

Philodemus On Piety

Post by “Don” of December 21, 2020 at 11:22 PM

Column 71 has some interesting points:

“They [i.e., people manipulated by philosophers or rulers by means of the poets’ false tales about the gods] will suppose that the gods are terrifying tyrants, and most of all because of their own bad consciences they will expect great misfortunes from them. Thus, as far as we are concerned, on account of the belief which they do not have, they would accomplish nothing [i.e., no proper conception of the gods]. But those who believe our oracles about the gods will first wish to imitate their blessedness in so far as mortals can, so that, since it [i.e., the gods’ happiness] was seen [i.e., in the past experience of humans in cultural history] to come from doing no harm to anyone, they [i.e., readers of the present work] will endeavor most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone as far as is within their power; and second to make themselves so noble... [most of a column missing, ~60 words, continues at bottom of next column]... to change sides and, not having learnt to be grateful for past goods and to bear up against natural pains and of death [probably continues as not to fear death]...”

A few points of interest to discuss here. It appears again to show the gods’ existence in an ambiguous light. We are asked by the author to “imitate” the “blessedness” of the gods “in so far as mortals can.” The word used is μιμεῖσθαι (mimeisthai) which does indeed mean “to mimic, imitate, represent, portray” but also “of the fine arts, to represent, express by means of imitation, of an actor (or painting, music, sculpture).” I might think of it as “Fake it till you make it”.

The word used for “blessedness” in the original Greek in column 71 is none other than our old friend εὐδαιμονίαν (eudaimonian)! I would have expected something like μακάριος (makarios) as used in KD 1 and elsewhere in Epicurus’s writings, since markios and related words like markariotes are used in the text of On Piety. For example, in column 24, the author says:

“Therefore they [the kathegemones] simply and necessarily supposed that he [Epicurus] left unquestioned [or “posited” or “allowed the existence of”] the existence of blessed and eternal beings.”

The words translated here as “blessed and eternal beings” are ζῶια μακαρία καὶ διαίωνα (beings blessed and everlasting).

The word makarion appears again in a phrase in a fragmented column 43 along with καὶ ἀφθάρ[των] (blessed and imperishable). Column 44/45 uses variations on makarios:

“... and to dispel what is foreign to its nature [i.e., a god’s], and to marshal all its overpowering strength, nor in On Gods does he [Epicurus] say anything conflicting with one’s doing these

things. And in On Holiness he calls the life of perfection [or 'completeness'] the most pleasant and most blessed, and instructs us to guard against all defilements, with our intellect comprehensively viewing the best psychosomatic dispositions, for the sake of fitting al that happens to us to blessedness and especially having it in good order..." [more of column 45, I've included in previous posts]

The "life of perfection the most pleasant and most blessed" translates "τον τελειοτητος βιον ἡδιστον και μακαριωτατον" ton teleiotetos bion hediston kai makariotaton. "Teleiotetos" is related to "telos", something's goal/completion/etc., so I can understand the ambiguous translation. Hediston is related to hedone "pleasure"! And finally we have makariotaton "most blessed." The last mention of blessedness right before the end is also makariote--.

To return to column 71, the echoes of the Principle Doctrines and other familiar precepts of Epicurus are striking at the end:

- to be grateful for past goods
- to bear up against natural pains
- [to have no fear] of death
- to do no harm

I also expected something like kalos when column 71 says "to make themselves so noble..."; however, the word is "μεγαλοπρεπεις." "to make oneself a great man, magnificent.; grand, elegant, or splendid in appearance; full of majesty; majestic." So there's a lot more going on there than simply "noble."

I plan to go back to investigate that translation of "psychosomatic dispositions" tomorrow.