

Discussion Plan For Chapter 13 "The True Piety" (Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus And His Philosophy")

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CHAPTER XIII - THE TRUE PIETY

1. Introduction

1. Epicurus approached the topic of piety as a reformer, a materialist, and a dogmatist. As a reformer he believed that the natural piety of mankind had suffered perversion and that his mission was to recall men to true piety.
2. The nature of the gods includes that they are not deathless (or at least were not called deathless by Epicurus himself); gods are made of atoms and void like everything else; all gods are not exactly the same; gods are at the top of an ascending scale of animate life; the idea of gods is something innate in mankind.

2. Knowledge of the Gods

1. Dewitt says that the desire to classify Epicurus as an empiricist helps explain why many commentators say that knowledge of the gods comes through vision, but that is not what the weight of the texts indicate.
2. "According to these evidences the sources of knowledge are multiple. The Prolepsis apprises men of the blissfulness and incorruptibility of the gods. The Feelings, that is, fears and worries, serve to inform the individual of the true nature of the divine through the distress that follows upon "false opinions." Reason, by deductive inferences from the Twelve Elementary Principles, informs men of the existence of gods, of their corporeal nature, their number, their gradation in kind and their abode. By the method of analogy, that is, progression from similars to similars, reason also produces confirmatory evidence concerning their form, by a chain argument concerning their nature, and by a disjunctive syllogism concerning the kind of life they lead."
3. It is important to note that this entire issues appears to be an advanced topic reserved for advanced students, as it is not covered in detail in Lucretius, which is in turn based on Epicurus' On Nature.

3. The Proper Attitude Or Diathesis

1. DeWitt quotes Diogenes of Oinoanda as writing: "Happiness is mainly a matter of attitude, of which we are the arbiters."
2. The Epicurean doctrine is ""The blissful and incorruptible being neither knows trouble itself nor occasions trouble to another, and is consequently immune to either anger or gratitude, for all such emotions reside in a weak creature." In spite

of its prime importance, however, this first Doctrine is only a particular instance of a more comprehensive principle, which is stated negatively and positively as follows: "First of all, believing the divine being to be a creature incorruptible and blessed, just as the universal idea of the divine being is outlined, associate no idea with it that is alien to incorruptibility or incompatible with blessedness and cultivate every thought concerning it that can have the effect of preserving its blessedness along with incorruptibility."

3. This attitude is not at all like modern concepts of omnipotence and omniscience ascribed to gods: "The feeling he was enjoying toward the gods was the same that his countrymen entertained in their better moments. The Greek word for it was eusebeia, "reverence," and the quality in the gods which evoked it was semnoma, "sanctity." The latter is sometimes translated "majesty," which is misleading to modern readers. There is no suggestion of omnipotence, omniscience, or omnipresence, which were not current Greek conceptions but the result of a progression of religious thought that took place beyond the original area of Greek religious ideas."

4. Existence of the Gods

1. It was Eudoxus and Plato who appealed to vision as the evidence of the existence of gods, not Epicurus. "The former declared that it mattered little what a man thought of the gods of Greek mythology but it mattered much what he thought about the visible gods, that is, the planets. It was on account of his revulsion from this teaching that Epicurus damned the Eudoxans as "enemies of Hellas.""
2. The major surviving Epicurean argument for the existence of gods is in Cicero's "On The Nature of the Gods" and the basis stated there by Velleius, the Epicurean speaker, is that the idea of godhood is implanted in humans at birth.
3. Confirmatory evidence for the existence of gods was found in logical deduction; this will be discussed in the section on Isonomy and the Gods.

5. The Form of the Gods

1. All we know about the details of the [Epicurean gods](#) comes from deduction, not observation.
2. Gods have human shape, with "pseudo"-physical bodies, and possess reason, and are believed to be beautiful.

6. Gradation In Godhead

1. It is debated whether Epicurus held there to be more than one class of god, but DeWitt appears to contend that he did hold there to be at least two classes.
2. "Even with heroes and daemons eliminated, however, there still remain reasons for entertaining the belief that Epicurus favored some degree of gradation in godhead. The first of these reasons is the current assumption of an ascending gradation in the order of living creatures. Belief in this was old, and it received a powerful impetus in the growth of biological knowledge that took place in the youth of Epicurus under Aristotle's leadership. According to Epicurus, it must always be borne in mind, the gods are zoa, "animals," or, if this word seems offensive to us, at least "animate creatures." They are thus not placed outside the ascending series of

living beings but at the top of it. Between man and god a physical nexus remains; they are both corporeal. Moreover, there is a psychological and ethical nexus: the idea of god exists congenitally in the minds of men, a model of happiness to which they may aspire."

