

Epicureans and the Ancient Greek Gods (Imagery of "Gods" / "Gods Among Men")

Post by "Cassius" of February 12, 2019 at 5:55 PM

Thanks for the detailed commentary. I've been thinking about this recently too, and incorporating some of the imagery in several graphics more as a discussion starter than anything else.

As you know LD from my prior posting, I am one who takes the position that Epicurus was serious about "gods" as he defined them existing. But for the moment that is not the part on which I would like to focus.

The reason I am comfortable incorporating Greek imagery into my graphics is that regardless of the "real" angle, I believe that Epicurus thought that the gods were useful as images of perfect happiness toward which to aspire. Certainly he rejected the myths about them doing all sorts of crazy things, but I suspect that even after rejecting that aspect he still found it useful to discuss the issue of how gods would be perfectly happy by personifying them. I am not aware that Epicurus spoke about "god" or in generic terms, rather than using the standard names - but of course I know the record is difficult to assess.

There is of course the call to live as "gods among men," and it is apparent that he embraced the public festivals, and did not argue at all (to my understanding) that they were disembodied spirits.

It appears to me, consistent with the reference to using the Phaeacian imagery from Homer as an example of the best life, that Epicurus believed it was useful to visualize the best life as one not altogether unlike the Greeks pictured the gods as living on Olympus, without all the childish melodrama.

To take this further, as you also know I believe that it is worse than useless to define the best life as "absence of pain." I believe that description applies only to the "limit of quantity" for the reasons discussed elsewhere. I also believe that anyone challenged to visualize what "absence of pain" means in realistic terms will end up visualizing an experience that any ordinary human being can understand in sensual terms, and not as a non-sensual abstraction.

Therefore I believe that Epicurus intended that his students incorporate godlike imagery as visualizations of the best life, such as described by Torquatus:

"The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the

prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."

To me, there is nothing wrong, and much that is right, and perhaps a lot that is inevitable, in visualizing this picture in human form much as Zeus or any other idealized Greek god might appear. Of course I don't mean to particularize this to Greece or Rome and to exclude other nations and ethnicity, as they will likely have their own equivalents that is perfectly appropriate for them to use.

But Epicurus spoke of the "enemies of Hellas," and I do not believe he would think it appropriate to abstract out to ideal form a "human" stripped of all background, family, friends, and culture. So use of the Greek/Roman imagery among those of us who follow in that heritage (which very likely includes everyone reading this, no matter what nation they may currently reside) seems very appropriate to me.

This is an excellent thing to discuss and I have an open mind as to the basic point.