

Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Matt” of December 27, 2020 at 8:24 AM

So a thought passed through my mind last night...

As a person who made theology a very large part of my initial philosophical studies especially with Hindu Vedanta and Neoplatonism, I started to meditate how (or rather what) it was that allowed me to transition to an Epicurean understanding of divinity. And later what caused my distress with a more “advanced” view Epicurean theology.

In the Letter of Menoecus, my first real introduction to Epicurean writings, I was struck by what was said right out of the gates about the gods/God. This I think was what allowed me to transition initially.

What I realized is that the statement about God in Menoecus is in fact “apophatic theology” and I think that’s what really appealed to me initially.

Essentially Epicurus affirms that there is a God, this God is “immortal and happy” and whatever agrees with this notion is sufficient knowledge for us to the degree that anything beyond this runs into the realm metaphysical speculation.

This apophatic theological view of a particularly unknowable and ineffable entity is in my opinion what Epicurus was trying to convey to us. Beautiful poetic language that affirms the cataphatic or positive qualities of immortality and happiness are good for the Epicurean because it upholds this notion outlined in Menoecus. But if a person starts diving into the metakosmos trying to examine this divinity in their mind’s eye...They are in the realm Neoplatonic style speculation. They are no longer affirming simple concepts but they may be attempting to “create” or generate ideas about divinity. These ideas are entirely the mental property of the speculator and they are in the realm of idealism since the Gods are not available to be studied.

For the Neoplatonists who stretched the technical minutiae about God/The One, Mind/Nous etc. to the point of logical madness, they still do not arrive with any empirical or sensory evidence of the truth of their speculations. Just extremely complex mental formulas that arrive at “divine simplicity.”

To say the aggregate of all things is “One” is really cool to say, but it does absolutely nothing for us. This axiomatic One has no administration, does nothing itself (except emanate the chain of being). It’s divinely simple. It took an incredible amount of mental energy from Plotinus to Proclus arrive at quite literally the most irrelevant and useless conclusion that all things are the ONE.

Just as the Stoics attribute the Divine Fire/Logos to everything in a pantheistic manner is fun to say, but it's just an abstract mind exercise. Without really powerful evidence that there is a transcendent or immanent Nous in all things that is responsible for the Forms in the platonic sense, the "forms" that we eventually apprehend and comprehend with our own material mind through the senses. Or in a more stoic sense the Logos is responsible for the rational aggregated cosmos (which makes little sense when we see just how much "randomness" there is in nature). You still just have a very abstract idealist concept with no evidence other than what you "think" or deduce to be true.

Moving away from this back to the the Epicurean view, Epicurus avoids the intense speculative habits of the Platonists and Stoics by simply saying (just like they do) God exists...he's immortal and happy (full stop), as far as our common understanding of what a God must be, but beyond that anything "added" to this extremely simplistic formula will run into speculation. Speculation about an unknowable is what leads to distress.

In my case, that's exactly what happened. I tried to add ideas to what a god was beyond "immortality and happiness"...others added the ideas of atomic beings, transhumanism or extra terrestrials etc. so my very "simple" idea of God, immortal and happy, took on a whole host of other speculative attributes. Then the "whys?" begin...why is God immortal and happy? Why does he never get irritated? Why doesn't he have any administration? Why doesn't he interact with humankind?...then you read classical arguments against Epicurean theology from Cicero and others and the beat goes on until you no longer trust Epicurus. Who in all piety, simply affirms the existence of God, admonishes us not to think too deeply and speculate too much as others do.

For me had I just gone full stop after the statement in Menoeceus, I could've cultivated a blessed and happy vision of divinity, left it ALONE and continued pursuing my own happiness, I probably wouldn't have been sucked back into metaphysical theological speculation for the last few years. I personally do not need anything from the metacosmic deities, unless what I get from them makes me exceptionally divinely happy.