

New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

Post by "Eikadistes" of March 19, 2022 at 5:24 PM

Quote

"The evidence is very clear that in the Epicurean universe gods do exist, and that they are indeed made of atoms. However, when it is asked what this mode of atomic existence amounts to, interpreters divide into two broad parties, the realists and the idealists, with the latter interpretation in effect making Epicurus an atheist. [...] Even according to the alternative, realist interpretation, Epicurus sides with atheism to the extent that he denies all divine intervention in the running of the world, thus claiming to liberate his followers from the fear of divine wrath."

Whenever I see this discussion, it usually seems to following the above structure, with the author admitting, first and foremost, that Epicurus clearly believed in gods and enthusiastically attended religious celebrations. The notion that he qualifies as a contemporary atheist because his theology is incompatible with Abrahamic faiths is anachronistic. It seems to me that Sedley is moving the rhetorical goal post throughout the essay to fit his conclusion.

Quote

But on the idealist (p. 147) interpretation his position is one that in most theological contexts would be called fully atheistic, and indeed was so called by Epicurus' own critics."

This is not true of some of the Cyrenaics. It is also untrue of Skeptics who seem to take agnostic position that portrays Epicurus as a dogmatic theist. Attempting to orient Epicurean theology within the tradition of atheism (for me) is like trying to frame American Democrats as Communists. Many critics of the Democratic Party would be comfortable entertaining this proposition, with the notable exception of *actual* Communists, who would take offense to the suggestion that centrists and liberals are in any way sympathetic to Marxist-Leninism.

If this charges of atheism had merit, I would expect at least one treatise by Philodemus called *Against Piety*, or a polemic by Metrodorus called *Against the Gods*. Instead, we have the exact opposite.