

# Philodemus On Piety

Post by "Don" of December 22, 2020 at 11:19 PM

To get a little better insight into Obbink's translation, I looked in my copy of Tsouna's *The Ethics of Philodemus* to see where it might be quoted. Surprisingly, I found something helpful both in itself and in making me dive back into specific servings of *On Piety* one being col 25.

First, Obbink references two other works in regards to column 25: P. Oxy. II 215 col 1,4-24. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus\\_O...215?wprov=sfla1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus_O...215?wprov=sfla1)

[The first part talks about those people who sacrifice only because they fear the gods. The author thinks "in this there is still no firm basis for piety." Then continues.] But you, sir, consider it a thing of the greatest blessedness to discern properly that which we can conceive as the one best thing among existing things. Marvel at this notion and revere it in freedom from fear."

<https://archive.org/details/oxyrhy...age/30/mode/2up>

That sounds and awful lot like Sedley's idealist view of the [Epicurean gods](#). Whether they exist or not seems to miss the point. "Marvel at the notion" this papyrus says.

There's also Philodemus's own *De mus.* col. 4,6 (fr. 386 Usener) *Philodemus, On Music, Vol. Herc. 1, I c.4,6:* (Obbink) "Let it suffice to say now that the divine needs no mark of honour, but that it is natural to honour it, in particular by forming pious notions of it, and secondly by offering with each individual usage (to each of the gods in turn) their traditional sacrifices."

Attalus's site gives this translation:

"Now, these very important things may still be said at the present: that the divine does not need any honor; for us, nevertheless, it's natural to honor it, above all, with pious convictions, even through the rites of national tradition, each according to his proper part." <http://www.attalus.org/translate/epicurus2.html>

I see the "notion" has turned to "conviction" in the second but I can see similarities in those two words. Again, this still seems to echo Sedley's idealist argument to me. The word used in P. Oxy. 215 is *διαληψις*. This is also used in *On Piety* in Column 10 and translated as "understanding" specifically as "an understanding according to similarity" when talking about the nature of the gods. I'm okay with any of those translations in context. And that similarity, in some cases, is the formation of the idea of the gods through similar "images" or *eidola* perceived by the mind.

But to return to Tsouna (finally), she references col 38 of *On Piety* and says in a note, after admitting that Philodemus's argument can be difficult to understand given the condition of the papyrus and textual difficulties, she notes the main thrust of his argument appears to be:

Epicurus and the founders DO assert that the gods do have harmful or beneficial influences on us; BUT genuine piety not fear is what makes people just (NOT as the theologians who tell scary stories about the gods contend). Also, the gods do not actually "do" or "give" goods and evils to men, nonetheless, they are responsible (αίτιοι) "in a way" and only partially, not wholly. Col. 38 says " Those who keep their oaths and are just are moved by the most virtuous influences both from their own selves and from those (gods)."

Tsouna also summarizes Obbink in that he outlines interpretations: the gods are responsible for harms/benefits by being implemented in various physical processes of causation; or that our \*ideas\* of the gods function as direct causes of harm/benefit for people.

So, again, to me, it seems to come back to the physical existence of the gods doesn't really matter. It is our notion or understanding or conviction of the gods' blessedness etc. that can cause us benefits and an incorrect view of piety that can cause fear and harm.

Still digging in but I felt this was important to get down.