

Youtube Video Discussing Cicero's "On The Nature of The Gods" (Classical Wisdom Podcast)

Post by "Godfrey" of June 10, 2024 at 9:00 PM

One thing which I found interesting came later in the video as Thomas gave a heartfelt take on why the gods and religion are important: personal consolation and civic cohesion (my paraphrase). He feels that religion is necessary even if it's not actually true, and for these two reasons in particular.

What I found illuminating, and disappointing in that the speakers seem to be completely unaware of it, is that Epicurus' take on religion addresses both of these points and attempts to improve upon them by incorporating truth as well. Although the typical discussion is whether the Epicurean view of the gods is realist or idealist, the point of view of Thomas introduces a different take, which I might call "functionalist." By removing the capricious and terrifying aspects of the gods, Epicurus makes them capable of consolation. Not by having them answer our prayers, but by serving as an example. This is pretty much the idealist view, just in the context of giving us a way to look at dealing with troubles. Encouraging his followers to attend the festivals and such serves to promote social cohesion, in addition to the potential pleasure obtained. I wouldn't be as cynical as the speakers and say that he did this to save his skin: I would say that Epicurus was aware of and acknowledged the historic role of religion in society and promoted it in his philosophy. In this context the Epicurean treatment of the gods actually isn't as mystifying as it's commonly made out to be.