

New Sedley Chapter On Ancient Greek Atheism

Post by "Cassius" of April 11, 2022 at 7:06 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

See, that's my sticking point here in reference to the gods. No one has ever seen a god and yet Epicurus says we have an image of them?

I would say there that we should not presume that what we are thinking of as "a god" is what Epicurus is thinking, so there's no certainty that what we are perceiving as images of the gods are actually what we are expecting. Maybe the perceptions of the gods even through images are just the "feelings" of blissfulness that we get when we contemplate them. As far as I can tell the majority (maybe all?) of the specifics like tall, shaped like men, speak Greek, and stuff like that -- those could all be later interpolations of later Epicureans rather than from Epicurus himself.

So that's what I am trying to drill down on -- we don't know that when Epicurus was referring to clear visions of the gods he was really talking about seeing beings who look like the statue of Zeus or Athena. Until we are absolutely sure that his "clear visions" constitute seeing human-shaped figures, I don't think we should presume that is what he means.

This is one of those areas where we don't have Lucretius giving direct testimony, and where I do think that we have to take the views of Epicureans 200+ years later as not necessarily of the same reliability of Epicurus himself.

So I really do see that as one of the areas where we have to be extremely careful. It is one thing to speculate that the gods look like humans, that they speak Greek, etc. But are those speculations really the "clear visions" that Epicurus was talking about? I don't think we should jump to that conclusion, and I think that (like you are implying) the fact that we today are not seeing such visions is a good indication that Epicurus didn't either.

But what we have is all so fragmentary -- I think that the issue of the speculations about the nature of the gods could well be just speculations, and that those speculations can co-exist compatibly with Epicurus having said that we have clear visions of them -- but that those clear visions are not of their shape or size or things like that, but of their "blissfulness" --- clear "feelings" or "reactions" to them but that fall short of "visions" like you and I and everyone else are expecting to see.