

A Question About Epicurean Gods

Post by "Cassius" of November 1, 2018 at 8:52 AM

Poster: I have a question concerning the 1st point; "there are no supernatural gods". As I've read, Epicurus never explicitly rejected the existence of gods, but he simply made them redundant and/or neutral as something related to our world. Maybe a modern account of Epicureanism, or what Epicurus had in mind entails or necessitates an account of atheism. Would you please elaborate more on this issue?

Cassius:

The issue centers on definitions. Epicurus definitely held (1) that "gods" exist, AND also (2) that "gods" are not supernatural. The key attributes of a god as Epicurus defined it are "perfect bliss" and "immortality." Nothing whatsoever about omnipotence or omniscience. People insist that the definition of "gods" must include "supernatural" but Epicurus explicitly held that the universe is all that there is, and that anything that exists is within the natural universe. This is discussed in greatest detail in Lucretius and in the Epicurean dialog in Cicero's "On The Nature of the Gods" but also by Epicurus himself in the letter to Herodotus:

"Nay more: we are bound to believe that in the sky revolutions, solstices, eclipses, risings and settings, and the like, take place without the ministration or command, either now or in the future, of any being who at the same time enjoys perfect bliss along with immortality. For troubles and anxieties and feelings of anger and partiality do not accord with bliss, but always imply weakness and fear and dependence upon one's neighbors. Nor, again, must we hold that things which are no more than globular masses of fire, being at the same time endowed with bliss, assume these motions at will. Nay, in every term we use we must hold fast to all the majesty which attaches to such notions as bliss and immortality, lest the terms should generate opinions inconsistent with this majesty. Otherwise such inconsistency will of itself suffice to produce the worst disturbance in our minds. Hence, where we find phenomena invariably recurring, the invariability of the recurrence must be ascribed to the original interception and conglomeration of atoms whereby the world was formed."

Also from the letter to Pythocles:

And further, let the regularity of their orbits be explained in the same way as certain ordinary incidents within our own experience; the divine nature must not on any account be adduced to explain this, but must be kept free from the task and in perfect bliss. Unless this be done, the whole study of celestial phenomena will be in vain, as indeed it has proved to be with some who did not lay hold of a possible method, but fell into the folly of supposing that these events happen in one single way only and of rejecting all the others which are possible, suffering

themselves to be carried into the realm of the unintelligible,. and being unable to take a comprehensive view of the facts which must be taken as clues to the rest."

There are many more similar references in Lucretius, and explicit statements about how nothing comes from nothing at the command of gods.

As to "Atheism" it will again be a question of definitions. If you insist that "Gods" must be supernatural, then Epicurus was an atheist. If you accept Epicurus' viewpoint, which includes that there is life throughout the universe and not just on earth, the the definition of gods becomes one of beings which amount to beings which are postulated to exist that have developed the capacity to be self-sufficient and without pain.

Much of what is recorded to have been said amounts to speculation, such as the gods speak "greek or a language like greek" but I suggest a fair appraisal is generally that gods are the theoretical top of a scale with bacteria or the like at the bottom, humans much further up, and "gods" considerably further up than that and living somewhere elsewhere in the universe (since we don't see them here).

But definitely no Jehovah, no Allah, no Zeus in the way that most people describe them. And in fact, to add to that, Epicurus held that it is "IMPIOUS" to consider any true "god" to do the things that Jehovah and Allah and Zeus are alleged to do.

Impious based on the reasoning of PD1 - 1. A blessed and indestructible being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; so he is free from anger and partiality, for all such things imply weakness."

And also the letter to Menoeceus:

Those things which without ceasing I have declared unto you, do them, and exercise yourself in them, holding them to be the elements of right life. First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, you shall not affirm of him anything that is foreign to his immortality or that is repugnant to his blessedness. Believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshipped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious. For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions; hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, seeing that they are always favorable to their own good qualities and take pleasure in men like themselves, but reject as alien whatever is not of their kind.