

For Gods There Are

Post by “Eikadistes” of August 15, 2022 at 9:14 AM

Epicurus' approach reminds me of an anthropology class I took a decade ago. Our textbook was called *Supernatural as Natural: A Biocultural Approach to Religion* by Michael Winkelman and John R. Baker. Among other things, the authors explored non-human animals' behaviors that anticipate human rituals. For example, monkeys intentionally eat fermented fruits to become intoxicated. Chimpanzees have been observed to enter "trance" states. Psychedelic chemicals are found throughout the natural world. Wolves howl without being sure that they will receive a response.

There is also a social basis underlying ritualistic behaviors. Fasting might seem abnormal, unless you contextualize it within periods of drought and food scarcity. Self-mutilation is cringe-worthy, *however*, bleeding a person was (until *very* recently) considered to be an effective medical procedure. The earliest Hebrew commandments were dietary and health restrictions based on their understanding of hygiene. All of these things come from a natural evolution.

Given all of this, let me say, *of course* knowledge of "the gods" is manifest (not "the gods" as in "what color is Zeus' beard" but "the gods" as in "the Persians also venerate idols in their minds"). Look to the abundance of ritualistic social behavior, psychedelic episodes, and experimental behavior found in non-human animals. Religiosity is, in some sense, universal to the natural world, beyond the perception that Religion is an isolated monolith that was uniquely invented by humans. The patterns of religious behavior seem to be grounded in our psycho-social evolution.

This, I think, might be an effective approach to understand Epicurus' position. He naturalized the religious experience in a way that is similar to the American pragmatist William James (specifically, I am thinking of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). Epicurus observed the various civilizations (absorbed by Alexander) had similar rituals, social bonding mechanisms, and wisdom traditions (*without* invoking the adventures of the Olympians), so there must be some part of the natural world that encourages animals to engage in rituals, speculation, and devotion.