

A line of questioning on Epicurean Theology

Post by "Root304" of August 1, 2022 at 12:18 AM

Would it be fair to say that Epicurean theology is meant to resolve a completely different set of problems than the prevailing supernatural theology? If the universe has no beginning or end, and there is no supernatural dimension, ideals or essences, then we aren't trying to solve with Gods the problems of prime mover, problems of evil or theories of supernatural magic, etc. So is Epicurus trying to explain the sensations, feelings and anticipations of, or associated with, Gods with his theology? I am not particularly well read on all the material, but I remember some pieces on explaining the Gods in dreams. Also Epicurus or an Epicurean talking about prevailing attitudes about Gods being morally good, as if he is trying to speak to the social conventions about Gods being their chief concern. If my line of question has any merit, what other empirical (or otherwise) problems might the ancient Epicureans be trying to resolve with their Theology?

Post by "Don" of August 1, 2022 at 7:09 AM

Epicurus's theology is primarily directed at removing one's fear of the gods. He wanted to get people to rid themselves of the ideas that their every move was being tallied, and the gods were either going to rain down divine punishment now or after death, or they were going to bestow blessings on the pious. Neither of those scenarios were going to happen according to Epicurus.

He maintains "gods exist" but "not as the hoi polloi believe." As you'll read here and elsewhere, there are two primary perspectives on the gods in modern scholarship:

1. Epicurus believed there were real beings existing somewhere in the universe who were eternally blissful, who had bodies that didn't decay, and who took no interest or action in human affairs, and who did NOT create or maintain the universe.
2. Epicurus used the vocabulary of the "gods" to describe mental concepts or archetypes of what a blissful, incorruptible being would be like and that Epicureans could use those concepts as an ideal of what a blissful existence could be like. David Sedley is one of the prime advocates for this position.

1 is referred to as the realist approach. 2 is the idealist approach. Personally, I fall well towards 2 in my current understanding.

Post by “Cassius” of August 1, 2022 at 7:09 AM

This is a good question, although the way it is phrased tend to imply that all of the motivation for discussing the issue was to "solve a problem" that needed to be solved, such that the issue would not have been reached but for a "problem."

Yes no doubt the theory does solve problems, but I tend to think of the entire system as one conclusion flowing naturally from another, such that once you observe life here on earth of varying degrees of advancement, and you deduce the "nature never makes only a single thing of a kind" principle, you're going to be impelled through those and your other deductions about atoms to expect life throughout the universe with some being more advanced than us.

I think that perspective of "following your own observations to their logical conclusions" is a big part of the issue of the gods. Yes if solves problems, but it's also the kind of thing you come up with when you exercise your mind on the things that you observe.

Post by “Root304” of August 2, 2022 at 12:59 AM

[Cassius](#) Thanks so much for this more holistic goal to work towards. I can see the constraint in thinking in terms of just problems to solve, as you wouldn't ever see the forest for the trees and just have a collection of answers without actually inhabiting an Epicurean worldview. I suppose I framed it that way as that sort of framing constituted a "switch" in my mind between still thinking in terms of the old Judeo-Christian God and Neo-Platonic ideas, and the usual questions, towards getting me thinking in terms of Epicurean philosophy and trying to conceive of new questions. Epicurus is literally the first philosopher I was ready and absolutely compelled to spend some time studying in depth, so it was kind of a "moment" I had. So much of Epicurean philosophy is so alien to how my unsystematic mind grew to think. I happened upon a wonderful starting point to start philosophizing. Cheers!

[Don](#) Thanks so much for this explanation. Of course! I forgot the big question of whether to fear the God's.

I think I've combined the idealist and the realist views before in my conceptions due some of the memes out there floating around and started thinking, "am I getting into a Ancient Aliens cult?" 😊

Post by “Joshua” of August 20, 2022 at 11:44 PM

Quote

1. Epicurus believed there were real beings existing somewhere in the universe who were eternally blissful, who had bodies that didn't decay, and who took no interest or action in human affairs, and who did NOT create or maintain the universe.

Yes! Just today I read an article by the Catholic Herald from 2019 that uses this formulation: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

It called to my mind one of Hitchens' witticisms.

Quote

He says that I am an ex-Trotskyist (true), a “popinjay” (true enough, since its original Webster’s definition means a target for arrows and shots), and that I cannot hold a drink (here I must protest).

Deism is a precise word with a precise meaning. The [Epicurean gods](#) do not qualify. Epicurus' gods are, in fact, so non-essential in the cosmos that one could (and I do) leave them out entirely. Can we satisfy all of his ethical and epistemological claims without them? I suspect so-- but if not, this is the ethical *raison d'être* of the Idealist view which Don has described. It only remains to speak of epistemology.

There are two points under this heading:

First, the Letter to Menoikeus makes the intriguing claim that knowledge of the gods is "clear", or "engraved on men's minds", or else "plain to see", according to various translations. He seemed to think, like Montaigne, that atheism is "unnatural":

Quoth Montaigne:

Quote

We are brought to a belief of God either by reason or by force. Atheism being a proposition as unnatural as monstrous, difficult also and hard to establish in the human understanding, how arrogant soever, there are men enough seen, out of vanity and pride, to be the authors of extraordinary and reforming opinions, and outwardly to affect the profession of them; who, if they are such fools, have, nevertheless, not the power to plant them in their own conscience. Yet will they not fail to lift up their hands towards heaven if you give them a good thrust with a sword in the breast, and when

fear or sickness has abated and dulled the licentious fury of this giddy humour they will easily re-unite, and very discreetly suffer themselves to be reconciled to the public faith and examples.

Were I to challenge Epicurus on this point, I would put it to him that he has allowed himself to become "enamored of the single cause", a tendency which he strives to reject in the Letter to Pythocles". That most humans in all times and places have believed in gods does not imply their existence--that is merely one explanation of the phenomena. In the absence of any sensory evidence, why shouldn't the best explanation be found in psychology? In pattern-seeking behavior, confirmation bias, and in our evolutionary tendency to infer agency? To Epicurus' credit, he does manage to avoid all of Montaigne's Platonist bigotry; *It is not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, who is impious, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them.*

And lastly, the second epistemological point that the gods appear to satisfy: the principle of isonomia.

Quote

This is termed by Epicurus isonomia, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the forces of destruction are beyond count, the forces of conservation must also be infinite.

-Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods

I haven't got much to say about that proposition. I hope I haven't left anything important out, but others may supply my deficiency!

Post by "Don" of August 21, 2022 at 12:05 AM

I sometimes fall back on the idea that that which is outlined in our minds - the image of divinity writ as widely as possible - is nothing more than an innate capacity for awe, to be in awe of something larger than ourselves or something literally awe-inspiring, something encompassing our solitary mortal existence. Looking up into the stars, we feel awe at contemplating our insignificance in the face of the universe (Hey, hey! No getting depressed! That's not the point!). Taking in an expansive natural vista like Yosemite Valley from Tunnel View (photos are wholly inadequate!). We're taken out of ourselves in that moment, and I can surmise that an ancient Greek, confronted by the gigantic statue of Athena within the dimly-lit Parthenon, could

experience that awe. Trying to come to terms with that feeling of awe could lead to this idea that it's tied up with divinity.

But it's just an idea.

Post by “Godfrey” of August 21, 2022 at 1:04 AM

Absolutely! Awe, and also coming to grips with mystery through myths. And passing myths down to children at such a young age that the myths seem innate.