

Carl Sagan, the 4th dimension, episode 20 of Lucretius Today, physics

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2021 at 7:43 AM

Ok I am back!

It seems to me that in the past I've had several conversations along these lines so I'd like to try to move straight to the ultimate issues if I can -

I don't think what we're really discussing is varying views of the gods (that they exist in reality vs as ideal constructions of the human mind). We have many opinion on that here among Epicureanfriends users and I don't think we have enough evidence to choose one option as the only one that was in Epicurus' mind. In fact this might be analogous to the multiple options that he allowed in astronomical matters (as long as the options all are consistent with observable facts).

It sounds to me like what you're really arguing in the issue of gods is that we should accept that some people have views of active gods that are not destructive of and in fact beneficial to their happiness.

I think my best response to that would be to drop back and say that I think we should keep in mind the likelihood (I think a certainty) that Epicurus was aware of the need to, and constantly did, swap back and forth between talking in terms which are primarily "logical" at times, while at other times focusing on the "practical." I think he would say that doing so does not make him inconsistent but acknowledges the limits of logic (the need to always tie it to observable evidence) and the ultimate primacy of the canonical faculties given by nature.

So when you point to particular cases and say that particular people get particular hope from their particular views of a particular type of god, I believe Epicurus would say "of course that can happen." He basically says as much in his concluding remarks on agency in the letter to Menoeceus where he points to it being better to believe in myths than to succumb to hard determinism. That is the ultimate practical side of Epicurus.

But I also think that Epicurus lived in a world dominated by Platonists and the rest who identify "logic" as the way to approach these issues, and so he also took a position on the "logical best" position to take, as he seems to have done on the issue of the "greatest good / good" even while criticizing the Peripatetics for walking around harping on it uselessly.

And I think Epicurus would say that on that purely theoretical level (which I think is where you also get the best reasoning in favor of the "idealist" view of the gods) the best way for the "average" human to view the gods so as to live the theoretical happiest life with the least

possible anxiety is the way he advocated -- that as a logical ideal, "gods" should be thought of in absolute terms as supremely self-sufficient and therefore not concerned about things that they have no need to be concerned about. I see that as analogous to the point which causes so much debate and (in my view) is so easy to misinterpret - that the greatest pleasure can be equated (at least in magnitude) with the absence of pain. That observation in my view is based on the logical abstraction of quantity which results from categorizing ALL experience as either pleasure or pain. In that statement I believe he is abstracting those two words "pleasure" and "pain" and expecting us to understand that those two words cover a myriad - actually unlimited - number of experiences that are each subtly different from each other and tied to their individual facts.

So where I end up is the view that you can definitely be right that in certain contexts certain views which we might not consider to be "ideal" can be practically useful, so it would be perverse to deny that and make "the perfect the enemy of the good."

However at the same time it is important in other contexts to be able to engage with the world around you, and if you are surrounded by Platonists instead of fundamentalist Christians, you need to be able to identify in your own mind, in response to the Platonists, a logical formulation of the "best" view of religion -- at least if you decide to play their game of accepting for the sake of discussion that there is a "best" view at all.

We probably ought to have an independent discussion of whether it is ever a good idea, and if it is, in what circumstances, to engage in these logic games despite Epicurus' insistence that there is no realm of pure logic, that logic itself is not part of the canon, that the canonical faculties are themselves the standard of truth, etc.

But just like you are pointing to realities that some people do seem to profit from their "active god" religious views, there are some people who insist on being Platonists / Stoics / and idealists of all kinds, and we live in a world where in practical terms most of us cannot escape from engaging with them.

That's the main point I wanted to make. Then there is also this:

To the extent you are saying that it seems likely to you that advanced beings would take interest in lesser beings as a matter of pleasure to themselves, I think Epicurus would also say "of course" and he would point to his position on isonomia and on infinite numbers of worlds with life on them and he would say of course there are highly advanced beings who do exactly like that, just like we do ourselves, but on a far more advanced scale that would seem to most of us as being "godlike." The isonomia view would I think allow for an infinite progression / spectrum of advancement above us.

It's only when someone insists on speculating "What about the TOP level of advancement" (as if there is such a thing, which I am not sure Epicurus would say that there is) that I think it would become appropriate to discuss his views of "perfect" beings. I would expect him to say that either virtually all or actually all of the advanced god-like beings that exist in the universe are

somewhere on that spectrum other than at the logical top, so to greater or lesser degrees that might well take interest in things around them.

In my mind, it is not Epicurus' views of the theories of gods that would make him reject the claim that such things as Jesus rising from the "dead" happened, or the various miracles that they claim are true did not actually happen. In my view, Epicurus would take the position that all kinds of things that we have never seen before "may" actually come to our attention, but if they do they are not "supernatural" - a logical term which is an impossibility in terms of Epicurean reasoning.

The real persuasive objection to the claims of miracles is not the assertion of abstract logic that they "cannot" happen, but that there is no valid evidence that they do happen. Many of our technological marvels today would seem like magic to the ancient Epicureans (at least in a manner of speaking) but they would be (1) confident that the effect was not supernatural, and (2) confident that upon studying the facts long enough they would eventually be able to understand how such things were brought about naturally.

Just because we think that it is impossible for supernatural gods to exist, that doesn't mean that tomorrow our solar system isn't going to be invaded by living breathing highly-advanced aliens from another galaxy who choose to destroy the earth in an instant for some purpose of their own.

OK I have probably rambled enough but maybe some of these comments will advance the conversation.