

Epicurus, gods and God

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And as Diogenis of Oinoanda also said : "The important point to take from the study of physics is that the universe did not arise at random from chaos, nor was it created, or is it controlled, by any gods. But do not take from this that we Epicureans are impious, or that we fail to have sympathy for those who have false opinions about the gods. Men who experience false visions, but who are unable to understand how they are produced, are understandably apprehensive, and they convince themselves that these visions were created by the gods. Such men vehemently denounce even the most pious men as atheists. As we proceed, it will become evident to you that it is not the Epicureans, who deny the true gods, but those who hold false opinions about the gods. For we Epicureans are not like those philosophers who categorically assert that the gods do not exist, and who attack those who hold otherwise. Nor are we like Protagoras of Abdera, who said that he did not know whether gods exist, for that is the same as saying that he knew that they do not exist. Nor do we agree with Homer, who portrayed the gods as adulterers, and as angry with those who are prosperous. In contrast, we hold that the statues of the gods should be made genial and smiling, so that we may smile back at them, rather than be afraid of them.

Let us reverence the gods, and observe the customs of our fathers, but let us not impute to the gods any concepts that are not worthy of divinity. For example, it is false to believe that the gods, who are perfect, created this world because they had need of a city, or needed fellow-citizens. Nor did the gods create the world because they needed a place to live. To those who say such naive things, we ask in turn: "Where were the gods living beforehand?"

Those men who hold that this world was created uniquely by the gods, as a place for the gods to live, of course have no answer to this question. By their view, the gods were destitute and roaming about at random for an infinite time before the creation of this world, like an unfortunate man, without a country, who had neither city nor fellow citizens! It is absurd to argue that a divine nature created the world for the sake of the world itself, and it is even more absurd to argue that the gods created men for the gods' own sake. There are too many things wrong, with both the world and with men, for them to have been created by gods!

Let us now turn our attention from gods to men.

Many men pursue philosophy for the sake of wealth and power, with the aim of procuring these either from private individuals, or from kings, who deem philosophy to be a great and precious possession.

Well, it is not in order to gain wealth or power that we Epicureans pursue philosophy! We pursue philosophy so that we may enjoy happiness through attainment of the goal craved by Nature".