3. "In support of this assumption may be cited a statement of Aetius the doxographer, which informs us "that Epicurus represented the gods as anthropomorphic and all of them discernible only by reason." ie Why, unless he understood them to differ in kind, should he have written "all of them"? There is also a passage of Philodemus in which he allows that more reverence is due to certain gods than to others."
4. These general considerations are reinforced by the specific evidence of the scholium to the first of the Authorized Doctrines, if only it be translated and interpreted without emendation: "In other writings he says the gods are anthropomorphic, discernible only by reason, some of them existing under limitation, others [not under limitation] by virtue of identity of form arising from the perpetual afflux of similar images wrought to the same shape."

7. Incorruptibility And Virtue

1. DeWitt says that the gods maintain their own deathlessness. "Plutarch, for example, who, though hostile, wrote with texts of Epicurus before him, has this to say: "Freedom from pain along with incorruptibility should have been inherent in the nature of the blissful being, standing in no need of active concern."⁵⁷ This manifestly implies that the [Epicurean gods](#) were unable to take their immunity from corruption for granted but must concern themselves for its perpetuation."
2. Eusebius quotes his Atticus as saying: "According to Epicurus it's good-bye to providence, in spite of the fact that according to him the gods bring to bear all diligent care for the preservation of their own peculiar blessings."
3. Porphyry, who lived early in the third century AD, cited Horace, who had quoted freely from Lucretius: "I have learned the lesson that the gods live a life free from concern." ⁶⁰ The comment runs: "This derives from the doctrine of the Epicureans, who assert that the gods cannot be immortal unless enjoying leisure and immune from all responsibility."
4. "The gods are characterized by two attributes, blissfulness and incorruptibility. Neither is inherent in their nature. They are incorruptible only because the contingency of destruction is avertible by their vigilance. If this seems subtle, the notion that keeps company with it is more so and also paradoxical. Let it be allowed that incorruptibility is tantamount to eternal life. Then, according to Epicurus, this eternal life is not to be thought a cause of happiness but rather the perpetuity of happiness is a cause of eternal life. The gods win eternal life by maintaining their own pleasures perpetually. This conceit appealed to Menander, who exploited it in his Eunuchus. It survives through transfer to the Andria of Terence, where the happy lover is made to exclaim: "I think the life of the gods to be everlasting for the reason that their pleasures are perpetual, because immortality is assured to me if no grief shall intervene to mar this joy." ⁸¹ This is labeled as "Epicurean dogma" by the Donatus commentary."

8. Isonomy And the Gods

1. DeWitt: "It was from this principle [isonomia] that Epicurus deduced his chief theoretical confirmation of belief in the existence of gods. It was from this that he arrived at knowledge of their number and by secondary deduction at knowledge of their abode. He so interpreted the significance of infinity as to extend it from matter and space to the sphere of values, that is, to perfection and imperfection. In brief, if the universe were thought to be imperfect throughout its infinite extent, it could no longer be called infinite. This necessity of thought impelled him to promulgate a subsidiary principle, which he called isonomia, a sort of cosmic justice, according to which the imperfection in particular parts of the universe is offset by the perfection of the whole. Cicero rendered it *aequabilis tributio*, "equitable apportionment." The mistake of rendering it as "equilibrium" must be avoided."
2. Cicero recorded: "The nature of the universe must be such that all similars correspond to all similars." Also ""If it be granted that the number of mortals is such and such, the number of immortals is not less."
3. Cicero: "And if the forces that destroy are innumerable, the forces that preserve must by the same token be infinite." DeWitt: "This doctrine, it is essential to repeat, holds only for the universe at large. It is not applicable to the individual world and it does not mean that the prevalence of elephants in India is balanced by the prevalence of wolves in Russia. Isonomy does not mean "equal distribution" but "equitable apportionment.""

9. The Life of the Gods

1. "From the proleptic belief in the perfection of divine happiness Epicurus also drew the inference that the gods were immune to all disturbing emotions, such as anger, and were consequently indifferent to human wickedness."
2. "Philodemus presents a brace of interesting details. As usual, the subsumed method is that of analogy and transition. The gods, like human beings, must be endowed with speech, "for we shall not think of them as more happy and indissoluble if not speaking nor conversing with one another, but like dumb people." 90 The second point is the conclusion that they speak Greek. "Yes, and I swear by Zeus," he adds, "we must believe that they possess the Greek language, or something not far different; in no other way do we understand gods existing unless they use the Greek tongue."

