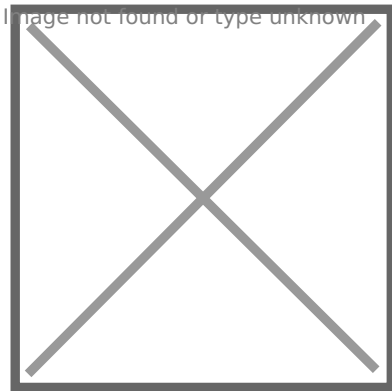


Sedley paper on Plato with interesting Epicurean implications

Post by "Don" of April 30, 2022 at 7:32 AM

I'll admit I didn't know where to post this, but it can always be moved. Here's the link to the paper:



[The ideal of godlikeness](#)

The ideal of godlikeness

www.academia.edu

I was browsing Sedley's papers on Academia to see if I'd missed anything interesting and came across this one. Typically, I'd pass over one on Plato but the title caught my eye. The idea that Plato advocated that we should "become like god as much as possible" (homoiosis theoi kata dunaton) struck me as sounding somewhat Epicurean. We know that Epicurus, in many ways, was responding to Plato and other contemporary philosophical schools. Epicurus was also working within the culture of his time as well, using and reworking aspects of existing Greek culture. So, I looked through this article and wanted to mention a few selections and to post for comment.

Quote

The standard for justice is not the Form of justice. It is god:

But it is not possible for evils to be eliminated, Theodorus—there must always exist some opposite to good—nor can evils be established among the gods. Of necessity, it is mortal nature and our vicinity that are haunted by evils. And that is why we should also try to escape from here to there as quickly as we can. To escape is to become like god so far as is possible (phuge de homoiosis theoi kata dunaton), and to become like god is to become just and holy, together with wisdom.⁵ The trouble is, my friend, that it

is not all that easy to persuade anyone that the reason why most people think we should escape wickedness and pursue goodness, namely so as to seem not wicked but good, is not the real reason. It's just an old wives' tale, I'd say..Let's put the true reason as follows. God is not at all in any respect unjust, but as just as can be; and there is nothing more like him than anyone of us who becomes in his own turn as just as possible.

It could hardly be made clearer that the absolute standard for justice described here is not the Form of justice, but god.

I found it interesting that Plato used phuge (Sedley translates as "escape") since this is the exact word Epicurus used for what is usually translated "choices and rejections." Plato addresses an absolute standard of justice being god, but as we know Epicurus talked about a prolepsis of justice as well as a "standard" being "to neither harm nor be harmed." Epicurus couldn't use god as a standard because the gods don't interfere in human affairs.

Another part I found interesting was:

Quote

it is easy to see how this text licensed the later Platonist view that homoiosis theoi was Plato's telos or goal, since becoming godlike is here described as the telos of the best life. This is not quite what we think of as the familiar Aristotelian use of telos to mean the goal aimed for, but rather the closely allied and often overlapping sense 'supreme fulfilment'. This may in fact be, and remain, the fundamental ethical sense of telos, even in the context of Hellenistic and later philosophy where each philosopher must state what the telos is. When Epicurus (Letter to Menoeceus 128) calls health and tranquillity 'the telos of the blessed life', he means its supreme fulfilment, not the goal it aims at. And Cicero's great dialogue on ethics is called de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum: again it is clearly the ethical telos that is meant, but 'fulfilment' rather than 'goal' is the proper translation (bad does not have a goal, but it does have a supreme fulfilment). Plato's usage in the Timaeus may therefore not implausibly claim to be the earliest formulation of a telos for a good human life. Arguably, this is the dominant ethical sense of telos for Aristotle too.

With all our discussion on the telos, I thought this could be important food for thought on the diverse connotations of that word in Epicurus's time and before.

I found especially interesting, however, the very first lines that prompted me to post here:

Quote

Try asking any moderately well-educated citizen of the Roman empire to name the official moral goal, or telos, of each major current philosophical system. Among others,

you will hear that Plato's is *homoiosis theoi kata to dunaton*, 'becoming like god so far as is possible'. Few people today, even those well informed about Plato, would come up with the same answer. *Homoiosis theoi*, universally accepted in antiquity as the official Platonic goal, does not even appear in the index to any modern study of Plato known to me, nor as far as I am aware does it play a part in any modern reconstruction of Plato's thought.

This idea of becoming godlike "so far as possible" seemed to echo recent conversations about references to Epicurus's godlike status as well as the idea of "gods as exemplars of the Epicurean life." So, I guess I should leave open the possibility that we could learn something from Plato even if it's only to compare and contrast him with Epicurus. Yet again, Sedley provides some interesting and thought-provoking reading!