

"The Polytheism of the Epicureans" by Paul T. M. Jackson

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2020 at 3:00 AM

Yes thank you for this Don! I had the pdf in my collection but can't recall if I have read it. Might as well clip and paste the key letter here. It certainly seems to me to be consistent with Epicurus, though I have no way of commenting on whether it was Epicurus himself who wrote this, or another Epicurean:

<It is no proof of piety to observe the customary religious obligations – through the offerings of sacrifices> on suitable occasions may be, as I have said, in keeping with nature – nor is it, by Zeus, when someone or other goes about repeating, "I fear all the gods, and honour them, and want to spend all my money in making sacrifices, and consecrating offerings to them". Such a man is perhaps more praiseworthy than other individuals, but still it is not thus that a solid foundation for piety is laid. You, my friend, must know that the most blessed gift is to have a clear perception of things; that is absolutely the best thing that we can conceive of here below. Admire this clear apprehension of the spirit, revere this divine gift. After that, <you should not honour the gods because you think thus to gain their favour>, as people will think when they see you performing acts of piety, but only because, in comparison with your own happiness, you see how the condition of the gods is infinitely more august, according to our doctrine. And certainly, by Zeus, <when you practise> this doctrine – the doctrine most worthy of belief, <as your reason should tell you – it is of course open to you to offer sacrifices to the gods. By doing so you perform> an act which gives confidence and is a pleasure to see, if it is done at the proper time, because you honour your own doctrine by enjoying those pleasures of the senses which befit such occasions and besides you conform in some sense to religious traditions. Only be careful that you do not permit any admixture of fear of the gods or of the supposition that in acting as you do you are winning the favour of the gods. For indeed, in the name of Zeus, [as men affect to say] what have you to fear in this matter? Do

you believe that the gods can do you harm? Is not that, on any showing, to belittle them? How then will you not regard the divinity as a miserable creature if it appears inferior in comparison to yourself? Or will you rather be of the opinion that by sacrificing thousands of oxen you can appease god if you have committed some evil deed? Can you think that he will take account of the sacrifice and, like a man, remit at some time or another a part of the penalty?

No doubt men tell each other that they should fear the gods and honour them with sacrifices, so that, restrained by the tribute they receive, the gods will not attack them; as a result they think that if their sacrifice is correct they will altogether escape injury and if it is not, all will be well because they pay homage to the power of the gods. But if those close relations <between gods and men were really to exist it would be a great misfortune, for the effect would make itself felt even beyond the grave>, after the funeral ceremonies, as soon as a man was cremated. For then men would suffer injury even beneath the earth and everyone would have to expect punishment. Moreover, I need not describe how men would have to beg for signs of favour from the gods in their fear of being neglected by them (for they would think to induce the gods in this way to communicate with them more readily and come down into their temples), any more than I can tell of the methods they would employ because of their fear of harm and so as to guard against punishment. For to speak the truth all this seems pure illusion of these people when compared with the doctrine of those who think that a life of happiness exists for us in this world and do not admit that the dead live again – a marvel not less unlikely than those which Plato imagined.⁷⁷

This kind of argument seems very sincere to me as a logical extension of his views. Discussion like this is a large part of the reason that I think Epicurus was serious about this view, rather than just creating a screen to protect himself from sanctions against blasphemy.