10. Communion And Fellowship

1. Lucretius warns the impious man "that he will not draw near the shrines of the gods with a heart untroubled nor will he be able to capture the images that from the sacred persons of the gods float into the minds of men, harbingers of the form divine."
2. "Let us Epicureans, at any rate, sacrifice piously and properly where it is required and let us do every thing else according to the laws, not troubling ourselves about popular opinions in respect of the things that are highest and holiest."
3. Vatican Saying 32: "Reverence for the wise man is a great blessing for the one that feels the reverence."

4. Philodemus quotes the master as saying: "The following truth is also of great moment and in respect of its guiding power, so to speak, is of surpassing importance: for every wise man has chaste and pure notions of the divine and takes it for granted that this divine nature is exalted and august.
5. Philodemus in his essay on the subject has this to say: "Let this much be said also now, that the divine being stands in no need of worship but it is natural for us to worship him above all with pious thoughts and next in importance by the rites handed down by our fathers for each of the gods respectively."
6. A passage from the work of Philodemus On the Life of the Gods: "[The wise man] regards with wonder the nature of the gods and their disposition [tranquillity], and endeavors to draw near to it and yearns, as it were, to touch it and to be in its company, and he also calls wise men the friends of the gods and the gods the friends of the wise."
7. Dionysius the Great, Bishop of Alexandria, for example, is quoted by Eusebius as writing of Epicurus: "In his own writings he puts oaths in his own mouth and those of others, swearing continually this way and that by Zeus, making all and sundry swear, including those with whom he is conversing, in the name of the gods, having no fear of perjury himself, I presume, nor ascribing any fear to the others, and adding to his words this empty, false, idle, and meaningless appendage of superstition."

11. Prophecy And Prayer

1. "According to certain of the Twelve Elementary Principles the universe was declared to be infinite, there could be no divine being outside of it to govern its operations and maneuver human events by remote control. Moreover, since predetermination was thus lacking, neither could there be prediction from that source."
2. "The visions of sleep possess no divine nature nor prophetic power but are accounted for by the invasion of images.
3. "The art of prophecy is nonexistent and, even if it did exist, external events are to be thought of as meaning nothing to the life within us."
4. Cicero: " there is nothing Epicurus ridicules so much as the prediction of future events."
5. Lucian: "depicts "Epicurus" opposition as "adamantine," and he tells how the false prophet Alexander "waged against him a truceless and undeclared war" and used to apply to him an epithet which in current slang is equivalent to "hard-boiled," because all prophesyings were denominated by him as "something to be laughed at and as childishness."
6. Epicurus: ""For the birds can bring to bear no sort of compulsion to bring winter to an end, nor does some divine being seat itself to watch for the departure of these creatures and then bring these signs to fulfillment, because such silliness would not benefit even an ordinary being, even if only a little superior, much less one possessed of perfect happiness."
7. DeWitt: "it was the Epicureans in Thessalonica who by their derision aroused the indignation of St. Paul, then prophesying the second coming of Christ. In his retort

he denied them the honor of mention by name but identified them adequately by those catchwords of their creed, "Peace and Safety." It may be added that the Epicureans, as usual, were in the right; the prophecy was not fulfilled."

8. DeWitt: "That the badgering tactics of the Epicureans were directed also against the Jews is revealed by Josephus. With him, as with his race in general, the question of prophecy was tightly tied in with the belief in the divine government of the world. Since the prophet Daniel, for instance, was believed to have been inspired by God, it was to be expected that his prophecies would be fulfilled by God. Prophecy was subsidiary to divine providence. In conformity with this view Josephus gives a somewhat extended account of the prophecies of Daniel and their precise fulfillments, thus demonstrating for his readers the falsity of the Epicurean doctrines, which he rehearses at suitable length."
9. A scholium to Aeschylus runs as follows: "There is a doctrine of Epicurus denying the art of prophecy, 'because,' says he, 'if fate is the master of all, when foretelling calamity you have caused pain before the due time and when foretelling something good you spoil the pleasure.'"
10. "If the divine being complied with the prayers of mankind, all men would speedily be perishing, because they are continually praying that diverse misfortunes befall one another."
11. Vatican Saying 65: "It is useless to ask of the gods such blessings as a man is capable of procuring for himself."
12. Horace: "It is enough to pray to Jupiter for what he gives and takes away, that he give length of life, that he give the means of life. As for the quiet mind, I shall provide that for myself."