

Pros and Cons Of Considering Epicurean Philosophy To Be A "Religion"

Post by "Don" of March 22, 2024 at 11:56 PM

Quote from Letter to Menoikeus

First, believe that the god is a blessed and imperishable thing (τὸν θεὸν ζῶον) as is the common, general understanding of the god. You, Menoikeus, believe everything about which a god is able to preserve its own imperishability and blessedness for itself. Do not attribute anything foreign to its incorruptibility or incongruous with the blessedness of the god! Gods exist, and the knowledge of them is manifest to the mind's eye.

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον "the god (is a) blessed and imperishable ζῶον. But what is a ζῶον?

First, note the singular "god." Not gods. This use of the singular - a god, the god - in the Menoikeus letter has led Long and Sedley offer that each individual creates their own god, their own image of the divine. I am still firmly rooted in this conceptual camp of the gods rather than imaging inter-cosmic beings hanging out somewhere in the universe. One reason: By definition, if they are inter-cosmic - literally between world-systems - there is nowhere for them to live! A cosmos is a world-system - ours has Earth at the center surrounded by the orb of the heavenly stars and wandering planets. There is no world in the metakosmos/intermundia - it is literally "between" worlds... No planet, no stars, no world.

But the word ζῶον (zoon) could very well be a clever use of an ordinary word by Epicurus.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ζῶον](#)

Yes, it "typically" means living being, animal. It's where we get zoology from.

BUT... it also can mean "in art, figure, image, not necessarily of animals."

And that second definition is NOT a later application that Epicurus didn't know. Here are some examples from Herodotus (c.484-c.425 BCE, from LSJ); Epicurus lived 341-270 BCE) and others:

The Histories, [3.88](#): First he made and set up a carved stone, upon which was cut **the figure** of a horseman (πρῶτον μὲν νυν τύπον ποιησάμενος λίθινον ἔστησε: **ζῶον** δέ οἱ ἐνῆν ἀνὴρ ἵππεύς)

The Histories, [1.203](#): Here, it is said, are trees growing leaves that men crush and mix with water and use for painting **figures** on their clothing; these **figures** (ζῶα) cannot be washed out, but last as long as the wool, as if they had been woven into it from the first.

The Histories, [2.4](#): it was they (Egyptians) who first assigned to the several gods their altars and images and temples, and first carved figures (ζῶα) on stone.

The Histories, [2.124](#): [4] (for the road is nearly a mile long and twenty yards wide, and elevated at its highest to a height of sixteen yards, and it is all of stone polished and carved with figures (ζῶων))

The Histories, 2.148: Near the corner where the labyrinth ends stands a pyramid two hundred and forty feet high, on which **great figures (ζῶα μεγάλα)** are cut.

The Histories, [4.88](#): Mandrocles took the first-fruits of these and had a picture (ζῶα) made with them, showing the whole bridge of the Bosphorus

Plato, *Republic*, [515a](#): [515a] and **shapes of animals (ζῶα)** as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material..

Plutarch, *Pericles*, 13: And yet they say that once on a time when Agatharchus the painter (ζῶγράφος "one who paints from life") was boasting loudly of the speed and ease with which he made his figures (ζῶα), Zeuxis heard him, and said, 'Mine take, and last, a long time.'

So, why am I belaboring this point? I find these instances of ζῶα interesting precisely because of the letter to Menoikeus saying in 123 " πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη." Usually translated as "First, believe that god is a blissful, immortal being, as is commonly held. (Saint-Andre); the literal meaning of this line is something like: "Fundamentally/first, know that the god is incorruptible and blessed, as common knowledge of the god is ὑπεγράφη."

ὑπεγράφη "has been outlined, traced"

Epicurus is using the image of outlining or tracing an image to be filled in by another. Consider this like the image of letters indicated by a teacher by an outline or tracing for the student to then follow. So the idea that the gods are imperishable and blessed is, basically, how the gods are commonly understood to be -- that is the general indication of the nature of the gods.

Herodotus and the other citations above all have to do with etching on stone or outlining on fabric. That similarity with the common knowledge of the god being outlined or traced is too enticing not to explore the implications of for me.