

Tetrapharmakos in Philodemus's On Choices and Rejections

Post by “Don” of February 26, 2022 at 7:37 AM

Ἄφοβον ὁ θεός,

ἀνύποπτον ὁ θάνατος

καὶ τάγαθὸν μὲν εὐκτητον,

τὸ δὲ δεινὸν εὐεκκαρτέρητον

The 4 lines of the Tetrapharmakos are statements of fact, not commands or commandments. I can't help that some translate them that way. Ἄφοβον is an accusative noun not an imperative verb. If the creator of the Tetrapharmakos epitome wanted to command people to "Don't fear the gods!" or say "I will not fear the gods", they could have used the imperative of φοβέομαι, δείδω, or ὀκνέω, but they didn't

Literally, the first line reads something more like:

The god causes no fear.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἄφοβος](#)

Same for line 2:

Death is free from risk. (i.e., there is no afterlife)

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἄνυπ-εξαίρετως, ἀνύποπτος](#)

The Tetrapharmakos is nothing more than an epitome or summary of the first four [Principal Doctrines](#). They are no more a full presentation of the whole philosophy than are the Letters to Herodotus or Menoikeus or the [Principal Doctrines](#) themselves. Just as those summaries are meant to keep the key points of the philosophy ready in one's mind, so the Tetrapharmakos keeps the first four Doctrines ready for application in one's mind. There's a reason Epicurus placed those first four Doctrines first, and, as far as I know, we can't say definitively that Epicurus himself didn't write the Tetrapharmakos. We know it from the writings of Philodemus, but there's nothing stating who actually composed it as far as I know. People seem to have asked Epicurus on multiple occasions for summaries of his philosophy. I see no reason to think the Tetrapharmakos might not be another one.

Saying a reason to ignore or downplay or dismiss the Tetrapharmakos is that some may misconstrue or misinterpret it is the the wrong way to handle it. This is an epitome gleaned

from an authentic ancient Epicurean text (multiple texts!) that exemplifies the kernels of the philosophy. Philodemus goes to great pains to expand those four maxims, using the first four Doctrines, and expanding beyond those summaries in [On Choices and Avoidances]. Philodemus himself urged people to return to the books and that the summaries weren't sufficient in themselves. They are reminders and outlines, and always point back to the texts.

An understanding that, to paraphrase...

The gods provide no reason to fear them... because they're not motivated by anger or gratitude.

Death is to be approached with no suspicion... because we don't exist after we die.

The Good is easily obtained... because of the reasons laid out in various texts.

The Terrible is easily endured... because ditto.

These are fundamental to the whole philosophy. It's not dumbed down. It's to make it crystal clear that the philosophy as a whole is eminently able to be grasped by everyone. It's not open to a select few but is appropriate to everyone. That's one reason Diogenes had his wall carved in Oenoanda. You get benefit in your life *starting* at the beginning with the summaries but you can also go as deep as you want to or are able to with the volumes of texts. We are at a disadvantage because all we have had for a long time are summaries.

I will continue to defend the Tetrpharmakos, especially because I don't know who wrote it and I don't see any reason to think it may not have been Epicurus or one of the other early scholars of the Garden. Plus any kernel from authentically Epicurean sources not filtered through a Cicero or Plutarch is a precious gem.