

More Thoughts on The "Idealism vs Realism" Question About the Epicurean "Gods"

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2019 at 12:40 PM

And I have another objection: maybe the worst aspect of excessive emphasis on "idealism" is that the very word smacks of an attempt to "Platonize" Epicurus.

There's a good reason that Epicurean philosophy is referred to as a branch of "atomism." That's because it is fundamental to Epicurus that nothing "eternal" exists in reality except the elements and the void through which the elements move. It's part of the essence of Platonism and Stoicism and Aristotelianism to postulate ideals and essences and divine fires emanating from some prime mover, and it is the essence of Epicurean philosophy to call "bull" on all of that.

The very idea that Epicurus would assert the existence of some kind of entities that exist solely "idealistically" without a real essence grounded in atoms and void is offensive to the fundamentals of Epicurean philosophy.

Not saying it's offensive to me personally, of course, or that I take offense to the suggestion, but that if you're going to attempt to understand what Epicurean philosophy was about, you don't succeed by grafting onto it the type of Platonism to which Epicurus objected most strongly.

And I suggest that the abstraction of "pleasure" as something esoteric (under the name "ataraxia" or "absence of pain") unrelated to the every-day experience of normal mental and physical pleasures is also an attempt to Platonize Epicurus as a "hedonist" instead of what Epicurus really was - an observer of reality.

Of course I also think it is misleading to try to peg Epicurus as primarily an "atomist" or primarily a "hedonist." Epicurus was an Epicurean, and those other words have varying meaning according to whoever wants to assert the definition. But one thing seems certain:

Epicurean ethics derive from Epicurean physics and his observations of the nature of man. "Atomism" is in that sense more fundamental to Epicurus than is "hedonism." If Epicurus had decided that the study of nature leads to the conclusion that gods created the universe, and that those gods told us how to live, then Epicurus would have had nothing to do with "pleasure" unless the gods said so. The ethics of pleasure follow from the natural physics of atomism, not the other way around.