

Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers, "Gods"

Post by "Cassius" of November 26, 2020 at 7:34 AM

In conclusion here, Sedley (p52) remarks that Epicurus would not have been "all that disconcerted" whether people adopted the 'realist' or 'idealist' interpretation. However, I argue that he would, for this is a vitally important point: the objective of Epicureanism was the acquisition of tranquillity and happiness, which Epicurean doctrine, preconception, and contemplation and emulation of the divine form made possible. The Epicureans had to believe that their gods actually existed as biologically

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alive entities for them to be worthy of emulation, and if they were not, they could not have been worthy ethical models. The 'idealist' interpretation is complex and ambitious, but there is no explicit evidence that the Epicureans believed the gods were thought-constructs, and indeed the cumulative weight of the evidence supports the 'realist' interpretation.

Furthermore, Philodemus defends the sincerity of Epicurean belief in the following way:

If he [Epicurus] had said that gods exist for the sake of social convention, they [the Epicureans] would certainly not have offered demonstrations, since there were not even any objections to tell against them, nor would they [the Epicureans] have fought against those who do away with the divine, nor would they [the Epicureans] have advanced proofs in such extensive argumentation and in the other matters connected with them [the gods] in their [the Epicureans'] books.⁶²

It seems very very difficult to believe that we (speaking for Sedley) can be in a better position today to evaluate what Epicurus meant when we have so few reliable works left to us, while Philodemus and Lucretius and others mentioned in these articles in the ancient world had virtually (or fully) the whole library of Epicurean texts available to them for evidence. To me it is not persuasive to think that if Epicurus had held a strongly idealist interpretation as Sedley argues that we would not have more evidence of it, and at the same time if that were true it seems doubtful to me that we would have the testimony of Philodemus and Lucretius and others that this is not simply something going on within our minds.

So I personally continue to hold to a "both" position, with gods serving "both" as symbolic aspirational goals beneficial to contemplate, and also as beings for which Epicurus held there to be "real" evidence of their existence (but not through the standard 5 senses).

For that reason I would side with the view that the "images" perceivable only by the mind that benefit us to contemplate stream "from" and not "to" the gods, and that the contrary statement is a scribal error, but with one caveat: I think it's likely that Epicurus held "images" to be streams of "particles" constantly streaming in all directions from everything at once, so I would expect an ancient Epicurean to presume that even while particles are streaming toward us from other things (including but not limited to "gods") there are particles streaming outward from us (towards those "gods") as well.

I think there is a lot of room for additional deduction here about what these sources mean. And I think one of the underappreciated implications is that if the "gods" are deathless then they presumably had no starting point, as implied in the discussion of how "similarities" can be immortal. This "similarities" reference is new to me and probably deserves more attention.

I would expect this cannot mean "platonic ideal forms" or "conceptions" in our understanding of "mental conceptions" (which is what Sedley seems to be arguing the gods to be) so what *would* it mean?

And so Aëtius claims, “the same philosopher [Epicurus] says elsewhere that there are four existences immortal in their kinds, namely, the atoms, the void, the

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universe, the similarities”.¹⁹ Philodemus in his *On Piety* had considered what these ‘similarities’ are:

[A god’s] constitution out of things similar would obviously be a unified entity. For it is possible for beings constituted out of similarity for ever to have perfect happiness, since unified entities can be formed no less out of identical than out of similar elements and both kinds of entity are recognised by Epicurus as being exactly the same things, for example in his book *On Holiness*. The demonstration that this involves no contradiction may be passed over. Therefore, he was wont to say that nature brought all these things to completion alike. And that for the most part they came about when they are formed from an aggregation of various similar particles.²⁰