

New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

Post by "Godfrey" of April 10, 2022 at 7:17 PM

I just happened across this passage in Lucretius, which relates to the LM passage discussed above:

"Unless you expel these ideas from your mind and drive far away beliefs unworthy of the gods and alien to their tranquillity, the holy divinity of the gods, damaged by you, will frequently do you harm: not because of the possibility of violating the gods' supreme power, and of their consequent angry thirst for bitter vengeance, but because you yourself will imagine that those tranquil and peaceful beings are rolling mighty billows of wrath against you. You will be unable to visit the shrines of the gods with a calm heart, and incapable of receiving with tranquillity and peace the images from their holy bodies which travel into men's minds to reveal the gods' appearance. The direct effect on your life is obvious." (Lucretius 6.68-79, Long and Sedley translation, The Hellenistic Philosophers)

This reads to me like the best resolution of the realist and idealist views that I've seen. It appears to acknowledge the realist view that the gods exist, while at the same time stressing that what is important to our well-being is how we view them.

Sitting here in 2022, the idea that we get images of the gods "from their holy bodies" is what makes the gods so problematic. That sounds silly today, but it's perfectly consistent with Epicurus' atomism. To me, the idea that in an infinite universe there are beings which would appear godlike to us (realist) is reasonable (admittedly I do enjoy science fiction ☹). I also agree with the (idealist) notion that how we think of potential godlike beings can be of benefit or harm to us. The cleavage between the two is how we interpret the images and anticipations.... Our modern theories of perception invalidate the ancient idea of images of beings reaching us from afar; instead, our anticipations (at least to my understanding) of gods are passed down to us in the same manner as, say, language. So the "black" of the realist view and the "white" of the idealist view are both valid. It's just the shades of grey in between which have naturally changed over the millennia.