720-730., col. 25-26

"Metrodorus reproaches even Socrates himself for saying, if indeed he did this, to Plato's Euthyphro: 'what is holy?' (τι ὁσιον ἐστί;)" ll.700-710, col. 25

"And if they have conducted themselves in a blameworthy fashion, with the result that they also aroused suspicion [], let the accusers formally charge those who have conducted themselves in this way." ll.680-690, col. 24.

