

Episode 241 - Cicero's OTNOTG 16 - A Common Thread Between The Epicurean View Of "The Gods" and "The Good"

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This episode made me go back and examine the relevant sections of the letter to Menoikeus... And I found myself asking "What *really* is the prolepsis of the gods that Epicurus is proposing?" I thought it's straight forward: A god is a blessed and imperishable 'being'. But I'm not so sure. Let me break down the text and show where I'm coming from:

First, on the one hand, believing that the god is a blessed and imperishable thing as is the common, general understanding of the god... πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων,...

First = not numerically, but "primarily, foremost, most importantly."

believe = νομίζων "believing, holding, considering" (present active participle of νομίζω) To me "believing" involves a cognitive act of choosing to believe, hold, or acknowledge something. You can choose to believe the earth is flat. However, once you have evidence available, you can become convinced to believe the earth is round. Believe that the god is blessed and imperishable has too much *semantic* and *conceptual* content to be the prolepsis, which I believe most of us take to be a pre-rational, pre-conceptual impression (like sensations).

Even ζῶον (as I've mentioned before) can be a "living being/animal" but also an "image" of a living being as in the painting of a horse. Could Epicurus be hedging his bets here? Is the god only apprehended by the mind and contemplation because it is really is an image constructed by the mind, like the painting on a cloth or wall, in the mind itself of the one who turns their thoughts toward the god?

...as the common understanding (mental perception, idea, concept) of the god has been outlined...ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη,

The use of ὑπεγράφη (hypegraphe) is especially interesting in this context because this word literally means to be outlined with the intent of someone filling in the details, like the image of letters indicated by a teacher by an outline or tracing for the student to then follow. It seems according to this, the most basic characteristics of the god are merely outlines in our mind on top of which all the incorrect assumptions and concepts of the hoi polloi are piled on. But those characteristics of blessedness and imperishability seem far too "detailed" to be considered ὑπεγράφη (hypegraphe).

Then we have:

Do not attribute anything foreign to the incorruptibility or incongruous with the blessedness of itself (i.e., the god)! μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε.

Believe everything about which a god is able to preserve its own imperishability and blessedness for itself. πᾶν δὲ τὸ φυλάττειν αὐτοῦ δυνάμενον τὴν μετα ἀφθαρσίας μακαριότητα περὶ αὐτον δόξαζε.

In this case, "believe" is actually δόξαζε (doxaze) "think, suppose, imagine, hold the opinion that" This word is connected with δοξαι in Principle Doctrines κυριαὶ δοξαι (kyriai doxai)

So, Epicurus exhorts his students to believe the god is a blessed and imperishable being (or the image of a being in their mind), to hold the believe that the god is able to preserve its own blessedness and imperishability, because the common idea of the god is engraved somehow in our minds by the faintest outline.

I still find it hard to believe that the prolepsis of the gods includes all that, somehow including all that conceptual framework.

This line of thought is one reason I continue to be intrigued by the "idealist" position of the [Epicurean gods](#). The god's blessedness and incorruptibility is maintained by our very focus on their blessedness and incorruptibility in our minds. As we approach a temple or image, that image of blessedness and incorruptibility allows the Epicurean to interact with a divine image as the physical representation of that image in the mind of a blessed and incorruptible being - and ONLY as that - without all the baggage of imagining a vengeful, wrathful god.

Still very much a work-in-progress but that a direction of inquiry I'm heading down.