

Episode One Hundred Eighteen - Letter to Herodotus 07 - "Images" - There's More To Them Than Meets The Eye

Post by "Don" of April 22, 2022 at 8:56 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The continuing problem with that, however, is that Epicurus and the other texts seem much more firm about the gods than just "possibilities."

θεοὶ ... εἰσιν· "Gods exist"

It doesn't get much more clear than that... Or does it? Here's the excerpt from my translation of the letter to Menoikeus...

123e. θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν·

If we take out the μὲν (and look for the inevitable δε in the next phrase) and move γὰρ "because, for" out of the way for now, we can pare this down to its essential:

θεοὶ εἰσιν. "Gods exist." "There are gods."

The implications of those two words have had entire essays (if not whole books) written about them. We looked at this a little in 123b with ζῶον. But Epicurus is not equivocating here: Gods exist. What he means by this we simply have to discover from his extant works and fragments. Again, if we take Sedley's position, each person has their own personal concept of a god. Many people, many individual gods.

123f. ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἡ γνῶσις.

Here's our δέ "on the other hand."

ἐναργῆς [δέ] ἐστιν αὐτῶν ἡ γνῶσις

"And the knowledge (ἡ γνῶσις (gnōsis)) of them (θεοί "gods", note the plural here) is ἐναργῆς." But what does ἐναργῆς mean?

It has two primary definitions:

visible, palpable, in bodily shape, properly of gods appearing in their own forms (in Homer); so of a dream or vision; ex., ἐναργῆς ταῦρος "in visible form a bull, a very bull"

manifest to the mind's eye, distinct

Epicurus can't mean the first meaning since he's adamant that the gods don't interact with humans. But the second definition coincides with his contention (and the idea of the prolepsis of the gods) that the gods are apprehended by the mind only. That also sets up a nice contrast with the first definition's use by Homer in describing the Olympian gods appearing "in visible form." Homer's gods were εναργής in one sense of the word; Epicurus's in the other sense.

Unfortunately, this does nothing to resolve our problem with puzzling out how the gods are ζῶον. Are they physically-existent material beings? Are they existing only as mental perceptions manifest merely to the mind's eye? The ambiguous nature of εναργής doesn't necessarily help us fully. It does, however, set up some of Epicurus's clever wordplay contrasting his view with Homer's.