

PD01 - Gratitude and Weakness (Especially In Relation to the Gods)

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 9, 2023 at 12:29 PM

[Quote from Little Rocker](#)

Yeah, I've wondered about the same thing. I seem to remember that concern showing up in the objections section of a paper I read on Epicurean gratitude by Ben Rider (attached in its pre-published form)

This is *precisely* what I needed. **Thanks!**

"VII. Gratitude is weakness?"

I argue that, for Epicureans, gratitude is necessary for a happy human life. But some passages seem to say that gratitude is actually a sign of weakness. In particular, this claim appears as a premise in Epicurus' argument that we have no reason to anticipate rewards and punishments from the gods:

What is blessed and indestructible has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone else, so that it is not affected by feelings of anger or gratitude. For all such things are a sign of weakness. (KD I; compare Letter to Herodotus 76-77, Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods 1.45 = IG I-16)

The gods exist, but because they are 'blessed and indestructible' they need not feel gratitude. Gratitude indicates weakness and is relevant only for those who have deficiencies and thus need others to help or benefit them. That humans feel anger or gratitude reveals our limitations and dependency. So, if wisdom enables a human to 'live as a god among men' (Ep. Men. 135), would not a wise and virtuous person also have no need for gratitude?

The answer, it seems to me, must be 'no.' The fact that gods feel no gratitude does not mean that we should not; though Epicureans seek to emulate the gods' tranquility and happiness, no human can attain their invulnerability or immortality, and any desire to do so would be unnatural and empty.

It is important to remember, in this context, that for Epicureans all virtues—like moderation and justice—are defined not absolutely, by an independent objective standard. They are instrumentally valuable because they contribute to a pleasurable life, and so what counts as virtuous in a case depends on what in fact produces happiness (Ep. Men. 132). We see this most clearly in Epicurus' analysis of justice: Justice exists because of 'a pledge of reciprocal usefulness' (KD 31), a 'pact about neither harming another nor being harmed' (KD 33). Justice

is 'in general outline' the same for all humans, but what counts as just may vary depending on circumstances—'the peculiarities of a region,' for instance (KD 36)—and when circumstances change, it could happen that a law that was originally useful and just 'no longer possesses the nature of justice' (KD 37; also KD 38). We should not become fixated on abstract notions but instead 'simply look to the facts' (KD 37).

In the same way, then, it is unsurprising that, for indestructible and perfectly self-sufficient gods, gratitude is not a value, while for vulnerable and deficient humans, it is. No matter how wise we become, we cannot eliminate these facts about what we are. Gratitude is part of how we achieve what limited and imperfect self-sufficiency we can obtain."

This seems to be consistent with the position that has thus far been enumerated.

I have been trying to find more fragments to flesh-out Epicurean religiosity, largely through Philodemus. It seems to me that he (and apparently Hermarchus, based on fragmentary attestation I'm still trying to organize) had concerns about the status of the gods' social lives and their speech patterns; that, combined with the analysis of gratitude, which is a seemingly human-unique, conscious behavioral practice (there are better words for that) Not to suddenly follow a distracting tangent, but this lends a lot of credence to the "*Realist interpretation*" of the Epicurean deities.

I am leaning away from the "*Idealist interpretation*" because it seems to rob the god(s) of blessedness.

I am also approaching this inquiry with an assumption: *I personally have assumed that the gods were once not gods.* My conception of a deity is a being who, through choice and personal development, has mastered the natural ethical path to achieve a perfect, animal life; this carries an additional assumption that they must exist, because, if such beings do not exist in an infinite universe, than choice if futile and ethics is an exercise in futility.

I think that KD1 seems incompatible with the "*Idealist interpretation*" if we rob the god(s) of their blessed ability to make perfect choices, having created (through development) a supportive circle of excellent companions; if gods are just inspiring thought-forms generated by cosmic particles that have intermingled through the void, they aren't much different that inspiring shapes in the clouds or any other experience that can be explained as an optical illusion.

As a side-note, perhaps Lucretius is assuming *too much* of a poetic license in describing Epicurus as a god if Epicurus (and, as it seems, Philodemus) had such specific preconceptions of the forms of deities.