

The Ethics of Epicurus and its Relation to Contemporary Doctrines by Jean-Marie Guyau. Edited by Testa and Ansell-Pearson, translated by Testa

Post by "Godfrey" of May 6, 2023 at 8:45 PM

More food for thought: Guyau on the gods. The idealist v realist debate has gone on for at least 150 years.... Notes from Book Three, Chapter 4 - "*Epicurean Piety. The Struggle against Divinity understood as Efficient Cause*"

- Even if there isn't a divine creator, this doesn't have to lead to atheism.
- If it's a fact there all men believe in the gods, in order for the philosophy to be founded on facts it must take this into account.
- Creation doesn't require divinity. And according to Epicurus the supreme happiness of the gods would preclude them from taking on the task of creating and managing the universe.
- Epicurean theory of the gods seems rather strange, but it follows "*logically from the principles*". It attempts to interpret superstitious beliefs that come from "*hallucinations*".

(Note: apparently utilitarianism has a definition of "interest" which I think is something like "self-interest" and contrasts with "obligation". In utilitarianism, it seems that this self might be a person, a group, a nation, or whatever particular entity is being considered.)

- Oddly "*for a utilitarian system, religious sentiment and the cult of divinity become entirely disinterested.*"

- Whereas prayer typically involved fear and petitioning the gods, Epicureans consider the gods to be indifferent to their concerns. "*Prayer becomes, then, useless and absurd; pure worship replaces it, but a form of worship detached from every personal feeling. Vulgar piety is always mixed with feelings of fear and hope. People pray to the gods in order to obtain the goods they desire, or to eliminate the evils they fear. The Epicurean, on the other hand, does not fear anything coming from the gods, nor does he expect anything from them, and nevertheless, he worships them. Why? Because they are [the expression of] an ideal form of happiness and serenity; because they represent that which the Epicurean ought to be; because they are beautiful to contemplate, and they enchant our own thoughts, just like the marbles of Phidias please our sight.*"

- According to Seneca, Epicurus removed disinterestedness from his ethics, but then he placed it in his piety. Seneca objects to this. Guyau: "*However, the piety of the Epicureans is indeed*

less astonishing than it seems, especially if one realizes that it does not cost a great deal of effort [to them], [or] if one realizes that effort and trouble would be much greater if one were to succumb to vulgar beliefs. Their piety also seems less astonishing if one realizes that these beliefs themselves have a natural ground and are quite rational in their principles. The gods really exist according to Epicurus; they are beautiful and happy. They are like an embellished image of ourselves: why wouldn't we, then, bow before them?

- Guyau dismisses the idea that Epicurus was insincere in his presentation of the gods and was actually an atheist.

- *"If Epicurus clearly affirmed the existence of the gods, if he consecrated a full work to piety, and if he offered his life as an example of the piety he praised in his writings, this is because he really believed in the existence of the gods, which he worshipped as genuinely real beings."*

- Lange (a contemporary of Guyau) came up with the idealist interpretation of the gods: Epicurus' gods did not have real existence: they were simply ideals. 'Undoubtedly, Epicurus honoured the belief in the gods as an element of [the] human ideal, but he did not see in the gods themselves exterior beings. Epicurus' system would reveal itself as fully contradictory were we not to look at it from the perspective of this subjective respect for the gods, which creates a harmonious agreement within our soul.' According to Lange, while the many worshipped the gods because they believed in their existence, Epicurus did the opposite: he did not believe in them, but nevertheless worshipped them. When Epicurus revered the gods for their perfection, 'it mattered little to him whether this perfection showed itself in exterior acts, or if it was employed only as an ideal within our thought'.

- But Lange had no textual basis for his theory, he based it on resolving what he saw as a contradiction in the system. Guyau believes that this contradiction doesn't exist. "We have seen that, on the contrary, Epicurus' doctrine does not contain any contradiction but only a certain number of unsound deductions." I'm assuming these are unsound based on modern science, but his wording is unclear.

- *"For Epicurus, the gods certainly represent an ideal, but it is a realized ideal, as well as a living ideal."*

- *"His system rests precisely on the identity of the subjective and the objective, for he claims that every sensation necessarily corresponds to a reality. Additionally, according to him, given that every idea has its roots in sensation, the human mind cannot have any ideal superior to reality itself. It is from reality that our mind borrows the ideal it conceives."*

- *"Epicurus' gods were not mere ideals and, as we have seen, they even nourished themselves with very real food, like simple mortals. Philodemus even asks himself whether or not the gods sleep. Ideals do not eat or sleep. We should not attribute modern doctrines to Epicurus, doctrines that are born from the progress of the sciences and of thought. Epicurus' system, with its strong and weak points, simply accords with its own time."*