

Article: The Ethical Implications of Epicurus' Theology by Stefano Mecci

Post by "Cassius" of September 27, 2023 at 9:21 AM

Just for reference from "On The Nature of the Gods" --

"If we sought to attain nothing else beside piety in worshipping the gods and freedom from superstition, what has been said had sufficed; since the exalted nature of the gods, being both eternal and supremely blessed, would receive man's pious worship (for what is highest commands the reverence that is its due); and furthermore all fear of the divine Power or divine anger would have been banished (since it is understood that anger and favor alike are excluded from the nature of a being at once blessed and immortal, and that these being eliminated we are menaced by no fears in regard to the powers above). But the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence.

"For the divine form we have the hints of nature supplemented by the teachings of reason. From nature all men of all races derive the notion of gods as having human shape and none other; for in what other shape do they ever appear to anyone, awake or asleep? But not to make primary concepts the sole test of all things, reason itself delivers the pronouncement. For it seems appropriate that a being who is the most exalted, whether by reason of his happiness or of his eternity, should also be the most beautiful; but what disposition of the limbs, what cast of features, what shape or outline can be more beautiful than the human form? You Stoics at least, Lucilius, (for my friend Cotta says one thing at one time and another at another) are wont to portray the skill of the divine creator by enlarging on beauty as well as the utility of design displayed in all parts of the human figure. But if the human figure surpasses the form of all other living beings, and god is a living being, god must possess the shape which is the most beautiful of all; and since it is agreed that the gods are supremely happy, and no one can be happy without virtue, and virtue cannot exist without reason, and reason is only found in the human shape, it follows that the gods possess the form of man. Yet their form is not corporeal, but only resembles bodily substance; it does not contain blood, but the semblance of blood.

"These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images

arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

Now Velleius does say this about inactivity:

“You Stoics are also fond of asking us, Balbus, what is the mode of life of the gods and how they pass their days. The answer is, their life is the happiest conceivable, and the one most bountifully furnished with all good things. God is entirely inactive and free from all ties of occupation; he toils not neither does he labor, but he takes delight in his own wisdom and virtue, and knows with absolute certainty that he will always enjoy pleasures at once consummate and everlasting.

“This is the god whom we should call happy in the proper sense of the term; your Stoic god seems to us to be grievously overworked. If the world itself is god, what can be less restful than to revolve at incredible speed round the axis of the heavens without a single moment of respite? But repose is an essential condition of happiness. If on the other hand some god resides within the world as its governor and pilot, maintaining the courses of the stars, the changes of the seasons, and all the ordered processes of creation, and keeping a watch on land and sea to guard the interests and lives of men, why, what a bondage of irksome and laborious business is his!

I don't think that version of "inactivity" is any harder to explain than the special definitions of "gods" in the first place, or of virtue, or of pleasure. They aren't "toiling" or doing any "work" that they don't want to do, but that doesn't mean they are sitting in one place staring at candles either. But at least as to the plain meaning of "inactivity" in English, which implies "doing nothing," I can't see how gods with bodies analogous to humans and blood analogous to humans and speaking language analogous to Greek can be considered to be "doing nothing." The don't toil or work any more than they superintend the universe, but that doesn't mean we should think of them as "doing nothing."

I note in the article that the author thanks someone for helping with this English, which is presumably not his first language. Maybe my complaint can be chalked up to nothing more than terminology, but still I would be careful with the implication of "inactivity."