

"Lucretius on the Divine" - Dr. Christopher Eckerman

Post by "Cassius" of July 9, 2022 at 9:49 AM

This topic is always good for new discussion, and the thought just occurs to me today, connecting this topic with the term "shibboleth" as to the size of the sun, that here's another angle:

I am not sure whether Epicurus was aware in his own time of people who think this way (I am referring to scholars who are vigilantly "idealist" on the subject of the [Epicurean gods](#)) but if he were alive in the 20th/21st centuries he would definitely observe what the reaction I see today, which contrasts sharply with what even later Epicureans including apparently Philodemus had to say:

Epicurus was absolutely clear that his definition of gods was non-supernatural, non-omniscient, non-omnipotent, and totally without involvement in human affairs, and he really gave them no specific attributes at all other than deathlessness combined with the ability to "have a good time" without any pain, and to do this consistently and without end. As such, these beings are absolutely no threat to any of us (including to those scholars) and the [Epicurean gods](#) are really nothing more than what we would think of as "advanced space aliens" who are of little more relevance to us other than as good material for endless "Star Trek" episodes.

Nevertheless, just like with "pleasure as the good" and "pigs as mascots" and "the size of the sun," there exists a strong tendency in certain scholars to want to have absolutely nothing to do with Epicurus' suggestions as to these extraterrestrial beings. These scholars do everything in their power to write entirely out of Epicurean philosophy the position that the [Epicurean gods](#) could be "real," just like they would write out "pleasure" and "pigs" and "the size of the sun."

And interestingly at the same time such people are frequently (I presume) perfectly happy to watch science fiction movies about advanced races, they are frequently advocates of animal "rights" and the nobility of intelligent animals (dolphins, etc) and they certainly have no problems engaging in the pursuit of pleasure so long as they don't admit it publicly.

So in my own mind I am seeing a collection of "shibboleths" or "litmus tests" which do serve well as indications of where a scholar really is on Epicurus:

1. Do they focus on "Ataraxia" or "Katastematic Pleasure" as the highest good?
2. Do they run away from the "pig" model not for the reason that Cicero did (comparing Epicureans to living like cows) but as animals that pursue "unworthy" pleasures?
3. Do they default to the position that Epicurus was just wrong about the size of the sun so forget about the issue?

And to those I would add:

4. Are those scholars constantly on a campaign to "prove" that Epicurus was misrepresenting his own view of extraterrestrial "gods"?

All of us (including me) are going to go through various phases in our personal views on answers to those questions. However I am also convinced that the longer one studies, and the more one is willing to avoid "compartmentalization" so as to preserve some aspect of one's "modern" viewpoints, the more that person is going to appreciate the depth of Epicurus' thinking and conclude that none of these positions were lightly or erroneously chosen.